

FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT
of Cook County, Illinois

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Steven M. Bylina, Jr., GENERAL SUPERINTENDENT

October 15, 2008

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Board, good morning.

Our great nation's twenty-sixth president, Theodore Roosevelt, once called this nation to support conservation efforts with these words: "we want the active and zealous help of every man far-sighted enough to realize the importance from the standpoint of the nation's welfare in the future of preserving the forests."

This great conservationist, who was a model for each of us who serve as the elected fiduciaries of conservation organizations, was correct to acknowledge the reciprocal relationship between our ecology and the well being of the human race.

In considering that relationship, it is important to closely examine the role of this Board.

At a time when real estate development and industrialization have severely reduced opportunities to procure high-value open spaces, it is imperative that we place a new premium on doing all that we can to properly preserve those lands.

Our forest preserves require that we continue to assist nature by implementing the best practices in land management and demonstrating an unflagging commitment to our lands' health and vitality.

In short, as nature does its part for us, it is imperative that we do our part for nature.

My 2009 Executive Budget Recommendation for the Forest Preserve District of Cook County reflects a commitment to doing all we can for our holdings, our visiting public and future generations.

Just as important as what I believe this proposed spending plan will do...is to make clear to each of you what it does not do. This budget calls for no increase in the District's tax levy in 2009.



I want to make that point clear again to ensure there are no misinterpretations or misstatements by anyone as to my intent and rationale: my proposed 2009 Forest Preserve District of Cook County budget recommendation includes absolutely no tax increase whatsoever.

In considering the direction the District would take in 2009, I decided that, given the current climate of our economy, it was best for the District to forgo such an increase in the coming year.

Despite this fact, by working closely with Dr. Bylina and his staff, I have been able to present you with a document that still provides for the District in a way that allows it to accomplish it's mission.

As stewards of vast open spaces, we must make decisions based on what is good for the ecology. Equally, as members of the human family we must consider the greater good when doing so. I believe this proposed budget accomplishes both of those goals.

With that in mind, before we examine our 2009 initiatives, I would like to briefly reflect on the many District achievements and accomplishments of 2008.

Our Permits and Recreation Department was as busy and focused in 2008 as it has ever been, which is always a great sign for our visitors.

We have now completed four years of allowing picnic permit seekers to go online and shop for their permits in the comfort of their homes. This year, more than 7,200 total picnic permits have been sold, about 60% of which were sold online.

In July, the District presented western Cook County with a wonderful new facility: the Cermak Family Aquatic Center. Along with several of you, I was pleased to join the hundreds of young people and their parents on opening day and have rarely seen so many little ones so happy.

The center remained open through Labor Day at absolutely no cost to the public. I believe this was a wonderful way to introduce this new facility and I encourage our lifeguards and pool managers to do all they can to ensure that it remains a premier recreation destination for young families.

In 2008, the Permits and Recreation Department expanded our concessions to include a bicycle rental opportunity. Now, in Chicago, Morton Grove and Wilmette, preserve visitors can rent bikes and tour our open space holdings without ever having to load up and haul a bike, bike rack or any other equipment.

Of course, we are pleased that many hundreds of thousands of individuals visit our lands for recreational purposes each year. But, there is a smaller, yet incredibly vital group of visitors who come to work: our volunteers.

Every weekend of the year, there are a number of volunteer workdays occurring somewhere on our lands. When most of us choose to rest or pursue leisurely activities – on the weekends and in our spare time – these individuals choose to work, many with their children in tow...and we all benefit from their commitment.

The proof lies in the numbers.

This year, our volunteers have donated 80,000 hours of service, providing a labor cost savings to the District that exceeds \$1.5 million dollars – a \$300,000 increase over last year's total.

To this incredible group of people, who give so regularly and selflessly of their time and hard work to keep our lands healthy, on behalf of this Board...and, also, in a very personal way...I thank you.

In 2008, we demonstrated our recognition that a growing volunteer base can only serve to benefit the District. That is why, this year, we launched phase two of our “So Close 2 You” public awareness campaign with a theme of volunteering.

Our advertising efforts included a television commercial; CTA trains, buses and stations ads; PACE bus ads; a dedicated Internet landing page; and seven highway billboards. We also hosted the highly successful “GO GREEN” volunteer recruitment event with the Chicago Bulls, who I thank for their participation.

And if you took a red line train to a White Sox or Cubs game during the regular season or the unfortunately short playoffs, you saw stations exclusively dominated by ads promoting the District's volunteer opportunities.

In short, we presented the general public with a campaign that was tough to ignore – and they didn't.

But we didn't stop with advertising.

We also enhanced our existing volunteer web site by presenting the public with the opportunity to become a volunteer online. They could also get a referral to a volunteer workday by phone.

As a result, since the launch of the campaign, our effort has resulted in nearly 800 new volunteer sign-ups – a total representing 8.8-percent of the District's 9,000 total current volunteers – in just three-and-a-half months.

The District has received 328 volunteer applications via email, something never even possible before this year, some representing large groups and corporations.

Our volunteer resources center has received over 700 phone calls specifically related to the campaign, with over 460 direct referrals to specific workdays or locations.

Just as impressive, our volunteer website has received more than a quarter-million hits since the campaign launched – unprecedented numbers for a four-month period. This is particularly important because it reflects the fact that, besides enlisting new volunteers, the Cook County Forest Preserve brand name was promoted and widely recognized.

This year, we also established our new Forest Preserve District Foundation. The formation of this entity provides myriad opportunities for providing for the future of our great preserves. It is my hope that individuals and corporations within our great County's borders and beyond will engage the Foundation in its mission of supporting our lands.

We also worked with the United States Forest Service to host the area's first region-wide Prescribed Burn Conference.

The conference was a tremendous success, bringing groups and individuals from throughout the area, and included speakers from the U.S. Forest Service, The Nature Conservancy, Purdue University, DePaul University and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency.

In 2008, we also hosted our third annual "Live Healthy, Discover Nature" outdoor public awareness festival at Daley Plaza where more than 3,000 visitors were reached. The day included more than 20 partner organizations, exhibits and an afternoon showcasing some of the best of what the District and its partners have to offer.

This year, the District also established a recycling partnership with the City of Chicago, allowing for recycling receptacles to be placed at select District holdings within the city's borders. We are excited about furthering our recycling goals through this program.

Our Department of Resource Management leads the charge for the District's mission in the field. Their expertise and drive are unsurpassed...and 2008 found them working as hard as ever.

The front lines of environmental education in Cook County are our six wonderful Cook County forest preserve nature centers.

Our naturalists combine a wealth of environmental knowledge with a keen sense of how to make that information appealing to our children. This combination results in a population of young people who, once presented with our interpretive displays and informative presentations, develop a new attitude about their natural environment.

By the end of this year, our nature centers will have served hundreds of thousands of visitors. That's a half-million people who visited us to sit in the front row of nature's classroom.

In fact, I was one of those students when I visited with Center Director Sue Holt and the River Trail Nature Center staff for their 50th Anniversary Celebration and Grand Re-opening. There is a unique joy to watching young children discover nature up-close-and-personal.

On occasion, our naturalists take their show on the road, so to speak, as with the “Mighty Acorns” programs, with whom staff from District Nature Centers schedule and coordinate activities. To date, 36 schools and over 2,500 students are participating in the program and I pledge our continued involvement.

In 2008, the District received millions of dollars in funding for restoration work. Most notably, the United States Army Corps of Engineers provided a combined \$10.4 million dollars for work at Tinley Creek, Orland Grasslands and Dan McMahon Woods. Additionally, in the last three years, the District has provided funds or assisted other organizations with restoration work in excess of \$22 million.

Our Department of Resource Management also supported our First Annual Forest Preserve District of Cook County/”Fishin’ Buddies!” Fishing Derby at Tampier Lake last month. The event was attended by 300 children, volunteers, parents and group leaders, including my son, Hans, and myself.

The event was a rousing success, thanks to our naturalists and Mr. John Kidd, the founder of “Fishin’ Buddies!” and a great forest preserve volunteer in his own right. Mr. Kidd has been a tremendous partner with the District for many years and was kind enough to organize and run the Derby, bringing his family and organization in support of our goal of introducing fishing to our County’s young people.

There’s simply not enough time to acknowledge all that Resource Management does, from District-wide safety and training coordination...to fisheries activities...to wildlife and plant life studies, and beyond.

Our Planning and Development Department broke new ground in 2008 - literally.

In fact, this year, our staff either began or completed dozens of projects directly benefiting our visitors – projects like the River Trail Nature Center addition and renovation; the Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center renovation and new learning center construction; the Camp Sagawau Environmental Learning Center; the Cermak Family Aquatic Center and the Green Lake Family Aquatic Center, just to name a few.

Of course, this does not include the myriad other successes they’ve achieved for our visitors.

Dozens of comfort stations were renovated, many new picnic shelters were built, and a whole host of other restorations, improvements and additions were completed Countywide. This is just a small sampling of all of this prolific department’s achievements.

As you know, many of these projects are funded through monies procured under Senate Bill 83 and the State of Illinois’ *Illinois First* program. I must thank Cook County’s legislative leaders in Springfield for making these projects possible.

Staff in our Maintenance Department found themselves busy throughout the year with a number of initiatives, many well beyond the daily repair and clean-up efforts required for the nation's largest forest preserve.

This year, our Maintenance Department integrated 3,000 metal-legged picnic tables into District picnic groves, completing the three-year phase-out of our older, less sturdy tables from our holdings. We are always proud to improve the quality of the District experience and this measure helped us accomplish that goal.

I should note that, at this very moment, staff is making preparations to sell these picnic tables on Ebay, just as we've done in past years when the need has arisen to liquidate other non-useful, antiquated equipment.

Our Maintenance Department also worked interdepartmentally with Resource Management to remove approximately 216,000 square feet of buckthorn in the fall and winter months. This cooperation is a shining example of how departments can work cooperatively to support our overall goal of removing invasive species from our holdings.

Our Law Enforcement Department also went the extra mile in 2008 to keep our holdings safe in a number of ways.

The department implemented their emergency call box deployment system – a protocol to ensure quick response to calls from our solar-powered call boxes throughout the County. If ever our patrons find themselves in distress, this box connects directly to 9-1-1, allowing for a near-immediate response by nearby law enforcement officers.

Law Enforcement staff also purchased additional electronic surveillance equipment to enhance security at our holdings. This equipment includes cameras that allow for direct monitoring of a number of our groves, parking lots and facilities.

In 2008, **all** District officers received training at the Illinois Department of Natural Resources' Conservation Police Academy in Springfield, Illinois. This Board has asked our officers to continue to enhance conservation training and we should all applaud Chief Richard Waszak for continuing to directly adhere to the wishes of this body.

If you've been in our preserves recently, chances are you've noticed an increase in police patrols with the introduction of the seven T-3 motion vehicles to our force. These vehicles have proved both useful and impressive in their first year and I hope to expand their use soon.

This year, we also increased bicycle and foot patrol in all areas of the preserves. My belief is that law enforcement officers must be visible outside of their cars to be effective in our preserves and I am proud to know that they are out and engaging our visitors.

Finally, in 2008, the Cook County Forest Preserve Police Department unveiled and launched the Trail Watch Volunteer Program. The program has been a success, with more

than 50 individuals already signing up for various levels of Trail Watch duty. We will continue to develop, promote and expand this opportunity.

To be sure, 2008 was an outstanding year for the District and I have every reason to believe that 2009 will be even better.

My proposed 2009 Executive Budget Recommendation calls for a total appropriation of \$160.7 million dollars, with an operating budget to the District of \$52.6 million dollars.

This appropriation also includes contributions of \$14.9 million dollars and \$9.3 million dollars to the Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden, respectively.

As I present this budget to you, I am proud that, despite not raising the tax levy, we were able to increase funding in key areas.

My 2009 proposed budget includes an appropriation of \$3 million dollars for land acquisition, a \$500,000 increase in funding over last year's appropriation.

This budget also appropriates \$3.5 million dollars in land management and restoration funding, an increase of \$275,000.

These increases are a reflection of my ongoing commitment to procuring new lands, with an eye towards one day reaching our legislative limit of 75,000 acres and my absolute belief that our lands must be managed effectively if we are to be remembered as true stewards of some of nature's most beautiful open space holdings.

This budget, as with my past-proposed budgets, seeks to add new front-line workers to our ranks. I want to note, unequivocally, that this budget adds no new management positions – only those individuals tasked with the day-to-day responsibility of serving our lands and visitors directly.

The budget adds eight Resource Technician positions to our trail maintenance division. These individuals will not only improve and maintain our trails on a daily basis, but will also be trained in fire suppression and herbicide applications.

In 2009, we have also removed three unfilled supervisory positions in our Law Enforcement Department and replaced them with three police officers who will be detailed exclusively to patrol our trails.

The budget also calls for the addition of 23 new part-time, seasonal personnel in the Permits and Recreation Department to support the operation of our existing pools as well as the new Green Lake Pool Aquatic Center, which is set to open during summer 2009. Sixteen part-time positions have been eliminated that were not filled in 2008.

The result of these changes is a net gain in full-time equivalent positions of 12 positions, from 524 to 536.

My proposed spending plan calls for a \$1 million dollar increase in our Buildings and Structure/Capital Improvement budget, bringing the total to \$4.78 million dollars. I truly believe that over the past five years, the District has given our visitors reason to expect better amenities, facilities and services and it is my full intention to fund the District in a manner that provides for that growth and improvement.

The budget also reflects my belief that, time and again, it is important to reassert our position as a national leader in open space preservation. That is why I have proposed a commitment of \$50,000 to fund the first-ever Sustainability Conference with University of Illinois to promote our forest preserves as a national model throughout the United States.

My proposed budget increases funding for youth education programs over 2008 from \$50,000 to \$75,000. I believe it is paramount that we do more to promote youth organization participation in our preserves by supporting programs such as the Mighty Acorns and "Fishin' Buddies!" among others.

Next year, we will implement the final phase of our very successful public awareness campaign. The campaign will focus on promoting and increasing attendance at our nature centers, presenting them specifically as unique destinations for environmental education. With new learning centers, additions and improvements at several centers, I am proud to propose a campaign budget of \$650,000 – a \$100,000 increase over 2008.

I am unwavering in my belief that the safety and security of our visitors is paramount. With that in mind, I am proposing \$75,000 in new funding for additional security systems, including security cameras and call boxes at select locations.

Fishing will take center stage as a large part of the District's recreation efforts in 2009.

In one of the more exciting measures the District will undertake next year, the District has agreed to serve as an initial partner sponsor for the newly formed Illinois High School Association's bass fishing sport tournaments.

I truly believe that this is an excellent vehicle for helping to create a whole new generation of forest preserve fishermen.

It is important to me that we are the first forest preserve involved with this initiative and that we create and solidify new relationships with participating schools. Some clubs involved in the initiative have already indicated a willingness to organize clean-up activities to benefit our holdings.

In 2009, we will launch a pilot program to clear lake shoreline vegetation, providing for additional areas for fishing opportunities. As we seek to add to our community of fisherman, we should be proactive in making sure there is an increased opportunity to enjoy a day of angling.

Next year, the District will establish an unprecedented pilot program with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources' Conservation Police to assign a full-time Conservation Officer to our holdings.

I want to note that no other forest preserve in this state has done this. We are looking to break new ground and bring new levels of conservation enforcement to our lands. I believe this measure will help us achieve that goal.

Since 2006, we have looked towards creating a better forest preserve experience for our patrons by examining the condition of our picnic tables. As I noted earlier, this year, we reached our goal of replacing all of our older, all-wood tables with sturdier, more-attractive, metal-legged models.

But we must do more in 2009. Next year, we will pursue the incorporation of picnic tables that accommodate the needs of individuals with physical disabilities at select locations. We are an inclusive organization and I insist that we always pursue avenues in which to make every preserve visitor feel welcome.

Another component of that effort is the expansion of our portable washroom program to include comfort stations with access for those with physical challenges at select locations. Again, we must seek to provide a premium District experience for all County residents.

We will also provide seed money for the Forest Preserve District Foundation in the amount of \$150,000. It is important that we demonstrate a commitment that bespeaks the seriousness with which we undertake the establishment of our foundation.

Next year, our Recreation Department will provide recycling bags to everyone who purchases a picnic permit in order to promote our recycling efforts. If, as our new slogan says, we have truly been "green since 1914," we must ensure that we continue to promote such practices in 2009.

Finally, towards the end of this year and into 2009, Recreation will pursue a winter activities concessionaire through the issuance of a request for proposals. Our hope is that it will attract vendors who will offer amenities for activities like ice skating, snowmobiling, and cross-country skiing at five different locations throughout the County.

As the District continues to improve and enhance its programs and services; as we consider and develop new ideas; and as we engage in groundbreaking initiatives, what we are doing is changing the culture of our organization in a powerful and positive way.

And, Commissioners, I believe that is what progress, preservation and proper public service demand of us.

Thank you.