

FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT
of Cook County, Illinois

GENERAL HEADQUARTERS



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Steven M. Bylina, Jr., GENERAL SUPERINTENDENT

November 30, 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Board, good afternoon...

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County is unique in that it is the largest and oldest conservation institution of its type in the country. Let me repeat that: We are the **largest** and **oldest** conservation institution of our type **in the country**.

We set the table...and we continue to raise the bar.

We are charged with protecting 68,000-plus acres of dedicated open space, offer some of the best ecological education programs in the state and place a premium on the work of our thousands of volunteers.

We maintain scores of picnic groves that are, in turn, used by thousands of visitors.

We monitor hundreds of miles of trails, both paved and multi-use, for everyone from die-hard equestrian riders to moms who simply want a fitness stroll with their children.

We do all this as part of an awesome and serious responsibility.

It is not now, nor has it ever been lost on me during my tenure as general superintendent, that when we do our best to serve our visitors, we accomplish our goal of serving the President, this board and, most importantly, the taxpayers of Cook County.

I believe that our high level of service, combined with President Stroger's decision to hold the line on taxes for the second year in a row, demonstrates that we are committed to pushing ourselves even harder in 2010.

Not only is the District keeping its tax levy the same in the New Year, but we are, again, increasing our contribution towards land management and matching last year's appropriation for land acquisition.

These facts should make clear our ongoing commitment to serving the taxpayers.



That is why I am pleased to hear so many people come here today and speak so highly of our programs, services and day-to-day efforts.

These individuals represent more than 50-plus diverse organizations, but most importantly, they represent a positive evaluation from taxpayers, who are the ultimate indicators of the job the District is doing with their valuable tax dollars...and we are humbled by their support.

Commissioners, the public comments you've heard here today are reflective of my most deeply held professional conviction: That your District is a trend-setting and, at times, model organization.

We have the most professional and well-trained field staff you will find among forest preserve districts with over 100 certified arborists on staff, leading our charge.

We are also committed to blazing new trails as a leader in ecological conservation. At no time was this more evident in 2009 than during our Daniel Burnham Sustainability Conference.

The conference was the first of its type for any forest preserve in the nation and, both practically and symbolically represented our commitment towards being the most sustainable forest preserve district nationwide.

Some of you were on hand for opening night, when we hosted over 200 individuals for a discussion of critical climate issues by renowned environmental expert Dr. David Orr. Over the following two days, we held both a workshop and summarization session to begin our journey towards real sustainability.

The point, ladies and gentlemen, is that your Cook County forest preserve district was the first and only organization of its type to convene local environmental, academic and governmental leaders for the sole purpose of improving its local ecology in such an interesting and thought-provoking way.

However, just as important as the need to guide the public conversation about conservation is the need to take care of the basics.

That's why we remain resolute in keeping our preserves beautiful by adhering to our maintenance schedules to ensure our groves are clean and our lands are presentable.

And why our Resource Management staff works to make sure that our programming and events available to visitors and volunteers are interesting and fulfilling.

These are facts about which you should all be proud – I know I am. In fact, even the most cursory review finds excellence throughout the Forest Preserve District of Cook County.

For instance, I took particular pride this year in the acknowledgement of our Finance and Administration department.

First, Finance received the Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting for their 2007 Comprehensive Annual Financial Report. As President Stroger noted in his remarks, I don't think any of us were surprised to hear that, largely because Mr. Kemp and his team are top notch by any standard.

A few months later, their efforts were again recognized.

When Fitch ratings upgraded the District's unlimited general obligation bond rating to AA-minus this year, it was made only more pleasant by the language used by Fitch in discussing our financial operation. They praised the District's improved financial performance, management initiatives and improvements in accountability and operating efficiencies since 2003. Transparency has been paramount.

And, while recognition is good, it may have been eclipsed by the achievement of one of the department's long-time goals: The creation of an internet-based procurement system.

Our purchasing process has never been as streamlined and transparent as it is today. Vendors register online, which has resulted in the largest vendor database we've ever had. This same system has allowed us to post requests for proposals online, resulting in a more competitive bid process and higher cost savings to the District.

In 2010, we are going to take that initiative even further.

Next year, we will implement bid openings via the internet and post online those vendors who are awarded contracts. This practice represents the best of transparency in government, combined with the utilization of technology to best serve our vendors.

In fact, next year, the District will take its efforts towards integrating technology and the preserves in a whole new direction.

As a great example of the direction in which our District will proceed in the New Year, I must pause here and discuss briefly how ideas are shared at the District.

Recently, one of our employees in the Planning and Development Department, Mr. Pat Jones, was speaking with a young woman at a forest preserve regarding access to information about the forest preserves. Following their discussion, Pat thought an Iphone application would be a great way for our visitors to get information about the District.

As most of you know, I have an open door policy in my office – we are casual, but professional.

So, Pat shared this idea with me and, following some discussion among staff, we decided that, in 2010, we will launch a one-of-a-kind Iphone application that allows our users to access an unprecedented amount of information about their forest preserves.

From their handheld Iphone devices, our visitors will now be able to utilize our application to locate forest preserve holdings.

The Iphone application will also provide an unprecedented amount of information to the user. Amenities available at various locations, photos of our holdings and large amounts of information never before available in one program will now be accessible through a few keystrokes on our visitor's phones.

And, before we move forward, let's entertain the obvious question: What if a visitor does not have an Iphone?

While no smart phone has enjoyed the consistently significant growth in its market share as the Iphone and despite the fact that it has become the standard by which comparable technology is measured, we are also seeking to ensure that there is another, web-based, companion program that allows users of other types of smart phones to have comparable, though not exactly similar, capabilities.

I should make clear right now that the Iphone's enhanced and unique functionality means that its application will be significantly more impressive than the companion application; however, in the event that this project goes well, we will certainly examine ways to expand in coming years to include other smart phones, like the Blackberry.

But make no mistake, ladies and gentlemen - **no other** forest preserve district in the nation has an Iphone application.

As we focus on technology in 2010, we will also set a new standard for how a forest preserve presents its online wilderness to its internet visitors.

The District first launched its current website in 2000 – www.fpdcc.com. At that time, no other forest preserve offered a site similar to ours.

The mission then was simple: Provide a resource to our visitors that allowed them to obtain all of the information they had, until that time, been able to receive only through pamphlets, brochures and other written material. We were immediately successful in that regard.

Since then, it has also become a place where the District has been able to announce its latest innovation, project or initiative, always with an eye towards empowering our visitors with information.

Several years ago, we also launched a partner site in conjunction with the Friends of the Forest Preserves – www.fpdccvolunteers.org.

This new site provided our volunteers and our own Volunteer Resources Division with a new way to interact online. From announcements regarding upcoming volunteer workdays to information on how to contact many volunteer organizations, we wanted to provide a tool that was unique, attractive and useful.

We've succeeded on all counts.

In 2010, we want to make our website the best among all of the country's forest preserves.

While we have added resources to our existing site, like YouTube, facebook and Twitter links, we must create a site for 2010 that is both functional and forward-thinking.

First, the new site will include more of the basics, like a search engine – something that has been discussed for some time.

The new site will also provide for expanded video, podcasts and GIS information. While these functions will be new to our site, I believe they should be considered standard for an organization like ours.

The site will also experience a full aesthetic redesign, providing for a new look and feel to our online presence. As we have consistently maintained, we want the new website to feel less like a government-owned site and more like our preserves themselves – attractive and appealing.

While our collar forest preserves have web sites as well, we believe that no other district will offer a site like ours.

Continuing our technological theme, next year, the Cook County Forest Preserve police force will enjoy yet another technological advance to help them keep our preserve visitors safe: The PocketCop.

Before I continue, I want to note that there is no doubt that our forest preserve police force is among the best of local law enforcement agencies. Their basic level of training is the most extensive in the area and their commitment to keeping our preserves safe is second-to-none. I commend Chief Waszak and his officers for working diligently to serve our visitors.

From bikes to all-terrain vehicles to environmentally-friendly SUV's, we have continued to make sure our officers have the tools necessary to do their jobs well.

This was especially apparent last year, when we introduced the T-3 motion vehicles to our preserves. These segway-like vehicles have helped our officers go into places where cars will not fit more quickly than they previous could have on foot or bike. It has been a perfect marriage of ecology and technology.

We do well by seeking out those tools that are especially useful for our officers' specialized type of policing.

And that is why, in 2010, we will introduce the PocketCop as a resource for our Cook County Forest Preserve police force.

The PocketCop takes technology out of the police car and puts in the officers' hands. This mobile data system is the first handheld tool of its size to make available almost every function that officers formerly had to in their cars with a laptop to access.

This is especially important for a force like ours, where our personnel is asked to perform their duties on trails, bikes, lakes, and, occasionally, deep into wooded areas.

As a former officer, I recognize that the requirement to protect our visitors is to ensure that our law enforcement personnel have all the tools that they need and I believe the PocketCop will be a tremendously useful tool in that effort.

While new technology is always exciting, we cannot lose sight of the fact that we best serve our visitors face-to-face. This has never been truer than for the Resource Management department.

Resource Management is the ever-present first line in our ongoing effort to provide environmental education to Cook County's residents. And they do a stellar job.

It was Resource Management that hosted three Illinois High School Association Sectional Bass Fishing Tournaments on three District lakes – the first endeavor of its kind.

It is Resource Management that schedules, coordinates and staffs our Mighty Acorns programming and the 30 schools and 2,700 students that participate.

And it is Resource Management that hosts more than a half-million people each year at our nature centers.

But that is a meager percentage of what these dedicated professionals do.

Resource Management coordinates the District's safety and training efforts; coordinates District efforts with state and federal officials regarding invasive pests like the Emerald Ash Borer and Asian Long-horned Beetle; and attends to the maintenance of all 300-plus miles of District trails.

To help them serve the public at even higher levels in 2010, the District will open its new Camp Sagawau Environmental Education Center and Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center.

We've always believed that our nature centers are unique gateways into environmental education. Nowhere will you find such a combination of such intimate locations, based right in Cook County's communities, with such knowledgeable and accessible staff; beautiful grounds and such a wide range of interactive activities, animals and learning opportunities.

It is with extraordinary pride, then, that I say to you that these large and modern new facilities will allow us to do even more.

These new buildings will provide new, improved opportunities for our visitors and staff alike, with more space, modern amenities and, most important, the opportunity to provide even more programming for our visiting public.

That is why we are seeking to add two new naturalists next year.

Since the initial planning stages of these buildings, we've known that this cliché' is true: "If we build them, our visitors will come" and we want to welcome as many of them as possible. Our two new buildings and two new staffers will allow us to meet that goal.

Resource Management will also undertake several other new initiatives in 2010.

Volunteer staff will continue to expand our high school volunteer program. Never in recent history has there been a more heightened awareness of the need to protect our planet and its resources. We will – and we must – continue to reach out to young people spreading our green message.

By establishing and developing partnerships with officials at the state and federal levels, we will also seek to do more to control invasive aquatic weeds and garlic mustard, as well as increase the number of habitat enhancement projects, including shorelines throughout the District. Resource Management has always excelled at creating and maintaining these relationships to benefit the District and I have asked them to redouble their efforts in the future.

One great example of this type of partnership is the work we've done with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. Most recently, we've worked with IDNR officials to help stop the spread of Asian Carp into Lake Michigan. Our long history of working cooperatively with the state has produced a great relationship that I believe has been beneficial to both organizations.

If Resource Management makes up a great deal of the house upon which the District is built, it is our Maintenance department that is the foundation.

It is a foregone conclusion that no one wants to visit a preserve that is unattractive, unkempt or littered and it is our Maintenance department that handles those responsibilities.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Board, I am proud to tell you that, in 2009, our Maintenance operation went above and beyond my demand for excellence.

There is no doubt that our groves are cleaner and better kept than ever before. Our supervisory staff and front-line workers are working together each day to ensure that our visiting public is welcomed by grounds whose condition bespeak the pride we take in them.

What is even more impressive is that so much of what Maintenance is doing goes beyond the basics.

In 2009, our Maintenance department continued to procure "green," fuel efficient vehicles, like hybrids, for integration into our fleet and purchased eco-friendly tractors and riding mowers for use in the field.

It was the Maintenance department that coordinated the expansion of our recycling program to include thirty additional recycling bins throughout the District. There is a pleasant irony to the fact that the men and woman tasked with picking up the trash left behind by others play such an obviously important role in taking waste out of the trash stream to help preserve our ecology.

Maintenance has also set out some impressive goals for 2010 – one, in particular, is particularly stellar.

2010's fourth and final foray into new technology – this time coming by way of the Maintenance Department - has less to do with the internet or networking, but is more about technology under the hood.

As I noted earlier, we have already added hybrid vehicles to our overall fleet and, now, look toward new ways of merging our day-to-day needs with our responsibility to always further our mission.

Our goal in 2010 is to install propane fuel conversion systems in approximately twenty District police vehicles. In doing so, the District joins a growing movement to introduce propane as a part of environmentally-friendly fleet management through the country.

The benefits of propane are simple and obvious as it relates to the District: It is cheaper to procure, burns cleaner than gasoline and conversion does not require the purchase of new vehicles.

Second only to the environmental benefits that propane offers the District, however, are the financial ones.

Propane costs are, on average, cheaper than gasoline fuel costs and propane is being promoted by the federal government, complete with the potential for financial subsidies. There is simply no financial downside to this technology.

Finally, we will be one of the only forest preserve districts in the nation to utilize propane technology in our vehicles. I look forward to sharing more with you regarding this pilot initiative as we move forward.

In 2010, Maintenance will also expand on their efforts to help the environment by reducing carbon emissions and particulate matter on diesel vehicles through the conversion of the current exhaust systems to a more eco-friendly system. Now, that may seem to be a small matter, but I hope that you will recognize that our Maintenance department is working hard to make sure everything they do contribute to a cleaner, healthier environment.

But the value of a clean environment is diminished when it cannot comfortably be enjoyed by all of us.

That's why, next year, the Maintenance department will increase our current inventory of picnic tables and comfort stations that are accessible to those with physical challenges. We have been

pleased by both the reaction and appreciation from our visiting public regarding these facilities and are fully committed to continuing to find ways to make their forest preserve experience as pleasant and enjoyable as possible.

And while Maintenance does all it can to make our forest preserves clean and accessible, it is the Permits and Recreation department that helps make them a little more fun.

While you may not know it, any time you buy a picnic permit online, call for information on horse licenses or need a Spanish-speaking employee to discuss our aquatic centers, you are working with our Permits and Recreation department.

Permits and Recreation took the lead in expanding our concessions in 2009 to include kayak rental operation, allowing visitors to rent kayaks on-site and immediately explore Skokie Lagoons. They also coordinated the food and beverage concessions process for our three aquatic centers.

Most notably, however, it was Permits and Recreation that facilitated the opening of the new Green Lake Family Aquatic Center last year, which attracted over 40,000 visitors throughout the summer.

And as the recession continues, we believe that the District must do its part to help families weather the storm.

A little over a year-and-a-half ago, we opened the brand new Cermak Family Aquatic Center and, with the permission of this Board, offered it with no admission charge throughout summer 2008.

This year, we continued that tradition, by opening Green Lake Family Aquatic Center and offering free admission there throughout the swimming season.

And in 2010, while we will not be opening a new aquatic center, we will be offering a special pass that will make them incredibly affordable: The Forest Preserve District of Cook County Family Swim Pass.

This pass will allow our repeat visitors to save money all summer long. With a one-time purchase, the pass will provide admission for two adults and up to three children at any of our three aquatic centers throughout the 2010 swimming season.

This is just another way we are continuing to create a value-added experience at the forest preserve district.

But monetary savings are certainly not the only way to add value for forest preserve visitors. Sometimes it is just a matter of introducing exciting new features. Other times, it's just improving the basics.

In either case, our Planning and Development department is almost always involved in creating a new, more enjoyable experience for our visitors.

Since the District received funds from the State of Illinois' *Illinois First* program and through Senate Bill 83, the District has embarked on an incredibly ambitious capital improvement program. P&D, as they are referred to in-house, has been at the helm of coordinating this effort.

While the funding for these programs will soon be exhausted, the result of their work speaks for itself: The District has **never** looked better.

From smaller projects like comfort stations at Dan Ryan Woods and Tampier Lake to larger projects, like restoration efforts at our Volunteer Resource Center and the remodeling of our new police headquarters, P&D has consistently led the way as the District has improved its holdings, especially in 2009.

One could see their work on street corners, as P&D coordinated the placement of 105 new property corners signs throughout the County.

Their work is also visible on our trails. Any trail user that enjoys the connection that completed the Centennial Trail or appreciates the repair and resurfacing of the trails at Busse Woods, Thorn Creek or Tinley Creek, again, is admiring the work of our P&D department.

In fact, there is no shortage of accomplishments in P&D. But no project will compare to the incredible work our P&D staff has done on our two new nature centers, which I mentioned earlier.

Their work has been so good and so forward-thinking, in fact, that I have been informed that our staff believes the new buildings will be LEED gold certified. As you may know, LEED certification is the nationally accepted benchmark for the design, construction and operation of high performance green buildings and I am excited that not one, but both of our new buildings may well receive that honor.

In 2010, we will again co-sponsor the Youth Conservation Conference in partnership with the Fishin' Buddies organization. We had the privilege of serving as a primary co-sponsor of the inaugural conference and its founder, Mr. John Kidd, has gone out of his way to ensure that the District has been widely recognized as one of the most significant players in helping bring environmental education to urban communities through this program.

The District hosted several high school aged children for internships at District facilities as part of its commitment to the conference last year, including our fisheries division and nature centers. The students were eager to learn and to serve, quickly grasping our collective role as environmental resources for the public.

We recognize the need to continue to expand our programming into Cook County's communities and this conference has proven to be a wonderful opportunity.

We also coordinated our annual “Live Healthy, Discover Nature” outdoor public awareness festival at Daley Plaza last June. It is hard to believe that, next year, we will be celebrating our fifth anniversary of bringing the best of our preserves to the concrete and skyscrapers in downtown Chicago. Our festival has grown to include an afternoon of environmental education, plus music, games, activities and an opportunity for both our staff and more than 20 partner organizations and businesses to connect with 3,000-plus people in a single day.

We look forward to continuing that tradition.

In conclusion, ladies and gentleman, I want you to consider the interesting contrast between the technology and new initiatives we will pursue in 2010 with our holdings themselves, which have been here, in some form, for many hundreds of years. We recognize that for our organization, like our plant life, there must be period of growth to continue to thrive and, like nature in general, with growth also comes change.

I assure you that as we continue to grow, change and improve for the better, our visitors – your constituents – will benefit the most. We look forward to serving them.

Thank you.