

Cook County Forest Preserve District Interest Group 2023-2024 Annual Report

The Cook County Forest Preserves district is moving forward on meeting the Next Century Conservation Plan Vision which includes goals in 4 categories: nature, people, economy and leadership. The goals in each category are expanded and explained which includes a plan for over 5 years with priority actions and initiatives. The Forest Preserve vision is in phase 2 of the plan. This implementation phase is to build support and secure needed resources and continue the important legacy of civic leadership. Passage of the referendum on November 8, 2022 by 2/3 of voters, met the needed (monetary) resource goal.

The LWV Cook County is monitoring land acquisitions and restoration, capital improvements in the forest preserves and Brookfield Zoo, and offering guided walks in the woods to League members. The Forest Preserves have been described as having a mission that states - Nature is our Business. Activities in the Forest Preserves need to be nature-compatible recreation.

LWV Natural Resources positions support the LWV Cook County actions.

Positions: Land Use

LWVIL supports development of a comprehensive land use policy for Illinois that provides for orderly growth while preserving the environment, conserving natural resources and providing needed open space. At every stage there should be citizen input. To assure the future availability of essential resources, government policies must promote stewardship of natural resources. Policies that promote resource conservation are a fundamental part of such stewardship. Resources such as water and soil should be protected.

The League supports comprehensive long-range planning and believes that wise decision-making requires:

- Consideration of environmental, public-health, social, and economic impacts of proposed plans and actions;
- Special consideration for the protection of areas of critical environmental concern, natural hazards, historical importance, and aesthetic value.

Promote an environment beneficial to life through the protection and wise management of natural resources in the public interest and managed as interrelated parts of life-supporting ecosystems. Resources should be conserved and protected to assure their future availability. Pollution of these

resources should be controlled in order to preserve the physical, chemical, and biological integrity of ecosystems and to protect public health.

Successes of the Referendum:

Passage of the referendum was estimated to bring in an additional \$42 million annually. One half of that money is to reach the goals of the Next Century Conservation Plans. One quarter is planned for capital needs and one quarter for pensions. About five percent is targeted for Forest Preserve police and maintenance.

Acquisitions and Restorations:

Land acquisition included finalization of Horizon Farm in Barrington Hills, acquisition in Spring Lake area, purchase of 57 acres in Ford Heights, and expansion of Busse Woods. There is a focus on land acquisition in the south suburbs as land is available on the market.

Restoration has picked up with the added revenue. In April 2024, Forest Preserve officials announced the biggest ecological restoration project in its history in the Palos Preserves, including Red Gate Woods — a \$10 million plan to improve more than 1,000 acres of land in southwest suburbs. Work will include preventing soil erosion, fixing walking trails where gravel has washed away and improving signage to help hikers better navigate the preserves. This effort is part of the Forest Preserve District's goal to restore and maintain some 30,000 acres by 2040.

Capital Improvements:

Brookfield Zoo updates for 4/23 - 3/25: Goals to increase staff and guest safety and comfort, and support the best infrastructure for optimal animal welfare.

- Update and repair electrical, HVAC, boiler and water systems
- Fencing, habitat and building updates and repairs
- Fire system, security, safety & technology updates
- Large equipment replacement
- Animal holding mechanical, flooring and related
- Electrical updates
- Exterior tuckpointing and painting
- Ground erosion and other improvements
- Paving

Walks and events with the goal to keep members connected, engaged and informed:

Monday, February 26, 2024 - During African American History month, historian Dr. Larry McClellan gave a talk on zoom regarding "Onward to Chicago: Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad in Northeastern Illinois". The Freedom Seekers crossed through what is now the Cook County Forest Preserves (CCFP) land on their way to Canada. The CCFP has a rich history regarding Freedom Seekers and support within this area.

Sunday, April 14, 2024 - Red Gate Woods Atomic Legacy talk at Sagawau Nature Center in Lemont. Presented by David Dolak, Professor Math & Science, Columbia College, regarding nuclear research and the association with the CCFP. A woman engineer from the Hanford Nuclear Site in Washington state shared knowledge regarding working in the plant that produced plutonium. The talk was followed by a walk in Red Gate Woods to the site of buried nuclear reactors and radioactive material from research in Argonne. Thirty people attended.

Planning continues for a steward led walk in Deer Grove East in June and a possible walk in Skokie Lagoon in September.

The LWV Cook County Forest Preserve team meets once a month at 8:30am. New members have joined and members monitor the Cook County Commissioners forest preserve meetings. We extend invitations to Cook County Commissioners to join our educational walks.

Continuing to monitor:

HB3791 - Olickal - Concealed Carry - Forest Preserve - a bill that would allow Illinois Forest Preserve districts to prohibit persons from carrying a firearm into forest preserves. Amends the Firearm Concealed Carry Act

2024-2025 Proposed Program:

1. Monitor
 - land acquisitions and restoration efforts by the FP
 - capital improvements made and proposed by the FP in the preserves and at Brookfield Zoo
 2. Offer guided walks in the woods to League members
- Submitted by Laura Davis May 2024