



**THE COOK COUNTY FOREST  
PRESERVE DISTRICT:  
REDISCOVERING  
OUR MISSION**

**2001**

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*December 2001*

*“ . . . to acquire. . . and hold lands containing one or more natural forests or parts thereof or lands connecting such forests or parts thereof, or lands capable of being forested, for the purpose of protecting and preserving the flora, fauna, and scenic beauties within such district, and to restore, restock, protect and preserve the natural forests and such lands together with their flora and fauna, as nearly as may be, in their natural state and condition, for the purpose of the education, pleasure, and recreation of the public. . . ”*

*--From the Illinois Enabling Act for the Cook County Forest Preserve District*

# ANOTHER YEAR LOST

Almost a year ago, our office released a report outlining financial management problems in the Cook County Forest Preserve District (FPD). A few weeks later, the District revealed that the financial situation was far worse than expected -- that it had been operating with a deficit of approximately \$16 million in the general fund while presenting a balanced budget to the Cook County Board of Commissioners.<sup>1</sup> While our report pointed out declining non-tax revenues, mid-year estimates later confirmed its findings. Just last month, a Deloitte and Touche analysis revealed that the FPD's recreational activities, previously deemed "revenue generating," are actually losing large amounts of money.

While our conservation and restoration efforts suffer, monies are diverted into poorly managed recreational activities such as golf courses, swimming pools, and toboggan slides. To cover the deficit, money was robbed from land acquisition and construction and development. As our preserves are falling to mismanagement and neglect, the FPD is *spending* over \$50 per person, per visit, on our toboggan slides. While the Chicago River is not navigable due to debris and fallen trees, the FPD is *losing* money on our swimming pools. While land acquisition is slower than during the depression and war years, we are subsidizing golf. The amount of money lost from recreational activities alone, \$5,655,729, could have saved 188 acres from development.<sup>2</sup> Our deferred maintenance costs are steadily mounting: at the start of FY2001, the FPD, Brookfield Zoo, and the Botanic Garden had a staggering \$95 million in combined deferred maintenance costs.

Despite the increasing population of the county, the rate of land acquisition has dropped 93% since the 1960s. Development is rapidly depleting the available open space for land acquisition. Our preserves are still in need of extensive restoration before our native species are destroyed. Restoration moratoriums remain, limiting the ability to restore our natural landscapes. Only a fraction of our holdings are under a land management plan. Of the preserves under land management plans, only a small number are actually undergoing conservation and maintenance.

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<sup>1</sup> Deficit is currently approximately \$10 million after \$7 million given to FPD from Cook County

<sup>2</sup> Based on the average price of \$30,000 acre. Figure includes expenditures for FY2000 for golf courses, driving ranges, pools, toboggans, sledding, and picnics.

Surprisingly, recycling is not available in our preserves, along our nature trails, or even at our FPD facilities.

The FPD still lacks responsible short-term and long-term strategic funding and management plans. Unfortunately, our failure to compile the most basic statistical information about our preserves, such as demographic data and staffing needs of each preserve will hinder our ability to create such plans. Our failure to track our visitors' level of satisfaction with our programs and preserves will make it difficult to assess which programs are worthwhile and which should be terminated. Moreover, our financial cash and management system is outdated, and we have just begun to truly assess the cost of any of our individual preserves or programs.

Most of the financial and management problems can be traced to the fact that the forest preserve has lost track of its mission. During its recent budgetary debacle, the forest preserve robbed from its land acquisition fund and cheated restoration and maintenance efforts while overstaffing recreation. Programs promoting our mission need not be paralyzed during this challenging time. It is not too late to regain our focus and to address old challenges in new and creative ways.

We must:

- **Implement alternative land acquisition strategies,**
- **Develop long and short term strategic management and funding plans,**
- **Restructure and downsize the forest preserve police,**
- **Dramatically increase alternative non-tax revenues,**
- **Merge management activities with Cook County government including finance, personnel, information technology, etc.,**
- **Increase volunteer programs,**
- **Privatize special events, maintenance, all golf activities, waste disposal, etc. This must include corresponding staff cuts, and**
- **Create a self-sustaining enterprise fund for golf to prevent subsidization of golf with tax dollars.**

Note: Our observations and recommendations follow in two parts: land acquisition and management. Land Acquisition discusses the importance of open space and alternative land acquisition strategies. Management provides recommendations on staff and financial management and the development of alternative revenue sources.

## PART I: LAND ACQUISITION

Cook County is among the most ecologically diverse areas of the country with its mixture of prairie, oak, savanna, and wetland. The Cook County Forest Preserves clean the air, filter our water, and reduce the frequency and extent of flooding.<sup>3</sup> In addition to their environmental impact, the preserves offer crucial open space and recreational opportunities to residents of Cook County. Each year over 40 million people visit the Cook County Forest Preserves. On an annual basis, more people visit the Busse Woods Preserve than Yellowstone National Park.<sup>4</sup>

As open space in Cook County succumbs to development, the pursuit of additional land for the Cook County Forest Preserve District is crucial. The decrease in open space is not only problematic for the natural world, but the holdings of the Cook County Forest Preserve District are insufficient to meet the needs of the five million citizens of Cook County. In 1994, our Land Acquisition Plan stated, “This plan is a Call to Action to establish in Cook County the finest land preservation system in urban America.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, our funds have been diverted from land acquisition to recreational activities including swimming pools and special events.

While other local governments are recognizing the importance of open space, Cook County is falling behind. The Forest Preserve District currently holds approximately 68,051 acres of land. During the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, the Cook County Forest Preserve District acquired an average of over 700 acres of land per year. Despite the increasing population of the county, between 1993 and 1998, the district acquired an average of only 50 acres per year; **a decrease of 93%**. In fact, land acquisition is presently slower than during the Depression and war years.<sup>6</sup> Currently, approximately 500 acres of land are under active acquisition by the FPD. However, these lands have been under active acquisition for over a year. As of November 2, 2001, only 80 acres of land had been acquired by the FPD in 2001. As we hesitate, the rapid pace of development is depleting the available open space for land acquisition. The financial state of the Forest Preserve District need not be an impediment to the pursuit of our mission to hold and acquire lands in

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<sup>3</sup> Friends of the Forest Preserve, White Paper

<sup>4</sup> Land Acquisition Plan, Forest Preserve District of Cook County

<sup>5</sup> Land Acquisition Plan, Forest Preserve District of Cook County

their natural state. As discussed in the following section, there are several alternative-funding strategies for land acquisition.

## IMPORTANCE OF OPEN SPACE

### Quality of Life

Cook County has a population of nearly 5.4 million people and a dense metropolitan area that accounts for most of its territory. The population density of Cook County is 45% greater than DuPage County and 55% greater than Lake County.<sup>7</sup> While the average ratio of forest preserve land to population is 35 persons per acre across the six-county region of northeastern Illinois, Cook County has a ratio of 78.5 persons per acre. In the City of Chicago, this density is amplified. The National Recreation and Parks Associations recommends 6.1 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents; the City of Chicago offers only 4.14 acres per 1,000 residents.<sup>8</sup> **In fact, in comparison to 8 cities of similar population and density, Chicago ranks 6<sup>th</sup> in available parkland per person.** The need for greater amounts of open space will only intensify in the near future. Population projections forecast that the population of the six-county region will increase 25 percent by 2020.

Open space not only provides an essential refuge to the density of Cook County, it offers recreational opportunities such as bike trails, walking paths, and canoeing at no cost to visitors.

### Environmental and Economic Benefits

Open space also has a great economic value apart from the value of land. The preserves help the environment by cleaning our air, filtering water, and helping to reduce the frequency and extent of flooding in Cook County. It is impossible to assign a monetary value to the environmental benefits from the preserves. However, studies reveal that open space enhances property value, particularly if it is not developed for recreational purposes.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Friends of the Forest Preserve, White Paper

<sup>7</sup> The population density of Cook County is 10.72, DuPage County: 5.84, and Lake County 4.83.

<sup>8</sup> Waterways for our Future

<sup>9</sup> Fausold, 1996.

## **STRATEGIES FOR OPEN SPACE— FUNDING AND ACQUISITION**

The Cook County Forest Preserve District is currently \$10 million in debt, this time last year, we were \$21 million in debt.<sup>10</sup> While incurring this debt, the FPD borrowed over \$19 million from the Land Acquisition Fund to subsidize its day-to-day operations. These monies have not yet been returned to the land acquisition fund. As a result, after our current commitments to purchase acreage are fulfilled, only \$6 million will remain in the land acquisition fund. It is impossible to reach our statutory maximum of 75,000 acres with this minimal amount of funding. To reach our goal, the county must pursue alternative methods of acquisition including intergovernmental agreements and land referendum bonds.

Two recent reports have highlighted the need for expanded acquisitions and corresponding strategies for funding and acquisition: the Land Acquisition Plan from the Forest Preserve District of Cook County and City Space, produced by the City of Chicago, the Chicago Park District, and the FPD.

### **Land Acquisition Plan—Forest Preserve District of Cook County**

The 1994 Land Acquisition Plan (passed by the Cook County Board in 2000) identified over 40,000 acres of land as potential acquisitions by the FPD. Chief among them are holdings owned by other public entities. For example, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District owns surplus ecologically diverse open spaces. The plan also included a public outreach campaign to sample Cook County residents' opinions about the state of the Cook County Forest Preserves and to solicit their ideas for improvements. Among the sentiments expressed was a belief that having more open space was worth paying for in the form of fees or a land referendum bond. In particular, residents supported financing the purchase of land that could be restored to its natural state. Residents' support for expansion was fueled largely by a desire to reduce overcrowding in the preserves, especially evident in the warmer seasons.

The 1994 plan recommended examining the potential for issuing land acquisition bonds. The plan acknowledged that this could be a major component in obtaining the financial resources to reach the state's statutory limit of 75,000 acres. A \$100 million dollar bond referendum ordinance introduced before the Finance Committee was never called for vote. This ordinance should be reintroduced, adopted, and placed on the ballot in the near future. Residents have voiced their desire for increased open space in Cook County and many have communicated a willingness to fund acquisition. A referendum would put the decision back in the hands of the customers of the forest preserves-- Cook County taxpayers.

Neighboring forest preserve districts have pursued this method of funding. In 1997, the voters of DuPage County passed a \$75 million forest preserve district referendum for land acquisition. In 1999, voters in Kane, Lake, and Will Counties passed similar referenda for \$70 million, \$55 million, and \$70 million respectively. These counties have subsequently made substantial acquisitions to their holdings, greatly expanding the educational and recreational opportunities available to their citizens. This trend is evident nationwide. According to the Land Trust Alliance, in 1999, 90 percent of 102 bond referenda for open space land acquisition passed, yielding \$1.8 billion in funds for open space. In 2000, 174 of 209 ballot measures passed, yielding \$7.5 billion in funding.

A \$100 million bond for land acquisition would not impose a substantial burden on Cook County taxpayers. According to the Friends of the Forest Preserve District, a house with a fair market value of \$150,000 would pay \$5.20 per year over the 20-year life of the bond. The Friends of the Forest Preserve District estimate that a \$100 million bond referendum would allow for the purchase of 6,000-7,000 acres.<sup>11</sup> To reach our statutory maximum of 75,000 acres, we would only need to purchase a total of 6,449 acres. There are ample land acquisition opportunities available. The 1994 Cook County Land Acquisition plan identified over 40,000 acres for potential acquisition.

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<sup>10</sup> The actual deficit of the FPD was approximately \$17 million. Cook County gave the FPD \$7 million to help cover the deficit.

<sup>11</sup> The recent average land acquisition cost of the Cook County Forest Preserve District is \$30,000/acre. Some land acquisitions may be matched with grant funds and some may be more/less expensive to acquire.

## **City Space—City of Chicago**

As outlined in the City Space Plan of January 1998, the City of Chicago, Chicago Park District, and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County sought to add 1,300 acres of new open space in the City of Chicago, through the creation of neighborhood parks, community gardens, river trails, nature preserves and lakefront parks by 2005. To support this goal, the City of Chicago has invested more than \$4 billion in neighborhood improvements. The city hopes to bring all communities to a minimum standard of two acres of open space per 1,000 residents by 2010 with the ultimate goal of five acres per 1,000 residents.

One of the key recommendations in the report is for the FPD to “...acquire publicly owned land along Chicago’s inland waterways and in the Lake Calumet District”. . . and to “develop and manage these properties as greenways and nature preserves.”<sup>12</sup> Specifically, the report recommended that the FPD lease land owned by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District. The highest priority should be the acquisition of unprotected wetlands in the Lake Calumet District. Currently, the State of Illinois and the City of Chicago are cooperating to clean up the Lake Calumet region. However, the FPD has yet to play a significant role. Finally, the report also recommends the use of tax bonds for land acquisition referenda.

## **Land Acquisition Opportunities (see also Appendix II)**

### ***Metropolitan Water Reclamation District (MWRD)***

The MWRD recognizes that its lands have great value beyond serving its own corporate function. It has historically encouraged and facilitated open space or recreational usage of its lands by giving first priority to leases relating to government and/or recreational purposes and by leasing lands to tax-based entities for nominal fees (usually \$1/year). Furthermore, public or open space agencies interested in leasing lands from the MWRD are not forced to comply with the same stringent requirements as private or commercial entities.

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<sup>12</sup> City Space pg. 123

The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District currently owns over 5000 acres of surplus land. Over 40% of this surplus land is currently leased to park districts, municipalities, and forest preserve districts for recreation and conservation, while the remainder is leased to private entities or used by the MWRD.<sup>13</sup> One thousand two hundred and sixteen acres of vacant surplus land remain. Open space agencies have expressed an interest in leasing or acquiring 655 of these acres, leaving 561 acres of potential land acquisition opportunities for the Cook County Forest Preserve District.<sup>14</sup>

While the MWRD has adopted an informal policy of giving first priority to governmental and/or recreational uses, it does not proactively market its land, assuming instead that if a governmental entity has a need for its land, it will make the first inquiry. Furthermore, it generally responds to the first party that inquires into the availability of the land.

By working with the MWRD, the FPD can lease land contiguous to our preserves for nominal cost. However, the FPD must act quickly. The preferential treatment provided government entities may not continue. The Board and administration of the MWRD recently indicated that substantial commercial interests may be given priority over recreational uses. Tax cap legislation is limiting the MWRD's funding and it needs to increase non-tax revenues.<sup>15</sup>

In January 2000, the Forest Preserve District expressed interest in a small group of parcels along the Main Channel and Calumet-Sag Channel, all vacant at last inquiry, which are adjacent to other forest preserve sites, are along identified greenway corridors, or are relatively natural in character.<sup>16</sup>

While the FPD has expressed its interest to the MWRD in making sure that these holdings remain available, it has not directly requested leasing rights to these lands. The FPD should obtain the authority to lease these parcels. When considering the nominal costs associated with leasing these holdings in conjunction with their ideal setting, the decision to pursue this opportunity for expansion should be an easy one.

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<sup>13</sup> Waterways for our Future

<sup>14</sup> Statistics current at the time of this report.

<sup>15</sup> Waterways for our Future

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix 1

### ***City of Chicago***

The Land Acquisition Plan of 1994 recommended expanding the presence of the FPD within the City of Chicago and forming partnerships with the Chicago Park District and other city agencies that benefit Chicago residents. Currently, only about 5% of the Forest Preserve District's holdings exist within the City of Chicago, other than in the Calumet region. Opportunities for land acquisition within the city do not exist on a large scale but are possible if the Forest Preserve District is willing to seek out partnerships with the city and its governmental agencies. Examples of available opportunities are located in Appendix II.

### ***Port Authority***

Intergovernmental agreements also should be pursued with the Illinois Port Authority. They currently hold 1,000 acres on the city's south side that should be investigated for acquisition.

### ***Suburban and Rural Cook County***

Other acquisition opportunities exist in suburban and rural Cook County. Referring again to suggested strategies in the Land Acquisition Plan of 1994, the County should "explore cooperative conservation projects with local governments and not-for-profit conservation organizations to stretch the available resources of the Forest Preserve District," and, "foster public-private partnerships with developers and private land owners to provide mutual benefits through shared projects."

## **PART II: MANAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

### **Staff Management**

Staff management in the FPD must improve dramatically. While conservation and forestry departments are frequently understaffed and restoration suffers, recreational activities are overstaffed. Staffing could dramatically improve through greater emphasis on volunteer recruitment and training, an increase in the number of SWAP laborers, and a shift in the FPD police department towards part-time and seasonal employment.

#### **Volunteer Recruitment and Accreditation**

Our 68,000 acres of Forest Preserve land are in need of not only maintenance but also clean-up and major restoration. The County has a valuable supply of volunteers with training and expertise in these areas. Last year, 4,000 volunteers saved the county \$400,000 in labor and expertise.<sup>17</sup>

The volunteer program could contribute substantially more through program restructuring. Currently, only \$75,000 a year is spent on volunteer programs and there is a lack of volunteer outreach. In addition, volunteers can only work under the direct supervision of FPD staff.

While the Cook County FPD has budgeted \$75,000 for its volunteer program, the Lake County Forest Preserve District spends \$200,000 annually on its volunteer program. Through general orientation supplemented by extensive task-related training, its trained volunteers develop considerable expertise. In addition, staff coordinators recruit, train, and manage volunteer stewards who lead volunteer activities. For FY2000, the Lake County Forest Preserve District estimated that their 3,000 volunteers donated over 45,000 hours of volunteer time and led to a

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<sup>17</sup> Strand 2000

savings of over \$750,000.<sup>18</sup> An increase in volunteer program funding for the Cook County Forest Preserve District would yield high long-term gains in labor savings.

### ***Accreditation***

The requirement that FPD staff directly supervise volunteers has been a hindrance to conservation efforts. Through a volunteer accreditation program, trained and trustworthy volunteer crew leaders could supervise volunteers in the preserves. This could maximize the contribution of volunteers through expanded volunteer opportunities and could increase the quality of work through improved supervision. Staff costs would be reduced by freeing time normally spent on unnecessary volunteer supervision.

Volunteer outreach should also be more coordinated. The Lake County Forest Preserve District and the DuPage County Forest Preserve District recruit volunteers through their web pages. Upon the completion of the Cook County FPD web page, we should offer on-line volunteer recruitment and registration. In addition, numerous private webpages list volunteer opportunities in our area. We should advertise our opportunities on these sites as well.

### ***Sheriff's Work Alternative Program (SWAP)***

Since its origin in 1990, the Sheriff's Work Alternative Program (SWAP) has become a very successful jail alternative program. The majority of the participants originate from traffic court. Nearly 20,000 registered offenders participated in SWAP during 2000.

In addition to providing huge labor savings to the City and County, SWAP is a revenue generator. The offenders who participate in the program must pay to work. Each offender pays a registration fee of \$35.00 and a work fee of \$10.00 per day for a total amount of \$135 at the completion of the ten-day program. In 2000, the SWAP program generated over \$800,000 in revenue for the county. The FPD is currently one of SWAP's biggest clients. In 2000, SWAP offenders worked 127,958 hours for the FPD, an increase of approximately 118% over 1999.

There are currently more SWAP workers than the county and district needs in current SWAP activities. The FPD could use additional SWAP participants to assist with restoration efforts.

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<sup>18</sup> Westernman 2001

**ACTION:**

- **Increase volunteer funding.** The FPD should increase the funding for the volunteer program from \$75,000 to at least \$150,000. As evidenced by the Lake County Forest Preserve District, the short-term cost will result in substantial long-term savings.
- **Offer quality training.** The FPD should offer more comprehensive training for volunteers.
- **Implement volunteer crew leader program.** The FPD should train volunteer crew leaders. The FPD could increase volunteer hours if certified crew leaders could supervise work.
- **Expand outreach.** The FPD should use a website to actively recruit volunteers. In addition, the FPD should list volunteer activities on volunteer related websites.
- **Increase SWAP usage.** The FPD must request even more laborers from SWAP to assist with overdue maintenance and restoration efforts.

## **Forest Preserve District Police**

The FPD Department of Law Enforcement consists of 164 employees—152 sworn police personnel and 12 civilian support services personnel, making it the sixth largest police department in the state.<sup>19</sup> At a cost of about \$9.1 million per year, its efficiency is questionable.<sup>20</sup> The patrol areas of the FPD police are scattered, and officers spend a majority of time driving between preserves. Law enforcement personnel in the Chicago suburbs handle more crimes with a fewer number of officers. About 245 serious crimes are reported each year and of the more than 4,000 people arrested a year in the preserves, most are underage drinkers.<sup>21</sup> In addition, there is considerable overlap between the Cook County Sheriff’s Department and the FPD police department. Often the Sheriff’s department travels through forest preserves to reach unincorporated areas they patrol.

Part-time and seasonal patrols for the summer months and during special events would reduce the need for a large number of full-time year round police officers in the forest preserves. Lake

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<sup>19</sup> Krause 1995

<sup>20</sup> Deloitte & Touche, 2001

County Forest Preserve has one Superintendent of Public Safety, 3 shift commanders, and 4 full time ranger police. In addition, they use 30 part time deputy rangers and rangers during weekends. These part-time deputies are full time Lake County Sheriffs and Firefighters.<sup>22</sup>

Last year, \$642,925 was spent on non-forest preserve law enforcement activities. The fact that our officers assist other governmental entities and frequently staff special events, suggests the division is overstaffed.<sup>23</sup>

**ACTION:**

- **Evaluate staffing needs.**
- **Utilize part-time assistance.** The Forest Preserve Police Department should use part-time and seasonal staffing.
- **Reduce overtime.** Special events should either be worked into existing schedules or per diem personnel should be hired. If overtime must be incurred, the organization/entity sponsoring the event should cover the costs.

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<sup>21</sup> Pallasch,2001

<sup>22</sup> Messerli 2001

<sup>23</sup> Deloitte & Touche, 2001

## FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

The Cook County FPD budget continues to increase. Most of the Cook County Forest Preserve's financial/management problems can be traced to the fact that the forest preserve has lost track of its mission. During its recent budgetary debacle, the forest preserve stole from its land acquisition fund and cheated restoration and maintenance efforts while overstaffing recreation.

The FPD lacks long and short term strategic management and funding plans. The FPD could benefit from the creation of enterprise funds for all recreational activities, privatization, and consolidation of managerial services and purchasing with Cook County.

### Enterprise Funds

There continues to be a lack of information presented in the budget, making it difficult to gain a sufficient understanding of our fiscal situation. Without complete information, it is impossible to determine our full operations costs, including the costs of our recreational activities. According to the Government Finance Officer's Association, our budget must clearly indicate not only salary costs dedicated to each activity or fund, but the total cost of operations for each activity.<sup>24</sup> The Lake County Forest Preserve District operates its golf courses in an enterprise fund – all revenue is self-contained and automatically reallocated into the golf courses. Tax-supported funds are not used for the golf courses.<sup>25</sup> Lake County is moving towards program based budgeting for all of its recreational programs. Program based budgeting separates budgetary accounts for all recreational activities to annually determine exact costs and labor allocated to each activity. By establishing enterprise funds for each of our recreational activities and the golf courses, we can better track our expenses and profits to assist with planning.

#### ACTION:

- **Establish program based budgeting.** Separate budgetary accounts for all recreational activities to annually determine exact costs and labor allocated to

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<sup>24</sup> GFOA, 1996

<sup>25</sup> Lake County Forest Preserve District Budget FY2001

each activity.

- **Develop policy of self-sustaining activities and funds.** Develop policy of keeping recreational revenues in the same fund as the revenue generator to eventually lead to self-sustaining activities.

## **Privatization**

Privatization affords local governments increased flexibility and decreased overhead costs while fostering market competition. All recreational and special events and some operational activities should be privatized including: pools, golf course operations, management and maintenance, information technology, special events coordination, waste disposal, and recycling. It should be noted, however, that privatization will not yield substantial cost savings unless the subsequent labor force is reduced.

### ***Pools***

Currently, Cook County pools do not charge a fee and are a drain on county revenue. Due to our small number of pools, we are unable to operate and maintain our pools efficiently. Cook County should enter into an intergovernmental agreement with local park districts for pool maintenance and operations. The pools would greatly benefit from economies of scale, with the pools costing less to operate, and having a larger pool of lifeguards and staff members.

#### **ACTION:**

- **Intergovernmental agreements.** The FPD should consider entering into an intergovernmental agreement either with the local park districts or with local municipalities for pool maintenance and operations.

### ***Golf Course Management and Operations***

Many government bodies are turning to privatization to increase cost savings, increase quality, and minimize risk. Based on the 2001 analysis by Deloitte and Touche, our golf courses are draining the resources of the FPD dramatically. The golf courses are costing the county \$1,541,364 each year.<sup>26</sup> The driving ranges cost the county \$219,880 each year.<sup>27</sup> The analysis

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<sup>26</sup> The total cost of the golf courses \$8,456,364 minus revenue of \$6,914,862 yields a net loss of \$1,541,502.

<sup>27</sup> The total cost of the driving ranges \$863,690 minus revenue of \$643,810 yields a net loss of \$219,880.

by Deloitte and Touche indicates that “contracting with a third-party management company would allow the District to eliminate the ‘direct costs’ associated with operating the golf course and recover from the contractor a fee for services provided to the course by “other District departments.”<sup>28</sup> The report goes on to state that the majority of the costs associated with golf courses involve maintenance and management of the course, directly attributable to labor costs. In addition, it reveals gross disparities between maintenance and management costs between individual courses. Privatization could therefore not only increase revenues but also decrease costs by containing labor costs. According to National Golf Foundation Statistics, public courses on the average spend 13% more on salary than private courses. The typical municipal facility spends about \$80,000 more on annual payroll than a similar privately owned course.

Privatization could also improve the quality of the golf courses, thereby increasing the number of players. Often included in an RFP is a provision that the contractor is required to set aside a set amount of funds to make capital improvements. Poor conditions at municipal golf courses often make it difficult to attract new players. When significant capital improvements are made, without any expense to the municipality, the quality of play can be greatly improved and more golfers are attracted to the new course as a result.

Contracting out golf course management to a private company is also a way of managing risk. Cook County could receive a guaranteed rate of return regardless of unforeseen obstacles that may arise at any given time and limit revenue. In FY2001, a record amount of rainfall adversely affected the FPD’s number of golf rounds in August and September.<sup>29</sup> However, through privatization, even slow periods of play can become profitable. In Cincinnati, hot weather and heavy rains during the summer of 1995 and spring of 1996 led to 90,000 fewer rounds of golf and \$1.4 million in losses. In FY2000, after gearing promotions towards slow periods of play, the city courses realized profits of approximately \$7.5 million.<sup>30</sup>

**ACTION:**

- **Privatize maintenance and operations.** The Forest Preserve District should contract out management and maintenance.

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<sup>28</sup> Deloitte & Touche, 2001, pg. 18

<sup>29</sup> Forest Preserve District, 2001

<sup>30</sup> Reason Public Policy Institute 1998

## **Consolidation with Cook County**

### ***Management Activities***

The FPD could save substantial resources through consolidation of select management activities with Cook County. The FPD has temporarily consolidated the Department of Finance with Cook County. This should become a permanent consolidation. In addition, the FPD should consolidate departments such as Purchasing, Human Resources, and Information Technology. The county could save on personnel and overhead costs.

### ***Joint Purchasing***

Joint purchasing offers the opportunity for significant cost savings through bulk purchasing. Collaborative agreements with other government entities offer discounts on products ranging from office paper to fuel to health care. Local governments have utilized buying cooperatives for many years. The Cook County Forest Preserve District currently engages in joint purchasing with the county on products including vehicles, gas, recycled paper, and office equipment. Greater cost savings would result from expanding our joint purchasing to include national piggyback agreements and the inclusion of other local government entities. The Chicago Public Schools has joined with the City of Chicago to reduce its fuel costs. Through this joint purchasing arrangement, the school district is able to fuel its vehicles for a base cost based on the oil price index (\$1.25 gallon as of 1/2/01) plus a .21/gallon mark up. This per gallon price includes personnel costs and all fluids.<sup>31</sup>

#### **ACTION:**

- **Expand joint purchasing agreements.** The Forest Preserve District should investigate the possibility of joining purchasing alliances or purchasing from State of Illinois contracts whenever possible.

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<sup>31</sup> City of Chicago 2001

# CREATING ALTERNATIVE NON-TAX REVENUE SOURCES

Currently, the FPD receives non-tax revenue from user charges, permits, and miscellaneous fees. While our non-tax revenues are decreasing, our reliance on tax revenues to sustain our forest preserves and implement our recreational programs is increasing. This is not the trend at neighboring parks and forest preserve districts. In Lake County, forest preserve revenue generated from taxes decreased from 72% in FY98 to 62% in FY01.<sup>32</sup> In DuPage County, only 32.86% of forest preserve revenues are tax generated.<sup>33</sup> In 1993, the Skokie Park District was 72% tax supported; today, only 30% of its total revenues are tax supported.<sup>34</sup>

The Cook County Forest Preserve District's reliance on tax proceeds as a source of revenue is too high. Comparatively, we are the highest among our neighboring counties. In lieu of raising user fees for our current revenue generators, the solution lies in the creation of non-tax alternative revenue sources such as sponsorships and a forest preserve foundation.

## **Sponsorships, Advertising, and Preferred Vendors**

There are numerous possibilities for alternative revenue sources currently utilized by neighboring governments including sponsorships, preferred vendor contracts, advertising, and foundation support. The Lake County Forest Preserve District generates \$100,000 to \$200,000 in sponsorship revenue annually.<sup>35</sup> This does not include the sponsorship revenue used to generate programs and activities wholly funded by sponsors. Events created through sponsorships help promote the mission of the FPD by offering recreational opportunities related to our mission. Many forest preserve districts have also actively explored the possibility of

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<sup>32</sup> Lake County Forest Preserve District Budget FY2001; figures are percentages of total revenues generated by taxes, not including the fund balance

<sup>33</sup> DuPage County Forest Preserve District Budget FY2001; figures are percentages of total revenues generated by taxes, not including carry over funds

<sup>34</sup> Hartman 2001

<sup>35</sup> Messerli 2001

venue sponsorships. This includes naming rights for our forest preserves, ice skating rinks, etc. Nationally, “*Adopt a Highway*” programs have been successful revenue generators. The FPD could investigate allowing groups to “adopt” certain sections of the forest preserve. The City of Chicago Special Events Department routinely recruits large corporate sponsors. For example, the city recently put on “Chicagoween,” a series of Halloween celebrations around the city. The clothing and apparel company “Old Navy,” paid \$50,000 for the right of sponsorship for the events.<sup>36</sup> Holiday events such as the Jingle Elf Parade and the Lincoln Park Zoo lights also receive corporate sponsors.

### ***Advertising***

Advertising can generate revenue and interest in the forest preserves. Since 2000, the FPD installed 180 new ball/club washers throughout FPD golf courses and began pursuing advertising on golf scorecards. The ball/club washers were provided through an advertising agreement that not only provided the ball/club washers at no cost, but also generated additional revenue. This should only be the beginning of advertising on our golf courses. Milwaukee Park District Golf Courses and the Lake County Forest Preserve District were able to acquire new tee signs for its golf courses at no cost.<sup>37</sup>

Advertising is also a possibility off the golf course. The FPD could acquire new trail signs and could subsidize new trail maps and brochures. The Chicago Park District acquired new signs for its trails through an advertising agreement with the Chicago Area Runners Association.<sup>38</sup> Before any new signs are purchased for our FPD, advertising should be explored.

Advertising outside the golf course also yields benefits. The FPD should also work with bike shops, sporting goods stores, and outfitters to encourage these providers to sponsor trails and parts of the preserves. They can create promotional tie-ins with hiking shoes, bikes, etc, in their stores.

However, piecemeal advertising will not be as successful as a comprehensive sponsorship/advertising package. The FPD must first meet with a municipal marketing company

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<sup>36</sup> For more information, see Appendix One

<sup>37</sup> Messerli 2001

<sup>38</sup> Colon 2001

to assess the value of our preserves and activities. This company can then create advertising packages for related vendors.

### ***Preferred Vendors***

Preferred vendor contracts create the opportunity for non-tax revenue without substantial resources from the FPD. Preferred vendor contracts range from preferred soft drink and concessions contracts to preferred credit card programs.

Many vendors provide free or reduced cost equipment to park or forest preserves in exchange for the right to be the *official product provider*. For example, a lawnmower company would provide lawnmowers to the FPD at no or reduced cost and would then label themselves as ‘*the official lawnmower of the Cook County Forest Preserve*’. The Chicago Park District entered into an agreement with Royal Crown Cola (RC) to be its official soft drink provider. RC provides and maintains all vending machines and beverage concessions. In exchange, the Chicago Park District receives marketing revenue, better product pricing, and greater concession revenues. Its annual marketing revenue alone has increased from \$150,000 to \$600,000.<sup>39</sup> The Skokie Park District receives \$45,000 annually for the next five years from Pepsi in addition to a commission from all sales.<sup>40</sup>

Credit card companies also actively pursue arrangements with park districts and similar entities to become their preferred credit card. For example, Skokie Park District has an arrangement with Visa to be the *preferred card of the Skokie Park District*. In exchange, Skokie will receive \$42,000 in revenue annually from Visa.<sup>41</sup> Other counties, including Lake County, are actively pursuing this program. Currently, Lake County has a credit card program that allows it to obtain a percentage of the interest that cardholders pay on their purchases.<sup>42</sup>

These alternative revenue sources create more than revenue—they create opportunities. Events created through sponsorships and advertising help promote the mission of the FPD by offering recreational opportunities. The opportunities created by sponsorships attract additional

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<sup>39</sup> Colon 2001

<sup>40</sup> Hartman 2000

<sup>41</sup> Hartman 2001

<sup>42</sup> Messerli 2001

participants to the forest preserves. Additional participants (i.e. consumers) attract additional sponsors. This synergy leads to a more marketable forest preserve for additional sponsors and, in turn, a more attractive forest preserve for visitors. The result is an increase in recreational opportunities without an increase in the use of tax-supported funds.

**ACTION:**

- **Asset Inventory.** The FPD should produce a comprehensive list of assets including the number of groves, trails, etc. and should produce an accurate demographic report for all our venues.
- **Meet with a marketing company.** The FPD should consult with a marketing company to determine our potential sponsorship revenues and to produce a marketing plan to solicit potential sponsors.
- **Actively seek sponsors.** Events such as our “Haunted Forest,” which has many visitors, particularly of younger ages, could generate larger streams of revenue. The FPD could attempt to solicit sponsorships for our events.
- **Create adopt a preserve programs.** Nationally, “Adopt a Highway” programs have been successful revenue generators. Locally, Brookfield Zoo raises approximately \$1 million through its "Shared Care" animal adoption program. The FPD could investigate allowing groups to “adopt” certain sections of the forest preserve.
- **Expand advertising.** The FPD should explore potential sign sponsorships before purchasing any new signs. The FPD golf courses should also consider cooperative advertising agreements in other areas such as golf carts and tee signs. The FPD should develop and implement a plan to sell advertising space on all its publications, from brochures to event tickets.
- **Pursue preferred vendors.** The FPD should actively pursue preferred credit card contracts and preferred vendors.
- **Develop partnerships with local businesses for promotional product tie-ins.**

## Foundations

The Chicago Park District established its own nonprofit foundation, The Parkways Foundation, in 1994 to improve Chicago's parks. The Foundation raises new funds from private sources for projects that fall outside the scope of the Park District budget. The Foundation also develops

public-private partnerships to help improve Chicago's parks. Parkways has three areas of focus: program development, environmental enhancement, and capital improvement projects

Over the last five years, Parkways has helped the Park District raise nearly \$7 million to "support[s] the Park District's effort to maintain its pledge against raising taxes."<sup>43</sup> The foundation could host an annual event, to fund the FPD's more popular programs, such as the Haunted Forests. The foundation could also hold smaller-scale events to offset the costs of other ongoing services the FPD provides, such as the Nature Centers or the FPD's toboggan slides.

**ACTION:**

- **Establish a foundation.** The FPD should establish its own foundation to raise revenues from the private sector.

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<sup>43</sup> Parkways Foundation 2001 Website at <http://www.parkways.org/>

## RECREATION

### Golf

In addition to privatization, the FPD golf courses could achieve higher rates of revenue through automation, expansion of services, and an increase in user fees.

The FPD should explore debit card golf ball dispenser machines and enclosed driving ranges that allow for year round usage. The Skokie Park District has a 40-station, two-tier, fully automated, enclosed driving range. It has achieved profits of over \$700,000 annually on this driving range alone.<sup>44</sup> Even during the winter months, the driving ranges pay for themselves and their related salary costs. Golfers may purchase cards with values ranging from \$5 to \$100. In addition to retaining significant amounts of money that is typically lost through mishandling of cash transactions, Skokie reported that 28% of the money-value put on these cards goes unused every season thereby increasing revenues.

While the fees to play on our public courses should be substantially lower than private courses, perhaps the County is undervaluing the service it provides. Courses such as Indian Boundary, Chick Evans, Edgebrook, Burnham Woods, and others currently charge a standard weekday rate of \$16, and only \$11 with an activity card. The increase for 2001 was only \$1. The recent analysis by Deloitte and Touche revealed that taxpayer funds are used to subsidize golf for county and non-county residents (see Appendix I).

Additionally, county and non-county residents are charged the same greens fees. The Chicago Park District charges higher green fees for non-residents. The FPD should also impose higher green fees for non-county residents and consider an increase for residents. The taxpayers of Cook County should not subsidize golfing for non-residents.

- **Automate procedures.** Investigate automated driving ranges that need little staff support to operate.
- **Expand the season.** By offering enclosed driving ranges, these can produce revenue year round.

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<sup>44</sup> Hartman 2001

- **Investigate fee increases.** The FPD should increase the golf rates. The rate increase could be non-applicable to seniors.
- **Charge differing fees for non-residents.** The FPD currently charges the same rates for residents as it does for non-residents. The taxpayers of Cook County should not subsidize golf for non-county residents.

## Educational Programs

The FPD runs a wide variety of educational programs including six nature centers. The FPD also oversees the Youth Opportunity Corps, the Mighty Acorns, and the Urban Fisheries. However, there is a greater possibility for expanded programs. The Lake County Forest Preserve District, for example, organizes a "Ranger Explorer" program to encourage youth interest in both nature and law enforcement. The Explorers, aged 14 -21, work alongside actual Forest Preserve Rangers throughout the year. Once fully trained, they are qualified to wear the Ranger Explorer uniform and are assigned to ride with Rangers staff. The Explorers study everything from conservation law to wildlife rehab.

The Skokie Park District provides golf lessons for its visitors. Providing golf lessons not only has the potential to increase revenues, but this service also recruits new players to the game and thus new repeat visitors to our courses.

### **ACTION:**

- **Investigate additional opportunities.** The FPD could investigate whether courses can be run primarily for profit, perhaps in partnership with the city, community colleges, school districts, or private educational opportunities.

## Concessions and Activities

The FY2001 budget anticipated \$362,106 in income from concessions. This is an 11% decrease since FY1997. The FPD currently offers the following concessions and activities:

- 10 golf course food/pro shops
- 1 driving range

- 1 golf car rental contract
- 2 food/fishing concessions
- 3 food/pool concessions
- 2 winter sports food concessions

Adding concessions could not only generate additional revenue, but could also attract more visitors to our preserves. For example, Lake County offers a bait and concessions site near fishing areas and a traveling trailer of dog treat concessions that frequents recreational areas.

**ACTION:**

- **Expand concessions.** The FPD should create other concessions, while only considering those that would not despoil the preserves. This could include bait sales at fishing locations.
- **Expand rentals.** The FPD should offer additional rentals such as canoes, paddleboats, cross-country skis, ice-skates, or sporting equipment.

## Creating New Recreation

Recreational programs in Lake County are not only self-sustaining, but they also gain revenues for its forest preserve district and meet a recreational need in the community.

One example is Lake County's addition of dog exercise areas. The county offers three dog exercise areas ranging in size from 15 to 44 acres, and plans are underway for a fourth area. These grove areas include a large pond, retrieving games, a mini dog playground, and training grounds and are fenced-in so that dogs can go "off leash." All participants must have an approved permit that cost \$35 annually for the first dog and \$10 for each additional dog. The non-resident fee is \$100 for the first dog and \$50 for each additional dog. The permit is displayed in each participant's vehicle.

In FY2000 alone, the areas produced over \$100,000 in revenue – more than the revenue generated from all of Lake County's picnic shelters combined. Most importantly, the exercise areas addressed a community recreational need. In addition, the inclusion of the recreation areas would keep dogs in designated areas, and the dogs would be less likely to be off-leash in other areas of the preserves.

**ACTION:**

- **Determine recreational needs.** Through community surveys, the FPD should determine what types of events are needed in the forest preserves.
- **Create new recreational activities.** Offer additional recreational activities such as dog exercise areas in the preserves that are in accordance with the mission of the Forest Preserve District.

**DEMAND**

It is impossible to market to, or provide programs for, our county residents if we do not understand their needs or track who visits our preserves or participates in our activities. If a significant portion of our county population is not visiting the forest preserves or attending our activities, we must find out why. Are our marketing efforts reaching all residents of Cook County? Are we addressing the recreational needs of a majority of our population?

The Lake County Forest Preserve District aggressively surveys county residents. Through an independent research firm, the Forest Preserve District conducts a telephone survey of county residents to determine what, if any, programs in the preserves they utilize. If the resident indicates that he or she does not use the Forest Preserve District, the firm finds out what needs of the resident are not being met. Lake County also surveys participants at the completion of each program and offers a money back satisfaction guarantee.<sup>45</sup>

This type of information will improve our potential for sponsorships and advertising. For example, if we know that 2,000 children visit our Haunted Forest Preserves each year with their parents, a youth oriented advertiser would pay for a portion of its operational costs; or, if a sporting goods store knows that 5,000 bikers use our bike trails, they may be willing to pay for our trail signs.

A telephone survey such as the one completed by the Lake County Forest Preserve District also heightens the visibility of the preserves. A phone survey may pique a resident's interest in the FPD's activities. Tracking our demographics determines whether or not we are truly meeting the needs of our residents. We may not realize that our marketing or recreational programs are

completely missing a demographic group. Additionally, we may be missing recreational opportunities desired by our residents.

**ACTION:**

- **Survey residents.** Annually, the FPD should hire an outside firm to survey Cook County residents to determine what their perceptions of the FPD are, if they attend programs in the FPD, and why or why not.
- **Track program participants.** Compile demographic information on all program participants and preserve visitors, whenever possible.
- **Survey participant satisfaction.** The FPD should take a survey of participants at the completion of every FPD program or activity. The FPD could also offer a satisfaction *guarantee* similar to Lake County.
- **Track marketing of preserves.** The FPD should identify which demographic groups are not participating in our programs and/or visiting our preserves. The FPD should then use this information to expand our programs to meet all recreational needs.

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<sup>45</sup> Messerli 2001

# APPENDIX I

## Summary of Deloitte & Touche Cost of Services Study for The Forest Preserve District of Cook County

### **GOLF:**

The average cost to the County to provide a round of golf is \$4.16. The most that the County spends per round is at River Oaks, where a round of golf costs \$11.46. Only one golf course makes money, Indian Boundary, where a round of golf generates only a \$.35 profit.

**TOTAL COST TO  
TAXPAYERS:  
\$1,541,502**

### **DRIVING RANGES:**

None of the driving ranges create revenue; on average the County loses \$1.49 per bucket played.

**TOTAL COST TO  
TAXPAYERS:  
\$219,880**

### **SWIMMING POOLS:**

The Swimming pools cost the County, on average, \$6.00 per attendee, and as much as \$14.08 per attendee at Green Lake Pool.

**TOTAL COST TO  
TAXPAYERS:  
\$850,136**

### **TOBOGGANS AND SLEDDING:**

Toboggans create a very large cost for the County, generating only \$1.27 in revenue per attendee and costing \$54.26 per attendee.

**TOTAL COST TO  
TAXPAYERS:  
\$971,784**

### **PICNICS:**

Permitted picnics also create a very large cost compared to the revenue they generate. Although a picnic permit only costs \$26.09, it costs the County \$213.96 to provide services associated with picnics.

**TOTAL COST TO  
TAXPAYERS:  
\$2,065,776**

### **SPECIAL EVENTS:**

One of the expenditures comes from having informational booths at seven different events. The combined cost of these informational booths makes up a significant part of the overall Special Events budget at \$110,228. Another substantial part of the Special Events budget comes from the cost of providing the Haunted Forests. There is a net loss of \$726,708 to the County for providing the North and South Haunted Forests.

**TOTAL COST TO  
TAXPAYERS:  
\$1,126,726**

## APPENDIX II

**Rosehill Cemetery:** On the city's northwest side at Devon and Western Avenue, and at the west end of Rosehill Cemetery, there is a seven-acre pond and adjacent woodland available for acquisition. In a cooperative project, the FPD could purchase the pond and woodland area, which covers approximately 25 acres, while the Chicago Park District could pursue land acquisition slightly to the south for recreational purposes. The estimated cost of acquisition is \$1,300,000.

**Eggers Wood Extension:** There are currently wetland areas east of the Burnham Greenway Bike Path that present a great opportunity to expand upon Eggers Wood Forest Preserve, as well as to succeed in securing Burnham Greenway, which runs between the wetlands and Eggers Woods. The woods are already owned by the FPD; such an acquisition would be consistent with the FPD's goal of acquiring land adjacent to other forest preserve sites. The current owners of the property are People's Gas and other residential owners, making a private land purchase at the south and a lease from People's Gas necessary.

**Riverdale Riparian Habitat:** Across the Little Calumet River from Beaubien Woods Forest Preserve lies an open parcel of land along the riverbank and two ponds/wetlands. By acquiring this land, the FPD could expand and protect vital open land along the river's edge as well as its own forest preserve. The property is currently owned by Stauffer Chemical Company, Rhone Poulenc Inc., McKerson Envirosystems, and Marina Developments.

**Powderhorn Lake Extension:** A large parcel of land between the Wolf Lake Conservation Area (owned by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources) and Powderhorn Lake (owned by the FPD) could connect these bodies of waters and expand the historic wetland areas. The land is currently owned by Harbour Point Estates, Inc.

**Orland Park:** There is a large area, almost a square mile, possibly ranging between 400-500 acres, in the Southern most part of Cook County, bordering the Will County line, which is currently owned by a developer. A few sub-divisions of homes have been built in this area already, and gradually, the rest of this land would most likely be built upon; however, the owner

may be willing to sell it to the FPD. To the north, is land now owned by the FPD. The developer would possibly be willing to give the FPD some of this area adjacent to the holdings, and sell the large open area to the south to the District. Trails could be built connecting the currently owned area with the land considered for acquisition.

## APPENDIX III

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