



FRIENDS
OF THE FOREST PRESERVES



**Friends of
the Parks**

THE FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT OF COOK COUNTY

Study and Recommendations

Phase I
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Preface

Friends of the Forest Preserves is a citizen advocacy group founded in 1998 to support the Forest Preserve District of Cook County in fulfilling its mission of conservation, recreation, and education. Friends of the Forest Preserves has brought together picnic grove users, bike riders, horseback riders, birders, boaters, restoration volunteers, and many others to advocate good conservation and recreation in our forest preserves. Friends of the Forest Preserves has testified annually at District budget hearings and at many board meetings on a variety of issues. Friends of the Forest Preserves is a member of the Chicago Wilderness consortium.

Friends of the Parks is a 25 year-old environmental organization whose mission is to protect, preserve, and improve parks and open spaces. As part of the CitySpace task force, Friends of the Parks has been obtaining information about District holdings and operations to determine how city residents can benefit further from the District. Friends of the Parks is also a member of the Chicago Wilderness consortium.

Nearly two years ago Friends of the Forest Preserves and Friends of the Parks began a joint study of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. Our intention was to review the District's operations, structure, and budget along with its key programs of land acquisition, management, recreation and education. The Forest Preserve District of Cook County has a noble and inspiring mission:

To acquire...and hold lands...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.¹

Today, the Forest Preserve District holds in trust for present and future generations a tremendous asset—the emerald necklace of woods and marshes, prairies and savannas that constitute eleven percent of the land in Cook County and contribute incalculably to our quality of life.

Yet, as with any public agency, the District's operations deserve periodic review. How well is the District doing at acquiring and holding natural lands? At protecting and preserving them? Restoring and restocking them? Is the District fulfilling its mission?

¹ Enabling legislation (“Cook County Forest Preserve District Act”), 70 ILCS 810/7.

PREFACE

The goal of this study was to conduct a comprehensive review and to present recommendations that will lead to improved land conditions, operations, programs, educational opportunities, and access. We are releasing our report in two parts. The first, presented here, contains our review and findings on land acquisition, land management, and public use. The second part, which will address the District's budget, organizational structure, facilities, and educational programs, will be released later this spring.

Stephen F. Christy, Jr., has served as author of the report. Christy has been the Executive Director of the Lake Forest Land Foundation since 1999. Prior to this, he was the Executive Director of the Lake Forest Open Lands Association, starting in 1985. From 1978 to 1984 he served as Supervisor of Planning and Design for the Lake County Forest Preserve District. A Chicago resident since 1977, Christy has been active in numerous open space issues over the decades. He has written extensively about the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, the Chicago Park District, and land preservation issues in the Chicago region.

At the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, General Superintendent Joseph Nevius gave us his time and allowed us access to District staff. His assistant P.J. Cullerton arranged times for our interviews. The staff members themselves will be acknowledged in the second half of our report, along with those District Commissioners who generously gave their time for our efforts.

Former District employees were most generous with their time as well. We thank those who allowed us to use their names: Richard Buck, Roland Eisenbeis, Chet Ryndak, and Ralph Thornton. Others preferred to remain anonymous; we thank them too, as well as people in various agencies, private groups, or simply concerned citizens who also chose to remain anonymous.

We also give thanks to the hundreds of citizens who took the time to fill out our user surveys. Barbara Hill analyzed and wrote up the results.

Michael Madison assisted with historical research and compilation of documents.

Linda Masters, Wayne Lampa, and Audubon of the Chicago Region designed and supervised the land audit. We thank the scores of professional and volunteer participants in that scientific study.

We thank the staff and commissioners of the Forest Preserve Districts in DuPage, Kane, Lake, and Will Counties for granting us interviews and numerous follow-up calls.

Sincere thanks for funding this portion of the project are due to the Bridgestone/Firestone Trust Fund, Friends of the Forest Preserves, Friends of the Parks, and the Illinois Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Executive Summary

This report, over a year in the making, is being issued in two parts. The current section deals with the history of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County and an in-depth view of its three most important missions:

- ◆ **Serving the public:** What do users think about the preserves?
- ◆ **Land acquisition:** What is the District doing to save the remaining available land in Cook County as permanent open space?
- ◆ **Land management:** What is the health of lands already preserved, and how are they being cared for?

The historical chapter of this report is essential reading in order to gain some perspective on the District as it is today.

Our findings in the first part of this report are summarized below:

- ◆ **Users** say that the most important problems facing the District are the need to acquire more land, deterioration of the preserves' natural habitat, and unresponsiveness to the public.
- ◆ **Land acquisition** is nearly at a standstill. The District's widely-praised *Land Acquisition Plan* has never been implemented. The District has lost many opportunities to preserve the last remaining open spaces in Cook County. Not only has the Board lacked the courage to ask the voters if they would be willing to pay for this, but the District has also squandered the last remaining funds it had for this purpose.
- ◆ **Land management** efforts have been crippled by a lack of resources and the Board's failure to take seriously, or act upon, the ongoing deterioration of the land itself. Instead of being the leader in this area, the Board has run from the issue and allowed the District to lag increasingly far behind the efforts of all the other forest preserve districts in the region.
- ◆ **The land itself** offers some reasons for hope but, on the whole, is in a sorry state and getting worse. The natural quality of the land is poor in 68 percent of the District's holdings, fair or good in 22 percent, and high or very high in 10 percent. Oaks, the characteristic canopy trees of our region, are not reproducing in numbers adequate to sustain their populations. Instead, the most common small tree on District lands is the undesirable European buckthorn, and the

young trees currently reaching for the canopy are mostly invasive species that will not comprise a high quality forest or support most species of forest wildlife in the coming years.

Our specific recommendations include the following.

- ◆ Land acquisition must be a priority, and all funds allocated to this purpose should be spent expeditiously on acquiring land.
- ◆ The District should retain a qualified land acquisition specialist.
- ◆ Additional land should be protected and preserved through long-term agreements with partners, including the City of Chicago and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District.
- ◆ The District should significantly increase its efforts to maintain and improve the ecological health of its holdings. It should draw upon staff, volunteers, contractors, and other resources for this task.
- ◆ The President and the Board should end the moratorium on land management and review its “Land Management Recommendations.”
- ◆ The District should substantially increase education and outreach to explain to the public the District’s conservation and restoration programs.
- ◆ The District should develop mechanisms for accepting and responding to suggestions and requests from the public. Sixty-nine percent of respondents to our user survey said that lack of responsiveness or lack channels for public input was a serious or extremely serious problem.

Chapter One

History

In the Beginning

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County came to be largely through the determined efforts of two great Chicagoans: the architect Dwight Perkins (1867–1941), best remembered today for his visionary designs of many of Chicago’s public schools, and the landscape architect Jens Jensen (1860–1951), nationally known for his park designs in Chicago and other cities, and a life-long champion of conserving America’s landscape.

As early as 1894 Jensen, from his several-year wanderings around Chicago, had sketched a map of lands then far distant from Chicago that he felt should be preserved for future generations. Perkins himself was constantly urging people to look ahead on Chicago’s growth, astounding people in 1902 by claiming:

Chicago will be a city of 10,000,000 inhabitants within the next 50 years, and when we are planning for the city’s future we must take pains not to be so short-sighted as to overlook it. We have a right to dream—if we are wide awake when we do it.²

In 1899 a civic group known as the Municipal Science Club, of which Jensen and Perkins were members, began a study of Chicago’s parks and playgrounds. The Club’s report led the City Council to establish in 1901 a Special Park Commission having as its members Jensen, Perkins, and other civic leaders as well as aldermen and park commissioners. This commission prepared a report that became the basis for Chicago’s tremendous expansion of its small park system during the following decade. Significant in its pages, however, was the statement for the first time that:

In the rapid growth of Chicago north, west, and south, thickly-settled communities are approaching natural park territory and other extensive open areas which are suitable park sites and could be improved without a great expenditure of money...before the rapid march of commercial interests and before suburban settlements efface the beauties of nature and destroy the usefulness of these spaces for parks.³

² *Times-Herald*, clipping, undated (as to day/month), 1902.

³ *Report of the Special Park Commission to the City Council, City of Chicago*, 1901, p. 11.

As with most novel ideas, this statement had precedent to lend it strength. The Boston landscape architect Charles Eliot had convinced that city to set aside 10,000 acres of outer parks during the 1890s, providing Boston with a total open-space system unsurpassed in the nation. Perkins's wife Lucy, a writer and artist, visited Boston and found this system "so arranged that parks are accessible from all parts of the city, and it is difficult to think of any Boston child as shut away from the beauties of nature."⁴

In 1903 Cook County Board President Henry Foreman formed the Outer Belt Park Commission and charged it with "the creation of an outer belt of parks and boulevards encircling Chicago."⁵ This effort culminated in 1904 with the publication of a detailed report, edited by Perkins and including Jensen's recommendations for outer park purchases. Perkins noted the lack of open space in Chicago, concluding that past city growth revealed largely an "enormous waste of treasure, time, and human life due to the lack of forethought and confidence in the city when it was originally planned."⁶

The paper went on to advocate in detail the preservation of lands that, for many years, had been recognized as "naturally beautiful." These lands were a crescent surrounding Chicago, starting at the north in the valley of the North Branch of the Chicago River, passing west of the city along the Des Plaines River, and turning east along the Sag Valley to Lake Calumet after embracing the highlands in the Palos area.

Jensen's section of the report dealt in greater detail with, as he called it, "the movement for acquisition of large forest park areas." He reiterated three great reasons for this enterprise:

- ◆ Preserve for present and future generations lands of natural scenic beauty situated within easy reach of the multitudes that have access to no other grounds for recreation or summer outings
- ◆ Preserve spots having relation to the early settlements of Chicago and which are therefore of historical importance
- ◆ Preserve flora in its primeval state for the sake of the beauty of the forest, and for the benefit of those desiring knowledge of the plants indigenous there⁷

Jensen then followed with a detailed account of the history of Chicago's native landscape and the special significance of each recommended area.

The report was a masterpiece of landscape planning, and the 3,000 original copies were distributed in a matter of months. Yet so thorough a work was necessary, for its bold suggestions would have to endure for over a decade before the first acre of land was set aside.

⁴ Lucy Perkins, "Boston's Parks and Pleasure Grounds," *Sunday Times-Herald*, October 15, 1899.

⁵ Henry Foreman, *Outer Belt of Forest Preserves and Parkways for Chicago and Cook County*, 1904, p. 59.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

There followed a ten-year battle over getting legislation passed to form a forest preserve district.

Several times the public, by referenda, voted to establish a forest preserve system, but court challenges negated these votes. Near the end of this struggle, the forest preserve movement nearly collapsed. It remained for Perkins alone and a few hardy followers to press the fight to the end. This they did, and in 1914 new legislation had again received approval from the state legislature. Perkins immediately challenged the bill himself to test its constitutionality, raising over \$2,000 to take the issue before the Circuit Court and Supreme Court in 1915 and 1916.

Perkins won. In 1916, the newly formed Forest Preserve District of Cook County became a reality, governed by the Cook County Commissioners and, by statute, giving the County Board President the responsibility of also being President of the Forest Preserve District. The new Board floated a \$1,000,000 bond issue and in September of that year purchased its first lands. By 1922 the District had purchased 21,500 acres and was well on its way to exceeding Perkins' extravagant 37,000-acre goal set so many years before. Thus did much of the plan first outlined by Jensen in 1894 come to fruition.

Little attention was given in these early years to providing recreational opportunities. Most lands purchased were still remote from the bulk of the population. The first District employees were a small group of police, hired to prohibit such egregious activities as people building cabins on District land and living there for months at a time.

The first decade was also rife with landowner lawsuits challenging the District's right to acquire their property. In every case, however, the District prevailed. In 1921 Edith R. McCormick made the first land donation to the district, giving 83 acres near Riverside to establish what is now the Brookfield Zoo. The District matched this gift with an additional 113 acres purchased specifically for that purpose.⁸

1929—A Momentous Year

In 1927, with the original land acquisition goals nearly complete, the Board decided to undertake the matter of land development. The original Citizens' Advisory Committee was thus formed. It is still widely believed today that the creation of this committee was a necessity grudgingly granted by then-County Board President Anton Cermak to avoid exposure of a number of ill-advised land purchases that benefited his friends. It should also be noted that the District never had a formal land acquisition plan until 1994, thereby leaving this issue open to political tampering.

In 1929 the Citizens' Advisory Committee issued its "Recommended Plans for the Forest Preserves of Cook County," chiefly authored by Robert Kingery, General Manager of the

⁸ Carl Condit, *Chicago, 1910–1925*, 1973, p. 211.

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Chicago Regional Plan Commission. This was a landmark document, which still holds sway today. It was created to address the many problems facing District lands at the time, colorfully recounted in 1947 by then-Director of Conservation Roberts Mann:

While still in the acquisition stage, the Forest Preserve District was over-run with people, saddled with pernicious forms of special privileges for the favored few, the playground of highway engineers thinking in terms of straight alignment, flat gradients, and free rights-of-way, and a dumping ground for contractors, rubbish collectors, and junk dealers.⁹

The Committee made recommendations in four specific areas: development, recreation, reforestation, and acquisition. The Committee assigned percentages of land to be applied towards these items:

- ◆ 75% to be maintained in a natural condition
- ◆ 14% to be developed for recreation, including groves, shelters, and parking
- ◆ 5% to be dedicated for water-based recreation on lakes and rivers
- ◆ 2% to be set aside for the new zoo and, in the future, a botanical garden

Most significant, the Committee recommended the hiring of a professional General Superintendent to run the District. This was duly accomplished with the retention of Charles G. “Cap” Sauers in May of 1929. Sauers would remain in charge of the District for 35 years.

Sauers—who “would have been more remembered if people knew how good he was, but he kept a low profile,”¹⁰ according to a former employee—ran an effective and orderly operation, and he was well respected and supported by his Board and President. An interesting story is related by another former employee, who was told this by Sauers himself: Cermak (“The most ruthless man I ever met,” according to Sauers) put a spy on Sauers shortly after he began his work at the District. Sauers got sick of this, and early one Sunday morning he went directly to Cermak’s house and sat on the foot of his bed. “When are you going to get rid of that goddamned spy?” he asked Cermak. Cermak sat up in bed and responded simply, “I like you, son.” From that day on Sauers had Cermak’s respect.¹¹

Sauers also had his own system for handling patronage, which was already present in the District. “Send me as many men as you want, as long as they’ll work. If they won’t I’ll send them back, and you can send some more,” was his general motto. Well-remembered columnist Mike Royko recalls the same from a personal interview: “They

⁹ Roberts Mann, “Policies Involved in the Design and Administration of Naturalistic Areas Adjacent to Metropolitan Areas,” paper delivered to the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters, 1939; revised January 1, 1947.

¹⁰ Richard Buck, interview with Stephen Christy, November 15, 2001.

¹¹ Anonymous interview, September 11, 2001.

know that if they are going to receive a full day's pay, they must give me at least a half day's work."¹² A former employee notes, however, that this worked well for Sauers only because he kept District jobs intentionally low-paying: "That way, he'd only have to send back some foot-soldier, not some politician's brother."¹³

The "New Deal" and Post-War Era

The 1930s and 1940s were a time of great growth and expansion for the District. Under the Roosevelt administration, the District operated the largest public works project in the nation: the construction of the Skokie Lagoons, which employed up to 9,000 men at one time. In a 1947 address at a national conference, Director of Conservation Roberts Mann noted other progress as well:

- ◆ District holdings had grown to 36,800 acres. Eighty percent of this total remained in its natural state, and 60% of these natural lands were already forested or scheduled for reforestation.
- ◆ In 1929, there had been "350 miles of aimless, rutted auto tracks" on District lands, now 95% controlled.
- ◆ In place of these were now 175 miles of "improved trails" for hikers, bicyclists, and 17,000 registered horses.
- ◆ There were 165 "major picnic centers," with 6,000 permits issued for groups between 50 and 5,000 people.
- ◆ The three swimming pools had 165,000 visitors, and the four golf courses 200,000 players. (Interestingly the year 2000 showed 146,697 pool visitors, a 9% decline from over a half-century ago.)¹⁴
- ◆ Some 400,000 people visited District lands on a peak day, and 15,000,000 a year; presumably they made good use of the 7,000 tables, 5,000 fireplaces, and "hundreds" of toilets provided for them.¹⁵

Interestingly, during this period the District was organized pretty much as it is now, with nine maintenance divisions, 3,000 to 9,000 acres each in size and staffed by 15 to 30 men, plus rangers. This was half the staff the divisions used to have before World War II, according to Mann, who had been Superintendent of Maintenance before accepting the directorship of Conservation. Everyone in Maintenance pitched in: "there is no 'Forgotten Man' in our organization."¹⁶ Engineering, as it was called at the time, was the largest professional department, employing landscape architects, surveyors, and other supervisors.

¹² Mike Royko, "Local politicians just can't seem to give up the ghosts," *Chicago Tribune*, January 28, 1997. In this piece, Royko also discusses the popular story that Cermak was "blackmailed" by civic groups into hiring Sauers or facing exposure of some District land purchases that had benefited his friends.

¹³ Anonymous interview, September 11, 2001.

¹⁴ Deloitte & Touche, *Cost of Services Study for the Forest Preserve District of Cook County*, 2001, p. 24.

¹⁵ Mann, "Policies Involved in Naturalistic Areas."

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

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Mann was widely known for his wisdom tempered with great humor. He authored a small piece describing the origins of the names of all of the District's preserves. In typical style, he also noted that the District was not afraid of new ideas: "a fresh viewpoint from an unpromising source sometimes lifts the petticoats of custom and lays bare the essentials."¹⁷

The Citizens' Advisory Committee continued its strong influence on District affairs, reaffirming in 1946 the purpose of the District, as stated in the enabling legislation:

To acquire...and hold lands...containing...natural forests..., or lands connecting such forests,...for the purpose of protecting and preserving the flora, fauna, and scenic beauties..., 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.¹⁸

Mann echoed the District's vigilance: "It requires great tenacity of purpose and constant hearkening back to the intent of our charter to protect these preserves from over-development and wrongful use."¹⁹

1953 was another important year for the District. The Citizens' Advisory Committee revisited its original 1929 report and made significant changes and new recommendations. This appears to be the last time the Citizens' Advisory Committee took such a sweeping view of the entire District operations.

The Committee noted that in 1953 the District held 40,000 acres out of the 44,000 that were the statutory limit at that time. It strongly urged continued purchase: "Additional acreage should be acquired in areas easily accessible to people who do not have the facilities and funds to travel further,"²⁰ specifically suggesting the preservation of the Sanitary and Ship Canal from Willow Springs Road to Route 83.

A number of outmoded concepts proposed in 1929 were wisely recommended for abandonment. These items give an interesting insight to how the District might have developed:

- ◆ "Forest Ways," or parkways modeled after the excellent system in Westchester County, N.Y., built in the 1920's by Robert Moses, New York City's Commissioner of Parks. Some 72 miles had been proposed, but little was ever laid out or bought. (The start of this system, called Forest Preserve Drive, still

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ 70 ILCS 810/7.

¹⁹ Mann, "Policies Involved in Naturalistic Areas."

²⁰ *Revised Report of the Advisory Committee to the Cook County Forest Preserve Commissioners*, 1953.

- exists today between River Road and Narragansett Avenue on Chicago's north side.)
- ◆ Aviation landing fields. (In 1929, following Lindbergh's dramatic flight to Paris, these were popular items!)
 - ◆ Buildings, lodges, and field houses, 20 of which had been proposed but, the Committee felt, were too expensive and not needed—besides which: "To provide community centers would give much more to some citizens than to others, and serve to originate further attempts to divide and dismember many land areas."
 - ◆ An arboretum: "The Morton Arboretum has rendered superfluous any such development in the Forest Preserve District."

An overview of District facilities gives a snapshot of operations at that time:

- ◆ District lands were used by 101 private horse stables.
- ◆ There were six golf courses, but the Committee noted that these had never been improved with clubhouses with showers, kitchens, and the like.
- ◆ Three pools, which the Committee strongly recommended be closed once they "became obsolete." (As of 2001, these had been or were scheduled to be rebuilt at great expense.)
- ◆ Camps: "only 11 remain"—five for Boy Scouts, five for Girl Scouts, and one for the Sokol organization.
- ◆ Six toboggan slides at Palos.
- ◆ Concessions: there had been 95 in 1929, overseen by the District's Department of Special Services. Most were now gone, remaining only at five of the six golf courses, one pool, and two preserves.

The Citizen's Advisory Committee also had some interesting opinions and comments on various other aspects of the District:

- ◆ *Shelters*: The Committee's 1929 report had recommended construction of stone, timber, and the like. These structures were now "hazardous and rundown," and several had been burned by vandals. The Committee recommended universal adoption of a new prototype steel-and-concrete shelter just erected in National Woods, "severely simple, functional, and unobtrusive."
- ◆ *Wildlife*: The Committee strongly recommended the completion of the Skokie Lagoons project up to Lake Cook Road to provide additional wildlife habitat. (This was never done, and in 1973 the land was converted into what is now the Chicago Botanic Garden.)
- ◆ *Education*: The Conservation Department was started for this purpose in 1945. However, it was "never intended that the District create a large staff to amplify the public school systems"—only in "several nature study areas," such as the Trailside Museum, which had opened in 1932.
- ◆ *Maintenance*: Highly praised for its "nationally known" reputation.

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- ◆ *New construction:* The Committee recommended spending \$10,000,000 per year for the coming decade.²¹

This effort stands as the last comprehensive view of the District by its independent advisory group. Equally important was the Committee's strong stance on the matter of parting with any District holdings:

The Board has wisely taken the position that all such requests and activities (for the District to sell any of its lands) are beyond the scope of Forest Preserve law and are not within its legal powers to grant or provide; that it should not provide such facilities for purely local populations, and that their provision is the responsible duty of the cities, villages, and neighborhoods.²²

The result of this position was the publication of *Land Policy*, a series of letters beginning in 1946, and periodically added to through 1962, reflecting (until recent times) the District's consistent refusal to part with land unless absolutely necessary. This booklet, while not updated for forty years, effectively represents District policy on the sale of land.

In 1957 John Morrill, long-time Chief Landscape Architect for the District, provided another snapshot of activities in his booklet, *The Forest Preserve District of Cook County, Illinois*,²³ which was revised and updated in 1970. This too reflects an earlier, simpler era, when for instance picnicking next to a highway was still a quiet affair. In 1957 the District had:

- ◆ 150 "major picnic centers," with 50 smaller ones along highways
- ◆ 700 roadside picnic tables
- ◆ 7 golf courses
- ◆ 3 "modern pools with bath-houses"
- ◆ "A number of playfields" and 100 softball diamonds near picnic areas
- ◆ A zoo and a "new botanical garden" run by the Chicago Horticultural Society
- ◆ 175 miles of trails
- ◆ 1 major and 4 minor winter sports areas
- ◆ 25 "fishing centers"
- ◆ 5 nature centers
- ◆ 15 "children's group camps"

²¹ Ibid. all the above.

²² Ibid.

²³ John Morrill, "The Forest Preserve District of Cook County, Illinois," *Planning the Region of Chicago* (Chicago Regional Planning Commission, 1957). See also "Forest Preserve District of Cook County, Illinois," *Landscape Architecture*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (1948), pp. 138-44.

Morrill reiterated the longstanding split in land use, with 15% being used to “meet public demands for outdoor recreation in naturalistic surroundings,” while the other 85% was “left in its primitive state.” Interestingly, while he noted that the District was holding to its target of reforesting 75% of its “primitive” holdings, he also commented that “prairie meadows” must be kept clear of hawthorns and other brush. Here was the germ of an idea that was not to be fully realized for another thirty years.

The End of an Era—And the Start of a New One

The venerable “Cap” Sauers retired as General Superintendent in 1964, having run the District for 35 of its 48 years. Sauers was universally admired for his evenhanded and efficient management, while skillfully maneuvering himself and the District through political situations of every stripe. Typical of Sauers’s vision, according to a contemporary employee, was his tremendous support of the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission. The 1963 INPC legislation established a statewide nature preserves system to permanently preserve ecologically significant land in Illinois. Sauers arranged for thousands of acres of District lands to be put into this system, to “set a good precedent and show a good-faith effort to establish the INPC state-wide.”²⁴

Sauers had devoted the bulk of his professional life to nurturing and caring for the District. His vision is obvious in his remarks in a 1961 address:

When Chicago has been rebuilt three or more times there will still be the forests and meadows offering solace and delight and a complete life to many millions, and to future generations as well.²⁵

Where to find a replacement? Sauers had favored Arthur Janura, then Superintendent of the Maintenance Department and previously a member of the Forestry Department. Board President Seymour Simon agreed and appointed him as General Superintendent in 1965. George Dunne began his long term as Board President in 1966, and he fully supported Janura for the next 24 years.

According to contemporary sources, however, Janura was not another Sauers. “He didn’t have a lot of vision; he just wanted something he could control,” remarks a former employee.²⁶ A *Chicago Tribune* editorial from October 6, 1986, seems to confirm this:

An eight-week examination by Tribune reporters showed that the Forest Preserve somehow has evaded the good-government reforms of the last 20 years. It remains in effect a feudal system: Mr. Janura owes allegiance

²⁴ Buck, interview, November 15, 2001.

²⁵ Charles Sauers, Address at University of Illinois, November 1, 1961.

²⁶ Anonymous interview, Oct. 3, 2001.

to County Board President George Dunne and theoretically the Board itself, but inside his own fortress his rule is absolute.²⁷

Even the Citizens' Advisory Committee was not immune to this kind of control. An early activist in District affairs remembers talking with the head of this Committee in 1978, who commented, "Yes, I'm supposed to be chairman—but Janura is being his own advisory committee."²⁸ (Janura sits on this committee today, and was contacted several times by telephone as part of this project. He always said he would think over the requests for interviews, but never called back.)

Despite the above opinions, Janura was clearly one who strongly defended the District. Writing in *Chicago* magazine in 1985, an author found himself having a very short phone conversation with Janura: "Why do you want to weaken the forest preserves? We have fought so hard for this, and you come around and want to write some story that will tear the whole thing down." The author continues: "'We are not a land bank,' Janura told me, and the actions of the District over the decades back him up."²⁹ We can confirm Janura's fortitude: our telephone requests for interviews for this report, while never accepted, did find Janura giving one opinion: that the District had now bungled its finances. He was proud that he had always kept money in the bank, a "cushion" for hard times. The Civic Federation, in a backhanded way, acknowledged this in budget analysis bulletins in 1987 and 1989, noting that corporate carryover surpluses were too high (19.6% in 1987) and recommending levy reductions for the subsequent year.³⁰

If Janura's interests focused on ruling his "fortress" and maintaining the political support of Simon, Dunne, and others, this allowed for considerable creativity on the part of the professionals running the District below Janura. Foremost among these would be the efforts of Chief Landscape Architect Richard Buck (1952–1988) along with his assistant (and now General Superintendent), Joseph Nevius, whom Buck hired in 1966. Their observations of the District span a half-century of its life.

Buck was hired in the traditional way, an amusing story about his introduction to District life. He presented his credentials to Sauers, who gave him a note for Commissioner Fred Fulle, recommending Buck be hired. Fulle responded: "God damn Sauers. I didn't even know the job was open, and I had lots of friends for it."

In 1962 Glen Weideman, appointed Chief Landscape Architect after Morrill's long tenure, died unexpectedly, and Buck took his position. Both Buck and Nevius commented in interviews on the successes of their decades of work together, providing another snapshot of the District's growth during that time:

²⁷ "Mr. Janura's Patronage Fortress," *Chicago Tribune*, October 6, 1986.

²⁸ Anonymous interview, August 10, 2001.

²⁹ Jerry Sullivan, "A Prairie Revival," *Chicago*, November 1985, p. 54.

³⁰ The Civic Federation, Bulletins 1005 (February 1987) and 1042 (February 1989).

- ◆ *Federal funding:* The District's use of this increased dramatically, particularly after the creation of the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund in the early 1960s. Sauers was skeptical at first: "Why should we get involved with accepting money from the federal government, with all the red tape?" Buck: "The red tape is the bonus—federal grant money puts an extra layer of protection on land the County might try to sell." (This was a prophetic and wise concept. Lake County's efforts to release Forest Preserve land for a new road over the Des Plaines River in the late 1980s were stymied, in part, by the opposition's pointing out that federal money had been used to buy this land for conservation.)
- ◆ *Bicycle paths:* Interest in this activity began to grow in the 1960s, the same time during which equestrian pursuits began to decline. The District installed its first bicycle path in that era on Salt Creek, between the Brookfield Zoo and the county line, converting an old horse trail into a limestone path. Next came the massive project on the North Branch of the Chicago River, starting at Devon and Caldwell and eventually extending all the way to the Chicago Botanic Garden. Agreements were needed with many towns, and overpasses were built at busy highways. When the Edens Expressway was rebuilt in 1979, the District was ready with funding for a tunnel under that highway.

Nevius considers the bikeways his "brainchild." For a time, the District was nationally recognized for its efforts in this area, and it continues an aggressive bikeway program to this day. Both Nevius and Buck saw that the great success of these trails lay in their providing instant accessibility (with public safety) to thousands of acres of land formerly available only on foot. As Buck describes it, "You are moving, passing through the property in a silence likened to sailing." The trails also provided a backbone connection for surrounding communities to connect to and enjoy District lands.

- ◆ *Busse Woods:* Next to the Skokie Lagoons, this was the largest development project in District history—and certainly the most complicated, given the working partnership of the Forest Preserve District, Soil and Water Conservation District, Illinois Division of Waterways, and local towns. Originally the recreation money for this project was to have been spread throughout the various impoundments created in the watershed plan. Buck suggested it all be put in one place, to get the most recreational impact for the region: Busse Woods. He and Nevius designed and built today what is one of the District's most popular and well-organized recreation areas. Buck invented the concept of "fishing walls": concrete structures with deep pools below them, to allow anglers access to the best fishing spots without damaging the lakeshore. For the first time (other than at golf courses), the District also installed flush toilets, setting higher and better sanitary standards. Neighboring Elk Grove was at first wary of the development of the south portion of the project, adjacent to homes, but when the

bike trail was developed and the neighbors began using it for their own recreation, opposition faded away.

Few people today realize that much of Busse Woods is “made land”: excavations from the lake graded and shaped into new forms. The fact that most people think this area is “natural” is a tribute to Buck’s and Nevius’s skills as landscape architects; indeed, Busse Woods has won several national design awards. Nevius considers Busse Woods and the newer golf courses his best works. Busse Woods today receives over 2.5 million visits annually, more than Yellowstone Park.

- ◆ *Land acquisition:* Buck strongly urged Janura and Superintendent Emeritus Sauers to buy the Rossmoor site (now Poplar Creek) in the early 1960s, at 2,700 acres the largest single District land purchase in its history. Under Janura, the Board passed several bond issues and continued aggressive land purchases, so that by 1988 the District owned over 67,000 acres.
- ◆ *Land management:* District naturalists had been doing modest amounts of prairie restoration from the Nature Centers, but this work received increased attention when Buck received “tacit” approval to work with a volunteer group on the North Branch of the Chicago River in 1977 (see page 67).³¹

The new work of “prairie restoration” volunteers coincided with a growing interest in the fate of the 80 percent of the District’s natural land that, under Sauers’s motto (“Nature left alone is always orderly”)³², had been planted to exotic “meadow,” vigorously reforested, or left to its own devices. By 1970 there began to appear obvious problems in the District’s still-rudimentary form of land management. For one thing, land managers within the District had come to understand that “leaving Nature alone” would not work for the prairies that were a prized part of the District from its early days. (As mentioned above, in 1957 District Landscape Architect John Morrill had urged that “prairie meadows” be kept free of brush.) By the 1940s Henry Curtis, Aldo Leopold, and others were experimenting with prairie restoration and management at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum. In 1963, the Morton Arboretum began a major prairie restoration project, and the District’s Camp Sagawau initiated a smaller but high-quality restoration at the same time. Sauers himself championed the purchase of Shoe Factory Road Prairie and dedicated it as one of the District’s first Illinois State Nature Preserves before his retirement.

Noting that “we’re missing the long view in the landscape,” in the early 1960s Buck had proposed a massive prairie restoration on the south side of Chicago. (Ironically the land, now called Bartel Grassland, has become 40 years later the site of the District’s newest grassland project.) Director of Conservation Roberts Mann had made the same

³¹ Interviews, Richard Buck, November 15, 2001; Joseph Nevius, June 20, 2001.

³² Sauers, address at University of Illinois.

suggestion some fifteen years earlier, proposing “to recreate large areas of original Illinois prairie.”

In contrast, Buck’s predecessor, Glenn Wiedemann, wanted “instant” forest preserves. Reforestation of all land, regardless of its past growth, was the rule. Buck remembers an original prairie at Wayside Woods being reforested in the early 1950s. To accomplish Wiedemann’s aims, fast-growing and even non-native trees were used. Some years later Buck was able to get the Forestry Department to change its “mix,” eliminating some weedy species and getting at least 50% oak, maple, and ash in the plantings.³³

Still, the concept of ecology was dimly understood. In the same breath that he had advocated prairie, Mann noted the 400–600 “wildfires” the District experienced each year had been confined to less than two acres per incident. “We’re going to beat that, and will.”³⁴ In 1963, however, the District began to do controlled burns in some of its prairie areas, according to Roland Eisenbeis, former Superintendent of Conservation. The first large-scale prairie restorations began in 1966: areas at Sagawau and the Crabtree and Sand Ridge Nature Centers were planted with seed imported from Nebraska, since there were no convenient local seed sources at that time.³⁵

Public interest in ecology and land management was growing steadily, and the District responded. Eisenbeis’s and Buck’s efforts in the 1960s and 1970s led to beginning a relationship between the District and The Nature Conservancy’s Volunteer Stewardship Network in 1983. Volunteers were to engage in habitat restoration activities under the supervision of trained volunteer stewards, following management plans approved by the District. In 1989 the Board unanimously (15–0) approved an agreement between the District and The Nature Conservancy to

initiate a cooperative effort and a pooling of resources to achieve their mutual objectives of restoring and restocking native flora and fauna; protecting the land and its biotic communities in as near a natural condition as may be; and encouraging and facilitating recreational and educational use of such lands by the public in a manner consistent with maintaining a high-quality natural environment.³⁶

By the mid-1990s, the management and restoration of District lands would bring the District more public attention about its execution of its mission than it had seen in decades.

³³ Buck, interview, November 15, 2001.

³⁴ Mann, “Policies Involved in Naturalistic Areas.”

³⁵ Roland Eisenbeis, interview with Stephen Christy, June 6, 2001.

³⁶ Minutes, Forest Preserve Board Meeting, March 20, 1989.

Boom—Then Bust

In 1990, two momentous events occurred: George Dunne ended his long reign as District President, to be replaced by Richard Phelan, and shortly thereafter General Superintendent Janura retired. Joe Nevius replaced Janura in 1992, having assumed the role as Acting General Superintendent in 1991.

Under Phelan, real change seemed possible at the District after the decades of Janura's control—control which, according to one former employee, often pitted departments against each other.

Up until Phelan came, the departments were kept from one another pretty much. It was a closed system. For somebody in, for instance, Conservation to talk with somebody in Personnel or Finance just didn't happen.³⁷

Certainly politics was still prevalent. "Phelan brought in his cronies and put them in high-paying jobs, to train and prepare them for when he would be governor. Obviously, this didn't happen!"³⁸ remembers another former employee. "Phelan liked the District, and was also looking for something positive to promote himself. The District was a 'hidden jewel': a public relations machine to make Phelan look good on the environment," says another.³⁹

Phelan had plenty of problems to face. Typical would be his somewhat amusing comment to the Board in his 1991 budget presentation to them:

There is no policy of maintaining records. The warehouse stores a mountain of useless material that should long ago have been catalogued and computerized. We're still holding purchasing orders for potato chips from 1965 at the same time our most valuable papers—one-of-a-kind property deeds, for example—have never been microfilmed or copied, so that any fire would be disastrous.⁴⁰

Phelan initiated a far-reaching Total Quality Management (TQM) effort at the District. Departments that had been isolated for decades suddenly found themselves working together on special teams. The results of this several-year effort are exhaustive and thorough. Typical of the documents reviewed is the report by the Forest Preserve District Strategic Design Team for 1994. It reiterated the District mission statement created at a 1993 senior District staff retreat:⁴¹

³⁷ Anonymous interview, May 8, 2001.

³⁸ Anonymous interview, June 12, 2001.

³⁹ Anonymous interview, June 15, 2001.

⁴⁰ Richard Phelan, address to the District Board, November 4, 1991.

⁴¹ The following quotations were gleaned from a number of TQM reports supplied by an ex-employee.

The mission of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, Illinois, is to acquire, restore, and manage lands for the purpose of protecting and preserving public open space with its natural wonders—significant prairies, forest, wetlands, rivers, streams, and other landscapes with their associated wildlife—for the education, recreation, and pleasure of the public, now and in the future.

The group continued with a motto:

Motto: The Forest Preserve District of Cook County preserves the natural environment for the education and pleasure of the public.

And, ironic today:

Vision: By the year 2000, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County will create an interconnected system of forest preserves which will be a national model of urban open space preservation.

Progress was slow, as Phelan noted in his 1992 budget address to the Board:

Last year at this time, I painted a picture of the Forest Preserve District as a body of government sorely in need of modernization....Today, I can tell you that that task is every bit as difficult as we thought it would be. We have found no shortcuts, but we are making steady progress.⁴²

The University of Illinois Institute of Governmental and Public Affairs was lending a hand, and Phelan's efforts were also rewarded with assistance from the Chicago Community Trust (CCT) Government Assistance Program. In 1994 it initiated year-long Strategic Design Team training, based on the Model of Excellence Initiative of its Governmental Assistance Program. Impressed by the Total Quality Management work done in the past two years, the CCT sought to assist the District "in creating the framework and foundation to speed up the effects of quality management beyond the 1992–1993 team training projects."

The CCT noted the District's then-current problems:⁴³

- ◆ Lack of clear communication and work responsibilities
- ◆ Reactive rather than proactive planning (crisis-oriented response)

The goal of this project was

To create a more responsive, *customer-focused* government which welcomes citizen input into the design and delivery of services; and to

⁴² Richard Phelan, address to the District Board, November 6, 1992.

⁴³ TQM reports supplied by former employee.

develop a *worker-empowered* management model which enables employees to focus their creativity, wisdom, and “real-life” experience on the task of improving government systems.

Phelan also strongly supported his top District staff. “Nevius just blossomed,” recalls one former employee. “His door was always open.”⁴⁴ Senior staff also had regular access to Phelan’s top people. Mid-level staff noted changes as well: “I think it was good for us to talk with people in other departments, and get a sense of what people’s positions were,” a former employee commented about the TQM exercise. “There was more direct contact after that between departments.”⁴⁵

Another Phelan initiative was the creation of the District’s first land acquisition plan. An October 1992 District press release notes that

For the first time in its history, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County will begin, pending Board approval, a comprehensive land acquisition study, which will pave the way for the District to increase its holdings. The nine-month study will identify available open land areas to increase the size and recreational/educational potential of the Forest Preserve District.⁴⁶

The plan, prepared by a nationally known planning and landscape architecture firm, was published in June of 1994. A complex and collaborative document, its partners included the Northeast Illinois Planning Commission, The Nature Conservancy, Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, Illinois Department of Conservation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S.D.A. Forest Service, and Openlands Project. Later that year, it received a special award from the Illinois chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects, which praised the depth of citizen involvement and the methods suggested for preserving land in an increasingly expensive environment. This group continued that

the plan can and will be widely distributed to the public...[It is] a very important project that should be viewed as a model for land acquisition. The diverse team of professionals should be praised for their commitment to stewardship of the land.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Anonymous interview, June 12, 2001.

⁴⁵ Anonymous interview, May 12, 2001.

⁴⁶ District press release, October 19, 1992.

⁴⁷ American Society of Landscape Architects, Illinois Chapter, Merit Award: Landscape Planning and Analysis, as published in the Illinois Chapter’s annual magazine, p. 26.

District Board meeting minutes show that in November of 1994 the Board received the plan and, in a unanimous vote, referred it the Real Estate Committee “for further consideration.”⁴⁸

Progress also continued on implementing and expanding volunteer land management efforts. In 1992 the board approved funding for workshops on land management, including proper use of herbicides and controlled burns, as well as budgeting \$50,000 for summer interns and science projects for volunteer prairie and savanna restoration. Also in 1992 the District appointed its first land manager, Ralph Thornton, and it would soon hire its first Volunteer Coordinator. In December the Board unanimously approved the extension of its agreement with The Nature Conservancy’s Volunteer Stewardship Network.

When Phelan left at the end of 1994, he had accomplished his desire to “spend down” the surplus monies Janura had so carefully squirreled away over the years. As late as 1991, the Civic Federation had again criticized the Corporate Fund surplus of 30%. No one could have foreseen that the exhaustion of these “rainy day” monies would be followed by a tax cap, effectively leaving the District with no extra cash for its mission.

Nevius notes some of his major accomplishments as General Superintendent, begun at that time:

- ◆ The District has grown greatly in its use of technology. In 1991 the District had one fax, and few computers. Now all golf and picnic permits are computerized (the golf reservation system by phone was the first in the nation, according to Nevius), all District lands are being loaded into a geographic information system (GIS), and the Planning Department is on full AutoCAD.
- ◆ Public relations have greatly improved. There were no special events in the early 1990s; now there are over 30. The District has an 800-number posted in red at all forest preserve entrances.
- ◆ The District was the first public agency to have a Greenways Planner (1992), long before the NIPC Greenways Plan was published, and the first public agency to have a Land Manager (1992).
- ◆ “The District’s presence in the City of Chicago is greater than it ever has been,” notes Nevius, with its active involvement in both the CitySpace and NeighborSpace initiatives: “We are proud to be part of saving neighborhood lots.”⁴⁹

In a July 1992 address at an international conference, Nevius gave a snapshot of the District, showing the tremendous growth in public use and facilities over the past few decades. There were now 40,000,000 visitors annually, enjoying:

⁴⁸ *Proceedings*, Cook County Board, 1994, p. 476.

⁴⁹ Joseph Nevius, interview with Stephen Christy, June 20, 2001.

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- ◆ 190 major picnic areas, with 202 shelters
- ◆ 34 fishing lakes
- ◆ 90 baseball fields
- ◆ 3 pools
- ◆ 10 golf courses
- ◆ 5 snowmobile sites
- ◆ 18 sled hills/toboggan areas
- ◆ 11 boat ramps
- ◆ 8 model airplane fields
- ◆ 6 nature centers
- ◆ 74 miles of paved bicycle trails, with 11 more scheduled
- ◆ 190 miles of other trails

In 1991, Nevius continued, the Conservation Department had distributed nature information bulletins to every classroom in Cook County, and its education programs (including 48 television and radio broadcasts) had reached 1.3 million people. 1991 had also seen 18,000 hours of volunteer labor, a dramatic increase over the 11,000 hours recorded in 1990. Nevius concluded:

The greatest achievement of all is the esteem and appreciation that the public holds for the District's lands, facilities, and opportunities.⁵⁰

In December of 1994 John Stroger took over as President of the Forest Preserve District. Things looked hopeful: in his inaugural address, Stroger stated:

I will work toward the goal of acquiring another 8,000 acres of land, so our holdings will be a full 75,000 acres of land—the maximum allowed by law.⁵¹

Inside the District, however, reality changed dramatically. The TQM process had put forward a Strategic Design Team/Strategic Plan Implementation program for 1995. What happened? A former employee echoes the opinions of several: "The entire effort was shelved. Mezell Williams (Stroger's new CFO at that time) openly mocked the entire three-year TQM effort and flushed it."⁵² A recently retired (1999) employee continues: "The organization [went back to] 'business as it always was'." A current employee says, "Eight years ago, people were hired and promoted in a timely fashion. The right people were hired and promoted. Unqualified people have been promoted and hired in the last eight years."⁵³

⁵⁰ Joseph Nevius, "An Urban Open Space System: A Perspective on the Forest Preserves of the Chicago Region," Summer 1992.

⁵¹ John Stroger, address to District Board, December 6, 1994.

⁵² Anonymous interview, June 12, 2001.

⁵³ Anonymous interview, July 25, 2001.

Several former employees confirmed that Williams and others in the new regime reversed the positive changes of the TQM effort, and morale sagged. In early 1995, all senior District staff was told to submit signed, but undated, letters of resignation to be kept in the central file.⁵⁴ As the past president of a conservation group long supporting the District puts it: “President Stroger regards the District as a necessary nuisance and a place to put ne’er-do-well relatives.”⁵⁵

There was a general exodus of skilled top employees, with Conservation and Planning suffering the most. Positions would then remain vacant: Conservation was without a superintendent for over two years. “Suddenly, everything had to go through downtown,” recalls a former employee—or, as a current one says, “Hiring an \$8/hour aide must go through the President’s office.”⁵⁶ Another former employee remembers:

When I applied [for my position] in 1992, there were 70 applicants for the job. Then things changed. There was tremendous inefficiency in hiring. You were not allowed to advertise a position. The bulletins were only posted at the District, and you couldn’t make copies of them....It was a way of decreasing competition. There would be memos about this: “If anybody calls to ask about the position, you are not to answer them, but direct all calls to Personnel.” You were instructed to send resumes back to the applicant and tell them to send them to Personnel. You were not allowed to keep any resumes on file.

There was a lack of accountability. It just wasn’t there, and I think it was organized that way. There was no accountability for what Maintenance did or didn’t do. Morale was very low. If you did a good job, there was no recognition, and if you did a lousy job, nobody noticed. It didn’t matter.⁵⁷

An outside observer also notes: “Joe Nevius has definitely gone underground since Stroger arrived. He used to be very active at professional get-togethers. Now he doesn’t show up at all.”⁵⁸

Other initiatives from the early 1990s also faltered. The Land Acquisition Plan remained stuck in the Real Estate Committee, year after year. A proposal sponsored by Commissioners Schumann and Sutker to seek referendum approval for a \$100,000,000 bond issue in the March 1998 election went nowhere, although the District’s attorney noted that the referendum could also be submitted for the spring 1999 and 2000 elections. The *Chicago Tribune* noted in late 1997 that President Stroger felt the marketing

⁵⁴ Anonymous interview, June 12, 2001.

⁵⁵ Anonymous interview, January 25, 2001.

⁵⁶ Anonymous interview, June 20, 2001.

⁵⁷ Anonymous interview, May 14, 2001.

⁵⁸ Anonymous interview, March 15, 2001.

of such a referendum would cost an “unbelievable amount of money.” A 1999 document put that figure at \$2,000,000, but noted that a \$150,000,000 bond issue would pass 53% to 43%.⁵⁹ During this time all the collar-county forest preserve districts were passing bond referenda, and available land was rapidly dwindling.

The District was not buying land. In fact, it was selling it. In 1999 citizens opened their newspapers to find that:

For the first time since Cook County began setting aside natural habitat as forest preserve 85 years ago, county officials on Tuesday sold a piece of land not designated as surplus, angering environmentalists but pleasing officials in Rosemont, who plan to use the property to expand the village’s huge convention center.⁶⁰

As the paper noted, in 1985 the District had designated some land as surplus: 30 or so parcels, some of which were vacant lots willed to the District and others strips isolated by road construction. Most of these have been sold. However, the Rosemont land was not surplus, and the deal flew in the face of the District’s *Land Policy*, a series of policy letters defending the District’s property back to 1946.

In the past, the District and Board had resisted numerous entreaties from various municipalities and other agencies for District land. “It would be unthinkable that lands acquired for Forest Preserve purposes be diverted from that use to allow the establishment of either a free or commercial parking lot [on any part of Cummings Square],” the Citizen’s Advisory Committee wrote in *Land Policy*, responding to a request from the village of Oak Park. Yet the land sold to Rosemont was for expansion of its convention-center parking lot.

The Citizens’ Advisory Committee, which had formulated the 1946 document, took the brunt of the divisiveness this action caused on both the Board and the Committee. In 1996, the committee had refused to designate the Rosemont parcel as surplus.⁶¹ Recalls a committee member:

We were dead opposed against it, but a faction, led by Art Janura, thought it was too good a deal to pass up. He spoke vociferously in its favor—but you could smell a rat. In the end, the Citizens’ Advisory Committee condoned it.⁶²

⁵⁹ Belden, Russonello, and Stewart, *Expanding the Cook County Forest Preserve District: An Analysis of a Poll among Cook County Voters* (January 1999).

⁶⁰ *Chicago Tribune*, June 12, 1999.

⁶¹ *Chicago Tribune*, January 24, 1996.

⁶² Anonymous interview, January 11, 2002.

Meanwhile, the land management issue exploded. Nevius had been hopeful in his 1992 overseas address: “Currently we have many fine organizations and individuals working with our professional staff towards a renaissance or restoration of the native landscape.”⁶³ A grant of \$879,000 from the U.S. Forest Service allowed the District to dramatically increase land-management personnel and other resources and to initiate a major new restoration project at Swallow Cliff. It seemed that the land-management program would soon catch up with those of other nearby agencies. Collar-county forest preserve districts, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the National Park Service at Indiana Dunes, and even the City of Chicago had restoration programs that started later but soon far outpaced those of the District.

In 1996 a series of challenges from land-management critics was felt by all agencies, but it had a very different impact in Cook County. Interviews with the heads of other Forest Preserve Districts, who observed the drama from outside but with an experienced eye, reveal an explosive combination of forces which they too had to deal with:

- ◆ A portion of the public, particularly those living next to forest preserves, were not receiving sufficient education and involvement in restoration projects in their “backyards,” and
- ◆ Animal-rights activists, who had largely failed in their efforts to stop deer control in Cook and other county forest preserve districts, were looking for a new media issue.

These professionals, as well as several media observers, correctly divined that, as right and well intentioned as the District’s growing land management initiatives were, the District had failed to adequately sell this mission to the public. In May 1996, *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Raymond Coffey launched a long-running series of attacks on restoration, focusing first on the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County, and then on the Cook, the Lake County Forest Preserves, and the City of Chicago’s North Park Village Nature Center. Coffey charged that the forests were being destroyed to create prairies. Negative public perception suddenly had thrown the entire decades-old effort into question.

In DuPage, Cook, and Lake Counties a series of raucous public hearings followed the attacks by Coffey and some local papers. Within a few months, however, staff and volunteers in DuPage and Lake Counties would be fully back to work. Other agencies met the concerns of the critics with a variety of education and community-relations initiatives.

In Cook County, however, President Stroger reacted with a moratorium that stopped all land management by staff and volunteers. In early 1997 the Board issued a new set of land management recommendations and appointed a special Community Advisory

⁶³ Nevius, “An Urban Open Space System.”

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Council to provide public input and a review of land management plans. Predictably, since the critics had charged that the District had not kept proper control on volunteer work in the past, the new guidelines were now, to many, over-restrictive. One example was the new rule that volunteer activities had to be conducted in the presence of a District employee. Since most of this work was done on weekends, it was perhaps inevitable that often this employee would not show up. A *Daily Southtown* headline observed that the "New Rules Leave Prairie Volunteers in Limbo": many volunteers were going elsewhere, since these are people who "like to get out and work, not play politics."⁶⁴

Another casualty was the District's qualified and dedicated land-management staff. The Land Manager, Ecologist, Volunteer Coordinator, and others worked hard to help the program recover, but all gradually took early retirement or moved on to more supportive agencies.

The late John Husar, the nationally known *Chicago Tribune* outdoor writer, perhaps summed the crisis up most incisively:

By quailing before a loud minority of ill-informed activists and one brazenly misinformed media commentator to obstruct the work of skilled crews for the past two years, Stroger has set back several projects and virtually dismantled the volunteer network.

Instead of enjoying the counsel of his scientific community, Stroger caters to the whims of a cadre of animal-rights activists whose hidden agenda is to punish the Forest Preserve District for allowing the culling of deer.⁶⁵

Today some of the moratorium restrictions have been lifted at most sites, and the volunteer work force is rebuilding.

In the spring of 2001, yet another problem surfaced for the District, this perhaps the most serious of all: a fiscal deficit, which was predicted to approach \$20,000,000 at the end of 2001, but which has been lowered to \$9,000,000 due to an infusion of County cash and budget reductions.

The roots of this deficit go back to two events. Each event was well intentioned for its time, but both combined to create a stranglehold on the District's financial operations. These were the intentional spending down of the District's cash reserves in the early 1990s, followed by a tax cap imposed by the state legislature in 1993. Whether in the long run the financial "cushion" would have helped the District is debatable, but it might have bought some time for the District to rearrange its financial house, which, as current events show, has been out of order for a long time.

⁶⁴ *Daily Southtown*, February 27, 1997.

⁶⁵ *Chicago Tribune*, February 27, 1998.

In January of 2002 the Board passed, after great debate, an “austerity” budget, considering 56 amendments in the process. Significantly, there were four “no” votes and one “present” vote, an unthinkable situation only several years earlier and showing, for the first time, some Board discontent with the current state of the District.⁶⁶

Several weeks later President Stroger announced the appointment of a new chief financial officer, Barbara McKinzie, to replace the vanished Mezell Williams.⁶⁷ Will this be the start of a new era, or a continuation of business as usual? Only time will tell.

⁶⁶ District budget hearings, culminating in a final vote on January 24, 2002.

⁶⁷ “Finance Chief Picked for Forest Preserves,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 10, 2002.

Chapter Two

Survey of Forest Preserve Users

Overview

In 2001 the Friends of the Forest Preserves and the Friends of the Parks conducted a survey of users of Cook County forest preserves. Survey forms were distributed to preserve visitors and the survey was placed on the web for Internet users. We received 395 responses between April and December of 2001. Key findings are these:

- ◆ Forest preserve users identified peacefulness and the chance to get away from urban life as the most important feature of the forest preserves. Eighty-four percent of the respondents rated this “extremely important,” and 97% rated it either “extremely important” or “important.” Habitat for wild plants and animals was also rated highly, with 98% rating it “extremely important” or “important.” Most users (96%) considered recreation in a natural setting to be “extremely important” or “important.”
- ◆ Only 24% gave high marks to recreation in a developed setting. Seven percent rated such activities as swimming and golf to be “extremely important.” Seventy-three percent of the respondents rated such features as “not important” to them.
- ◆ Three concerns were most often rated “serious” or “extremely serious” for the Cook County forest preserves. These top priorities were the need to acquire more land (78%), deterioration of natural habitat (76%), and unresponsiveness to the public (69%).
- ◆ When asked to grade various aspects of the preserves, users gave the highest mark, slightly above a B, to the nature-center staff. Sanitary facilities earned the lowest grade, D+. The average grade for all items was C+.

Respondents also expressed concerns about excess litter (65%), poor maintenance of facilities (59%), and the lack of public safety (50%).

Respondents to this survey drew a clear distinction between parks and forest preserves. They value the forest preserves primarily as places where nature exists. They want the District to protect and preserve nature, and they see facilities such as golf courses and swimming pools as less important or unimportant to this mission. While many are concerned about the condition of facilities, they are most critical of the District’s efforts to protect and preserve nature.

The principal survey results are summarized below. The full report is available at the website of Friends of the Parks, <http://www.fotp.org>, or by request.

Methods

In the spring of 2001, the Friends of the Forest Preserves and the Friends of the Parks developed the questionnaire focusing on

- ◆ How people use the forest preserves
- ◆ What ratings people give the preserves' facilities
- ◆ What people value about the preserves
- ◆ How serious various issues facing the Forest Preserve District are

The survey, included as Appendix A (p. 88) was available both on paper and on the Web. Members of Friends and allied groups distributed close to 10,000 paper copies at approximately 60 forest preserve picnic groves, parking lots, and bike trails throughout Cook County, and also at public events and wherever interested people could be found. We received most of the responses between April and September of 2001, and we closed data collection in December. We received 395 responses.

Our methods of distribution did not give us a random sample of Cook County residents (or of any particular population). For example, we handed out the survey to people in the preserves, which over-represents people who spend a lot of time in the preserves. Also, respondents needed to find the survey on the Web or to fill it out and provide their own postage to mail it in. Thus, respondents are disproportionately those who use or have an interest in the preserves. The survey does not reflect the views of people who, for whatever reason, do not visit or take an interest in forest preserves. Another survey would have to be done to gather information on Cook County residents who never or rarely use the preserves.

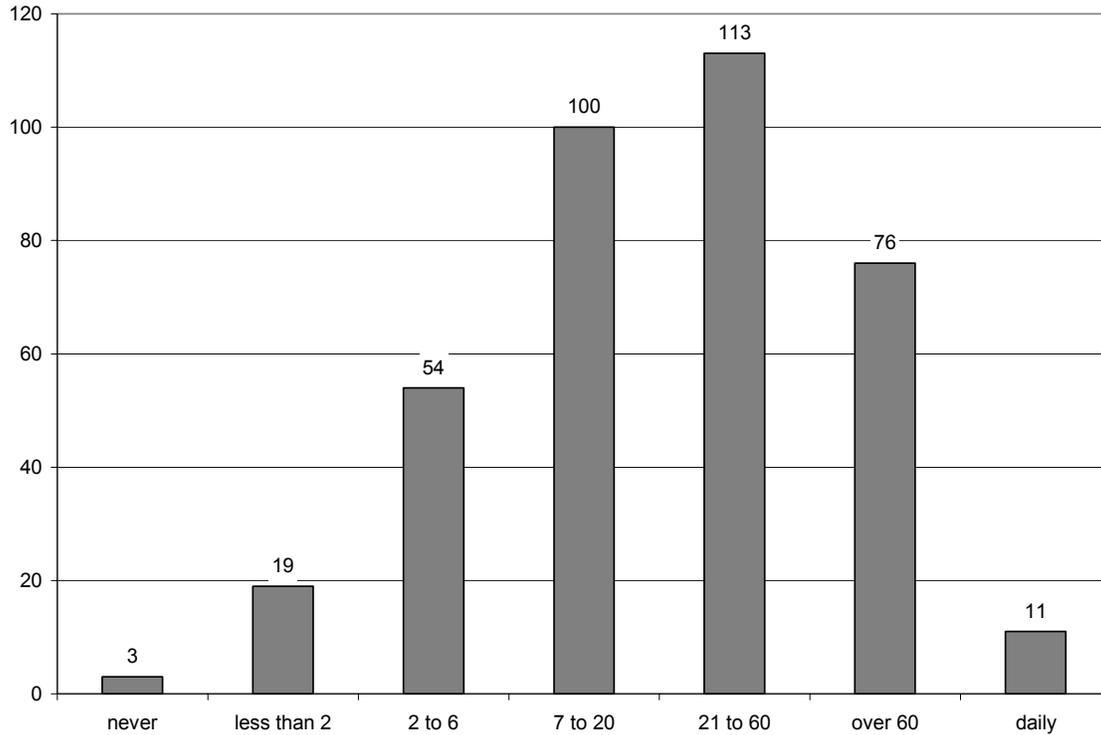
Results and Discussion

Use of the forest preserves

Frequency of visits

Question 1 asked, "How often do you go to a Cook County Forest Preserve?" Figure 1 shows the answers we received. The median value is 21 to 60 times a year, or once every week or two. We estimate the total number of visits by these respondents at about 24,000 per year. The District estimates that the preserves have approximately 40 million visits a year, so our respondents make 0.06% of these visits.

Figure 1. Frequency of visits, per year



Dividing 40 million visits per year by Cook County's population of 5 million gives an average of roughly 8 visits per year per citizen. Thus, our respondents visit the preserves more often than the average citizen. Since distribution was largely to people using the preserves, the views expressed in this survey are weighted toward those of people who do use the preserves and use them relatively frequently.

Preserves visited

Question 2 asked, "What preserve(s) do you visit most often?" Respondents mentioned 142 places in Cook County forest preserves. The places mentioned most frequently were unspecified places in the Palos and Sag Valley Divisions (51 mentions, usually simply as "Palos"), Busse Woods (38), Poplar Creek (31), Crabtree Nature Center (30), Deer Grove, (30), Harms Woods (27), Skokie Lagoons (26), and Somme Woods (20).

Transportation to the preserves

Question 3 asked, “How do you usually get to the preserves you visit?” Figure 2 and Table 1 show the responses.

Figure 2. Survey respondents’ means of transportation to preserves: percentages

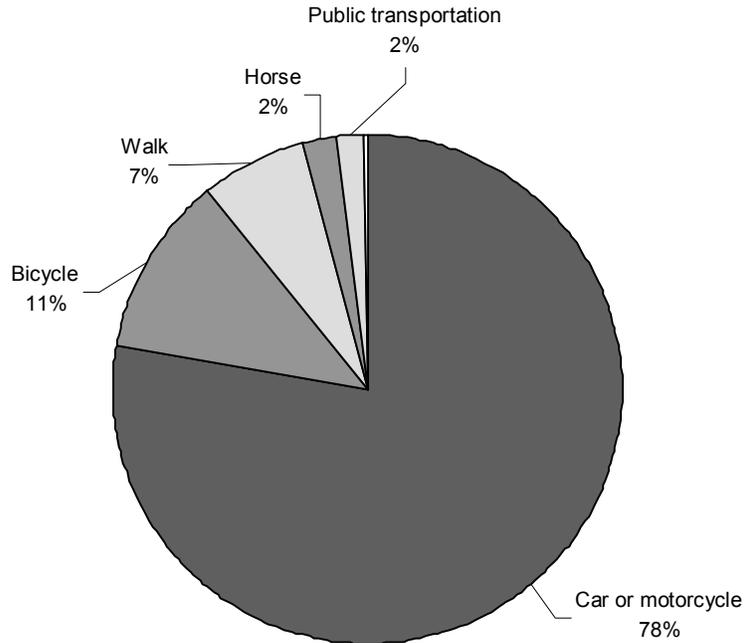


Table 1. Survey respondents’ means of transportation to preserves: numbers of respondents

Means	Number
Car or motorcycle	307
Bicycle	45
Walk	26
Horse	9
Public transportation	6
Other	1

Unsurprisingly, motor vehicle is by far the most common means of getting to the preserves, as it has been since the 1920s. It is noteworthy that more respondents get to the preserves by horse than by public transportation.

Activities in the forest preserves

Question 4 gave a list of 20 activities and asked respondents to check all in which they engage in the forest preserves. The question also offered a blank for adding other activities. Figure 3 shows the number of respondents who engage in each activity, sorted by prevalence.

Figure 3. Survey respondents' activities in the forest preserves

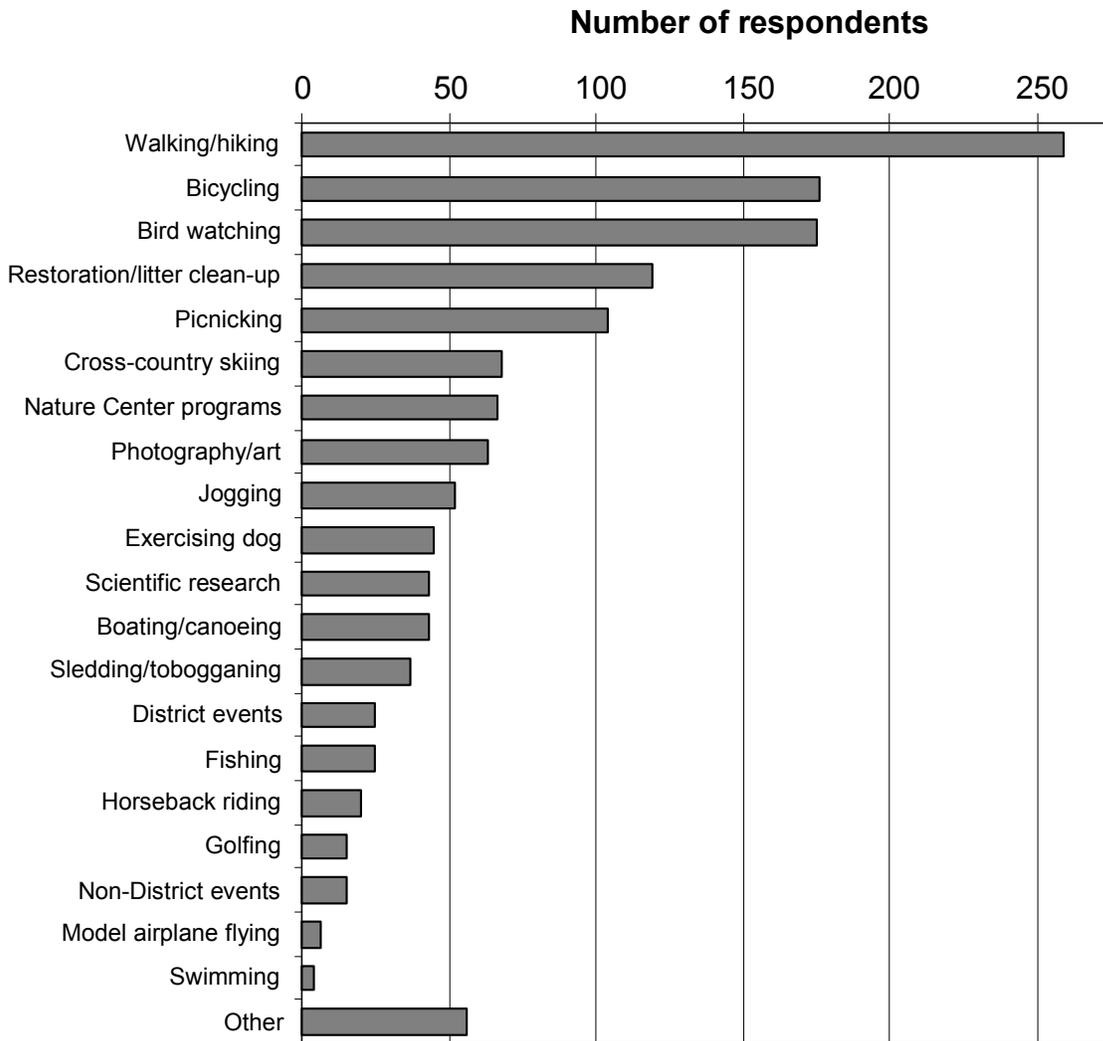


Table 2 gives the number and the percentage of respondents who engage in each activity.

Table 2. Survey respondents' activities in the forest preserves

Activity	Number of respondents	Percent of respondents
Walking/hiking	259	66%
Bicycling	176	45%
Bird watching	175	44%
Landscape restoration/litter clean-up	119	30%
Picnicking	104	26%
Cross-country skiing	68	17%
Nature Center programs	66	17%
Photography/art	63	16%
Jogging	52	13%
Exercising dog	45	11%
Scientific research	43	11%
Boating/canoeing	43	11%
Sledding/tobogganing	37	9%
District events	25	6%
Fishing	25	6%
Horseback riding	20	5%
Golfing	15	4%
Non-District events	15	4%
Model airplane flying	6	2%
Swimming	4	1%
Other	56	14%

As shown in Table 2, 56 respondents listed additional activities. The additional activities mentioned most frequently were botany, flower watching, and plant monitoring (10 responses), mountain biking (5 responses), and bird monitoring, nature study, and teaching (4 responses each).

The popularity of walking and hiking is not surprising. This is one of the easiest activities to undertake: it can be done alone or in groups, it costs nothing, it can be enjoyed in many weather conditions, and even a five-minute walk can refresh the spirit. When we cross-compared frequency of forest-preserve visits with activities, walking ranked first by a substantial margin among all groups.

The popularity of bicycling shows that the District is succeeding in its goal of attracting people to the preserves by providing bike trails. We did not separate road bicycles from mountain bikes in this survey. Fourteen cyclists specifically added that they engage in

mountain biking, and one of these mentioned using both mountain and road bicycles. Presumably most of the other 162 cyclists use the paved trails only.

Perhaps surprising is the high popularity of bird watching, essentially tied for second place in this survey with bicycling. When we compared frequency of visits with activities, birding was the second or third most popular activity among all groups except the eleven daily users, for whom jogging and Nature Center programs edged out birding and picnicking by a margin of one respondent each. The popularity of birding should be a welcome finding to the Forest Preserve District, since providing this activity requires only that the District maintain diverse, high-quality bird habitat and walking trails.

We believe that participants in landscape restoration and litter clean-up are over-represented in this survey. The number of picnickers undoubtedly exceeds the number of people who restore land or pick up litter. However, the views of the restoration volunteers and those who remove trash from the preserves do deserve close attention. Like the birders, these users are engaged in activities central to the District's mission. They tend to be motivated and knowledgeable users of the preserves. (For simplicity, we will call this group "volunteers" in this report.)

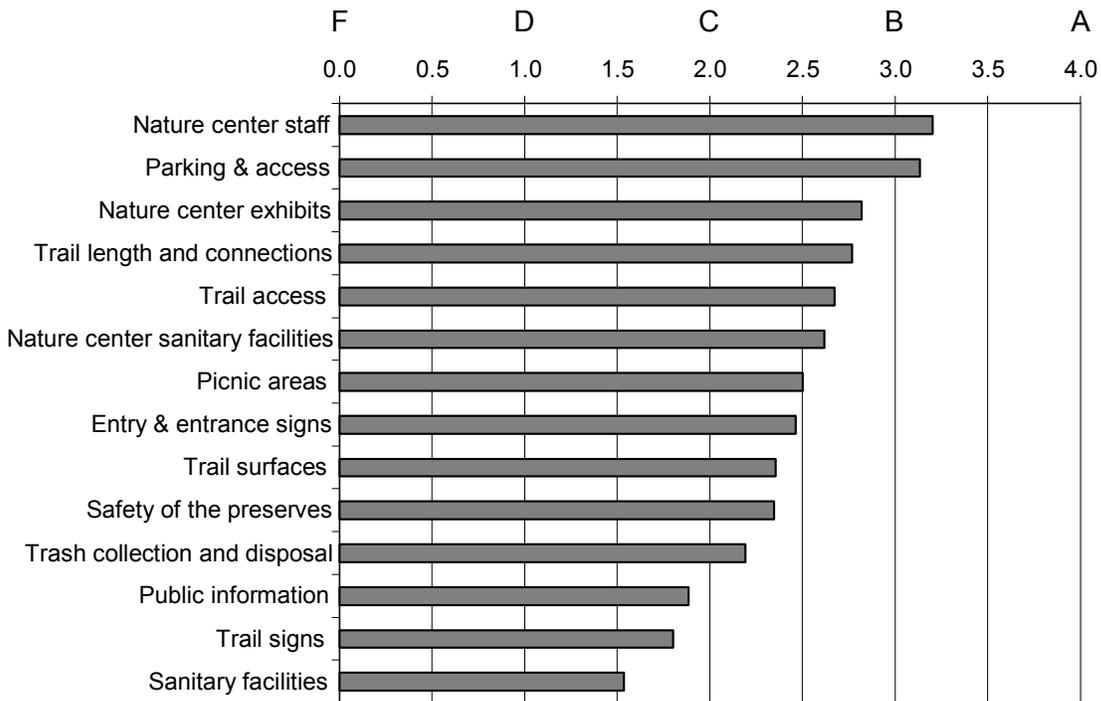
In the additional activities noted by our respondents, we find several activities that had more participants than did some of the activities included in our list. We conclude that the next version of this survey should add activities of observing nature, identifying plants, and monitoring birds or other taxa. While some respondents may have been willing to call these activities "scientific research" or "walking," many obviously were not.

Question 7 asked whether respondents use the undeveloped areas beyond the bike trails and picnic groves. Two hundred eighty-three respondents (72%) answered "yes," 98 (25%) answered "no," and 14 (4%) gave no answer. (These percentages add up to 101% due to rounding.)

Grades for facilities

Question 5 asked respondents to assign a grade of A, B, C, D, or F to 23 aspects of the facilities in the forest preserves. Figure 4 gives the averages for the facilities graded by at least 100 respondents. As a result, this figure omits grades for golf courses, pools, toboggan slides, and boat launches. (For details on these items, see the longer version of this report.) The overall average for all items is C+ (2.26 points on a 4-point scale).

Figure 4. Survey respondents' grades for facilities (averages)



For almost all items, there was high variability among respondents about the appropriate grades. The variability may reflect either differing standards or evaluations of different forest preserves. Our survey gives us little way of knowing which preserves the users had in mind when marking grades. The only clear agreement is that parking and access are average to excellent.

Nature-center staff earned the highest average grade of any feature of the preserves.

Six items received Ds or Fs from more than 50 respondents. These are:

- ◆ Sanitary facilities: 168 Ds and Fs
- ◆ Trail signs: 145 Ds and Fs
- ◆ Public information (maps, handouts, flyers): 132 Ds and Fs
- ◆ Trash collection: 99 Ds and Fs
- ◆ Trail surfaces: 76 Ds and Fs
- ◆ Entry and entrance signs: 71 Ds and Fs

On a more positive note, every item in the list except the sanitary facilities received at least 100 As and Bs, except where the total sample was less than 100. Parking and access

received the most As and Bs (281), followed by trail length and connections (216) and trail access points (213). Almost all items received more As and Bs than Ds and Fs.⁶⁸

Value of the forest preserves

Question 8 asked respondents to rate five aspects of the preserves as “extremely important,” “important,” or “not important.” We assigned these answers values of 20, 10, and 0, respectively. As examples of “recreation in natural setting,” the questionnaire listed canoeing and walking. As examples of “recreation in developed setting,” the questionnaire listed swimming and golf. Figure 5 and Table 3 show the responses. (Percentages in Table 3 add up to 101% in some cases due to rounding.)

Figure 5. Survey respondents’ importance ratings for aspects of the preserves

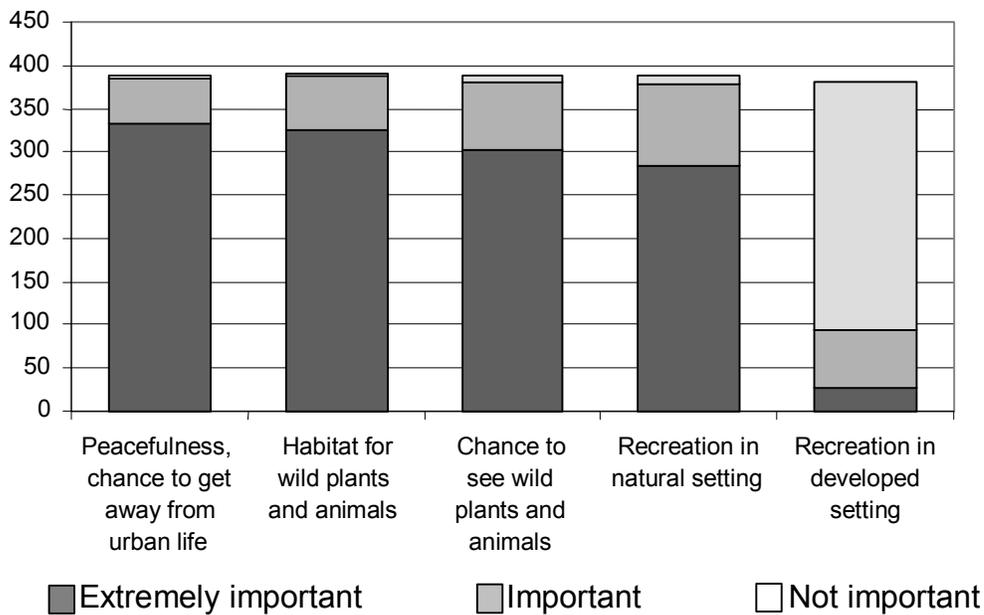


Table 3. Survey respondents’ importance ratings for aspects of the preserves

Aspect	Extremely important (20)	Important (10)	Not important (0)	No answer
Peacefulness, chance to get away from urban life	333 (84%)	53 (13%)	3 (1%)	6 (2%)
Habitat for wild plants and animals	327 (83%)	60 (15%)	3 (1%)	5 (1%)
Chance to see wild plants and animals	303 (77%)	79 (20%)	7 (2%)	6 (2%)
Recreation in natural setting	284 (72%)	94 (24%)	11 (3%)	6 (2%)
Recreation in developed setting	27 (7%)	68 (17%)	287 (73%)	13 (3%)

⁶⁸ The exceptions (items receiving more Ds and Fs than As and Bs) were sanitary facilities, trail signs, and public information.

The golfers ranked these aspects in the same order as did respondents as a whole. (Golfers gave recreation in a developed setting an average rating of 9.3 rather than the overall average of 3.2, but they still rated it least important of the five choices.) The numbers from pool users, of whom there were only four, are too small to be meaningful on their own.

The most striking finding is that the respondents consider recreation in a developed setting by far the least important aspect of the forest preserves. The respondents value peacefulness, natural habitat, and the ability to visit natural habitat very highly, but they do not count on the forest preserves to offer them golf courses or swimming pools. The difference in importance between natural values and developed recreational facilities had the strongest consensus of any topic in our survey.

As the District tries to make difficult choices about where to allocate its scarce resources, this finding supports those who suggest that pools and golf courses lie outside the District’s core mission. The results on this issue make it clear that the people understand the difference between parks and forest preserves and that they value the preserves primarily as places in which nature exists. It is noteworthy that “habitat for wild plants and animals” received more ratings of “extremely important” than did “chance to see wild plants and animals.” This suggests that people value simply knowing that there is a place for wildlife near where they live, even if they do not see the wildlife themselves.

Problems facing the District

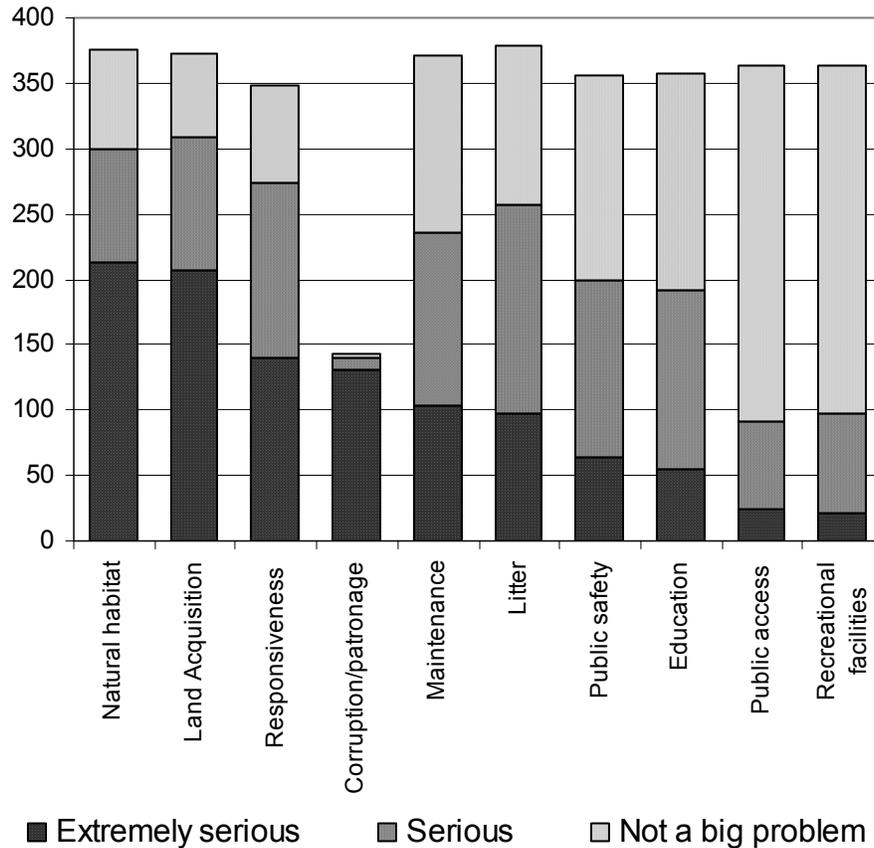
Question 9 listed ten areas that could be considered problems for the Forest Preserve District: The survey asked the respondents to rate each as “extremely serious,” “serious,” or “not a big problem.” We assigned these answers values of 20, 10, and 0, respectively. Table 4 below and Figure 6 on the next page give the overall results, ordered by the number of respondents who identified the problem as “extremely serious.”

Table 4. Seriousness of problems facing the Forest Preserve District: survey respondents’ ratings

	Extremely serious (20)	Serious (10)	Not a big problem (0)	No answer
Deterioration of natural habitat	213 (54%)	86 (22%)	77 (19%)	19 (5%)
Need to acquire more land	207 (52%)	102 (26%)	63 (16%)	23 (6%)
Lack of responsiveness or channels for public input	140 (35%)	134 (34%)	75 (19%)	46 (12%)
Corruption/patronage	131 (33%)	9 (2%)	3 (1%)	252 (64%)
Poor maintenance of facilities, trails, bridges, etc.	103 (26%)	132 (33%)	136 (35%)	24 (6%)
Litter	98 (25%)	159 (40%)	122 (31%)	16 (4%)
Public safety	64 (16%)	135 (34%)	157 (40%)	39 (10%)

	Extremely serious (20)	Serious (10)	Not a big problem (0)	No answer
Shortage of educational programs, tours, etc.	54 (14%)	138 (35%)	166 (42%)	37 (9%)
Lack of public access	25 (6%)	66 (17%)	273 (69%)	31 (8%)
Inadequate recreational facilities	21 (5%)	77 (19%)	266 (68%)	32 (8%)

Figure 6. Seriousness of problems facing the Forest Preserve District: survey respondents' ratings



One might expect respondents who engage in landscape restoration to rate the deterioration of natural habitat as a much more serious problem than do those who do not restore land. After all, the restoration volunteers spend large amounts of their free time trying to reverse habitat deterioration. Therefore, we separated the responses of those who checked “landscape restoration/litter clean-up” in the list of activities (119 respondents) from those who did not check that box (276 respondents). The differences between these two groups were not as large as one might imagine. The main differences between the groups were: (1) the former considered almost all issues more serious

problems than did the latter, and (2) the former considered public safety a less serious problem than did the latter.

For both restoration volunteers and others, the top two problems were deterioration of natural habitat and the need to acquire land. Non-volunteers put land acquisition slightly ahead of habitat deterioration, while volunteers put habitat deterioration slightly ahead of land acquisition.⁶⁹

The next most serious problem was lack of responsiveness or channels for public input. In their comments several respondents expressed frustration about the District's lack of response to their requests to remedy specific problems.

Patronage and corruption came in fourth in this ranking, but in an unusual way. Only 143 of the 395 respondents, a little more than a third, gave any response on this topic. In other words, almost two-thirds of the respondents do not know or have no opinion about whether corruption and patronage are a problem. Of those who do have an opinion, almost all consider the problem extremely serious. But most people reserved judgment on this question. In a ranking that totals the responses of "extremely serious" plus "serious," this issue comes in eighth out of ten.

Infrastructure maintenance and litter have received much attention in the media. About two-thirds of our respondents considered these problems either serious or extremely serious, and so our respondents agree that these matters warrant real concern. But they are not the top priority.

Public safety and education programs are topics on which the survey respondents were evenly split, with half considering the issues "extremely serious" or "serious" and half considering them "not a big problem" or giving no opinion.

Lack of public access and inadequate recreational facilities were of relatively little concern. The opinions on recreational facilities probably echo the respondents' view that recreation in a developed setting is not important for the District to provide. They may also echo the grades for picnic areas and trails, which were generally C and above. We are unwilling to draw any conclusions from this survey about the general public's views on the accessibility of the preserves. Since handing surveys to people in the preserves was a major method of distribution, our sample is undoubtedly biased towards people who can get to the preserves.

⁶⁹ Among non-volunteers, 116 rated the need to acquire land "extremely serious" and 85 rated it "serious"; 113 rated habitat deterioration "extremely serious" and 73 rated it "serious." Among volunteers, 91 rated the need to acquire land "extremely serious" and 17 rated it "serious"; 100 rated habitat deterioration "extremely serious" and 13 rated it "serious."

Respondents' comments

The questionnaire included an area for additional comments, and 209 respondents gave us their thoughts. Comments covered a broad range of topics, from specific problems in specific preserves through praise for various programs to suggestions or demands for changes in policy. We have reproduced a small selection of the comments here, choosing a set that embodies views expressed by many.

"In the 6-county Chicago area, the Cook Co. FPD is the largest landowner yet they are neglecting most of these important lands. Volunteers do most of the ecological management, the maintenance staff does about one percent of what should be done to keep the preserves clean and safe, and the county misuses funds which were supposed to be for land acquisition. The nature centers are old and need updating, there are practically no interpretive signs at any of the preserves, and the outhouses are dirty, smelly, and probably not up to code. The FPD puts tons of money into the maintenance of the golf courses and keeping patronage employees on the payroll, but neglects 95% of the natural lands it is responsible for managing. The situation is just appalling."

"I don't know what difference my participation in this survey will make, but I was happy to find out that someone wanted to know.

I treasure my time spent in the forest preserves. I get annoyed with people blasting music and disrupting the natural sounds.

I wish there were more police so the people that speed through the 15-mph limit would get punished and a reputation would develop to alleviate that problem. I wish the garbage cans were emptied more frequently. None of these things keep me away, but fixing any of them would only enhance my experiences."

"Camp Sagawau in Lemont provides excellent public educational opportunities and in my opinion should be the model for other educational programs for the county. They are doing a great job!

Please do more policing of the trails, to especially control off-leash dogs. I have encountered some very aggressive dogs while out on FPD trails in various places whose owners have no control over, since leash laws are apparently not enforced outside of the picnic areas. Maybe provide dog owners with additional 'dog activities' areas for them to exercise their dogs, but please really clamp down on off-leash dogs elsewhere. Thank you."

"The forest preserves in the Riverside/Lyons area are filled with people living there. These people approach you while in the forest and in some areas are very threatening. White Eagle is the most dangerous. These people are routinely drunk and aggressive and make it so tax-paying citizens are afraid to use the facilities their taxes help support."

“Need to come up with a mile marker system for locating people on bike trails, so Fire Dept. can find people faster when they call. ‘Heart attack near mile marker 7.5’ narrows the search and speeds treatment.”

“How can the preserves be safe? No patrolling.
Several years back I contacted the forest preserve about garbage solutions at the Hofmann Dam preserve, Lyons, Illinois. After several phone calls I gave up.”

“Most preserves are visibly deteriorating. Brush is taking over, ruining habitat. Wildflowers and other native plants are being crowded out by weeds, brush—‘alien’ species. This is obvious in nearly *every* preserve we drive by. Non-native plants are ruining the area’s natural treasures.”

“The tolerance by police of gay activity in Tinley Creek, Batchelor’s Grove and nearby forest preserves makes me feel very uncomfortable by myself & my family. I have seen males engaged in sex at Tinley Creek & police officers would do *nothing!*”

“Since I and my organizations have lots of interactions with the ‘staff,’ I want to express my feelings that most of the FPDCC staff try very, very hard to do a good job but they are overloaded and overworked with limited resources, i.e., the big problem is political and financial.”

“1. The trail maintenance in the Cook Co FP has *always* been very poor—this is in contrast to the DuPage Co FP who has meticulous trail maintenance. 2. I see the FP workers empty garbage cans but make no effort to pick up garbage laying around in the groves—I’ve spent countless hours cleaning up on my own, picking up garbage & glass. I’m not very happy spending my free time doing other people’s work. 3. I question the safety. I recently put in about 7–8 calls to the FP police concerning a perverted individual who likes to hang out in McCleary Springs. No effort or interest seemed to be placed in my notification of this person, so I just quit calling. 4. We are lucky to have the FP’s surrounding Chicago—they are beautiful and more effort needs to be put into preserving them.”

“Need to have noise levels. Too often loud music ruins the experience.”

“It would be a wonderful addition to mark native species when they are in their bloom season, identify trees and shrubs, as well as invasive foreign plants. It would be great to learn more about biodiversity through the forest preserves.”

“Re ‘need to acquire more land’: just take better care of what we have. If you read what other counties do to restore & maintain their preserves, we’re in sad shape. The Cook County Forest Preserves should be taken out of the control of the Cook County Commissioners & should be run by someone that *knows* more about the natural world.”

Recommendations

We recommend that the District begin to focus attention on the areas that the preserve users identify as problems and priorities.

Acquire land. More survey respondents identified this issue as a serious or extremely serious problem than any other issue. It is the subject of Chapter Three of this report.

Reverse the deterioration of natural habitat. Survey respondents gave this issue essentially the same ranking as the need to acquire land. Habitat is the subject of Chapter Four of this report.

Develop mechanisms for accepting and responding to suggestions and requests from the public. Seventy four percent of our respondents said that lack of responsiveness or channels for public input was a serious problem or an extremely serious problem. In their comments, several respondents gave examples of futile attempts to get the District to take relatively simple actions. The District should institute a system for recording requests from the public, following up on requests, and communicating with the requestor about the disposition of a request. One element of such a system might be meaningful rewards for employees who carry a request to a satisfactory conclusion. Many corporations have methods of measuring and improving customer service and customer satisfaction that the District could use as a model.

Focus attention on items rated unsatisfactory by many users. As discussed above, more than 50 survey respondents gave grades of D or F to:

- ◆ Sanitary facilities
- ◆ Trail signs
- ◆ Public information (maps, handouts, flyers)
- ◆ Trash collection
- ◆ Trail surfaces
- ◆ Entry and entrance signs

While this survey did not ask how these features of the preserves could be improved, it should not be difficult to ascertain the problems.

Chapter Three

Land Acquisition

Background

Land purchases

On April 20, 1916, the Illinois Supreme Court upheld the legality of the newly formed Forest Preserve District of Cook County, and the new Commissioners issued \$1,000,000 in bonds for land purchases. The new District President, Peter Reinberg, appointed a committee to recommend these purchases. Among the members of this committee were Dwight Perkins, Daniel Burnham, Jr., and Charles Wacker: prominent people who had worked so hard for the creation of the District. Their first report, issued in June of 1916, called for the purchase of about 1000 wooded acres northwest of Chicago. In September the District bought its first 500 acres and created the Deer Grove Forest Preserve.⁷⁰

The early years were difficult, despite the District's orderly efforts at obtaining proper appraisals and following the advice of Messrs. Perkins and others. Condemnation proceedings were frequent—there were 30 by the end of 1919⁷¹—and the District had to broaden its legislation to allow for the purchase of such non-wooded areas as the Skokie Valley. However, progress was made and, until recently, the District regularly bought land, as shown in Table 5 and Figure 7.

⁷⁰ *Message of the Forest Preserve Commissioners, 1917*, p. 4.

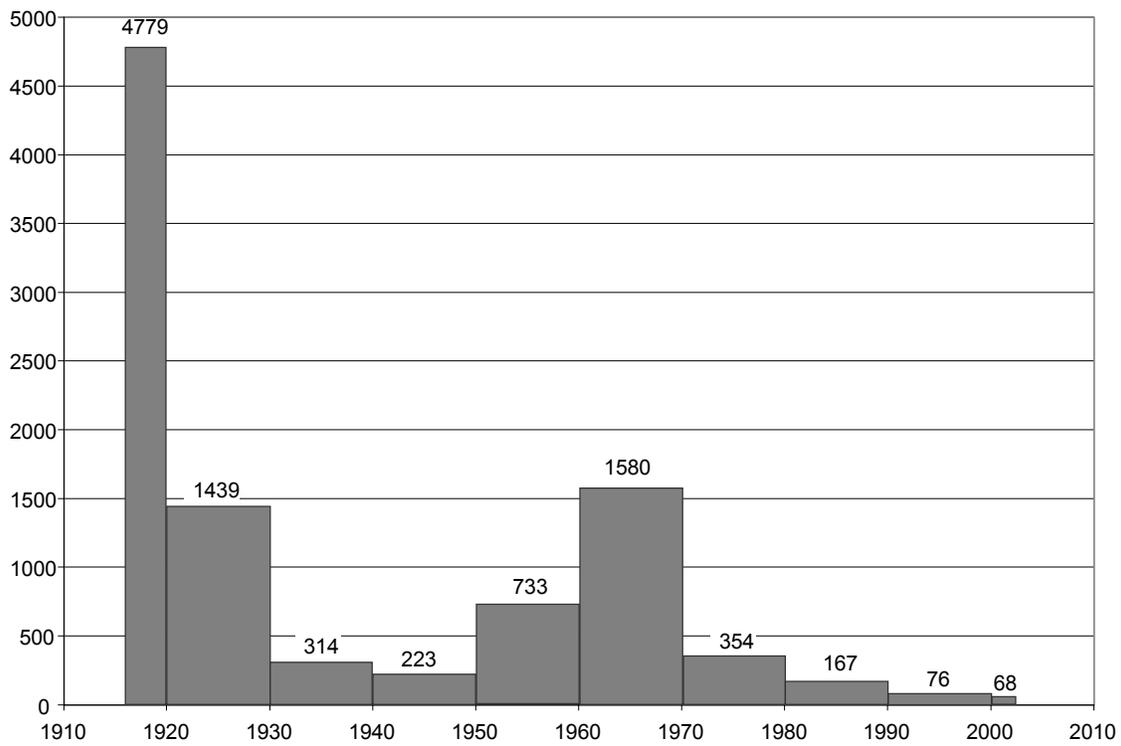
⁷¹ *Annual Message of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, 1920*, p. 6.

LAND ACQUISITION

Table 5. Land acquisition, 1916–2001

Time Period	Amt. Purchased (acres)	Total Holdings (acres)	Acq. Rate (acres/year)
1916–1919	19,115	19,115	4,779
1920–1929	14,389	33,504	1,439
1930–1939	3,140	36,644	314
1940–1949	2,230	38,874	223
1950–1959	7,332	46,206	733
1960–1969	15,798	62,004	1,580
1970–1979	3,537	65,541	354
1980–1989	1,668	67,209	167
1990–1999	755	67,964	76
2000–2001	137	68,101	68

Figure 7. Land acquisition rates by decade, 1916–2001 (acres per year)



Additional purchases are still in the works:⁷²

Table 6. Efforts underway to acquire land

Site	Approx. Acreage	Status
Wentworth Prairie	40	Working with Corlands
Thorn Creek/Union Pacific	10	In negotiation
Sagawau Canyon Addition	10	In negotiation
Spring Lake Greenway	200	Delayed due to lawsuits
Tampier/McGinnis	56	In negotiation
Radio Unica	15	In negotiation
Wolf Road Prairie Addition	15	In negotiation
Thorn Creek Greenway	115	In negotiation
TOTAL:	461 acres	

The District's proposed 2002 budget shows that the District had received \$1,687,500 in IDNR grant money for the Thorn Creek and Spring Lake Greenways.⁷³

The Land Acquisition Plan

In June 1994 the District published its *Land Acquisition Plan*. However, it was not until July 2000 that the District formally adopted this plan. Between these dates was an intense but futile effort to get the plan out of committee and passed.

The *Land Acquisition Plan* is a well-written and easily understood piece and the first of its kind in District history. A massive effort in cooperation with many other agencies, advocacy groups and citizens, the *Land Acquisition Plan* cost over \$100,000 to prepare a decade ago—sadly, less than half the amount the District has just spent on an auditing report to try to correct its current fiscal problems.

The plan noted the central problem facing the District:

The rapid pace of urban development in Cook County and the region continues to close the window of opportunity to preserve our remaining lands for public benefit. The link to our natural heritage is slipping away every day we wait to expand the forest preserve system.⁷⁴

In its inventory of open space in the county, the *Land Acquisition Plan* targeted potential new forest preserves “according to known bio-diversity data and other considerations such as greenway linkages, proximity to existing preserves, and relation to population centers within the County.”⁷⁵

⁷² Sources: Friends of the Forest Preserves; Correspondence, John Stroger, Sept. 15, 2000; discussions with District staff.

⁷³ 2002 *Executive Budget Recommendation*, p. 103.

⁷⁴ *Land Acquisition Plan*, p 4.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

LAND ACQUISITION

The District's *Land Acquisition Plan* estimated there were about 40,000 acres of vacant land left in Cook County in 1994.⁷⁶ Understandably, not all this land would be suitable for forest preserve purposes. But an internal District memo of that year specifically targeted about 6,500 acres for potential District purchase.⁷⁷ To date, less than 1000 acres of this, or 15%, has been or is scheduled to be bought.⁷⁸ Much of the rest has vanished to development.

Interestingly, the plan's authors also did a good bit of public outreach, meeting with over 200 individuals, both lay and professional. They concluded:

- ◆ The District had a “good base of resident and community leadership support.”
- ◆ Residents were surprised that District property taxes constituted only one percent of their total property tax bill.
- ◆ Residents supported acquiring more open space, even by raising or instituting user fees.
- ◆ People supported District expansion for conservation, especially to benefit education.
- ◆ While some favored increased fees rather than increased taxes to pay for new lands, all felt the distinct need to develop a “strong message” as to the benefit of buying new land.
- ◆ The District needed to increase publicity on its use opportunities, especially among city youth.⁷⁹

One wonders what the authors would have thought, had they known their final remarks were never to be acted on:

This *Land Acquisition Plan* provides a foundation to carry forward a renewed land conservation agenda for Cook County. It offers a comprehensive method to identify open land, evaluate property, find ways to secure land as future forest preserve, and develop public and legislative support to finance the forest preserve agenda.⁸⁰

The problem? A long-time land conservation specialist in the non-profit sector, who knows the District well, puts it bluntly:

There is less than zero leadership at the [District] Board—no vision, no appreciation. Most municipalities showcase their park districts in the

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁷⁷ Confidential; 1994.

⁷⁸ Stroger, correspondence, Sept. 15, 2000.

⁷⁹ *Land Acquisition Plan*, p. 8.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

public eye; why not Cook County? The current Commissioners don't hold a candle to the leadership in the District's earlier years.⁸¹

Bond referendum

To implement the *Land Acquisition Plan* fully, the District would need additional funds. The obvious route to obtaining such funds would be to ask the voters for the money. The Southwest Council of Mayors urged the purchase of additional open space in January 1998.⁸² Later that year the *Daily Herald* noted:

For the first time, citizen groups are organizing for a \$100 million tax referendum so Cook County's forest preserves can be expanded. About 20 groups have joined the new Friends of the Forest Preserves in urging the Cook County board to put a countywide tax referendum on the ballot in April 1999 or March 2000.⁸³

The Friends of the Forest Preserves estimated that the referendum, if passed, would increase taxes on a \$150,000 home by about \$5.20 per year. Commissioners Schumann and Sutker had submitted a resolution to the Board for \$100,000,000 in bonds for the March 2, 1998, election.

Nevertheless, to this day the District's Board has taken no action on proposing a referendum or carrying out the proposals of the *Land Acquisition Plan*, despite some Commissioners' strong support for land purchases. The Board's inaction is perhaps best summed up in a 1998 editorial in the conservative *Crain's Chicago Business*:

In fact, more than 40 million people visit Forest Preserve properties each year, making them one of the most highly-used services provided by Cook County government. Yet there is one troubling fact: Even though demand for open space is growing, the inventory is shrinking and land prices are rising.

Against that backdrop, the Forest Preserve and Cook County Board President John Stroger have been embarrassingly slow in efforts to add to the county's open space holdings.

It has been four years since the land acquisition plan was drafted, but little has been done to act on it. Meanwhile, a hot real estate market is driving up costs, and the competition for open parcels is growing.... It's

⁸¹ Anonymous interview, February 14, 2001.

⁸² Southwest Council of Mayors, Resolution 98-01, January 29, 1998.

⁸³ *Daily Herald*, October 8, 1998.

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time for Mr. Stroger to see the forest through the trees and back the land acquisition referendum.⁸⁴

The *Chicago Sun-Times* also noted in 1998 that

while collar counties—DuPage, Will, Kane, Lake, and McHenry—are aggressively adding significant amounts to their forest preserve acreage, Cook and its Forest Preserve district commissioners are pretty much sitting on the sidelines watching land prices shoot skyward.⁸⁵

Other counties were indeed busy, both locally and nationally. A poll conducted in 2000 by the Land Trust Alliance (a national group representing over 1,000 private land conservation groups throughout the country) found that 81% nationwide wanted to see the environment protected, and that 77% wanted tax levy money to buy more open space. In 2000, there were 209 ballot initiatives for this effort nationwide; 84% of them passed.⁸⁶

Locally, in the last five years, four outlying forest preserve districts have successfully passed \$280 million in open-space bonds by referendum. If one includes the McHenry County Conservation District (not technically a forest preserve district, but still in the land preservation business), the number jumps to nearly \$350 million:⁸⁷

1997	DuPage	\$75,000,000
1999	Will	\$70,000,000
	Kane	\$70,000,000
	Lake	\$55,000,000
2000	Lake	\$85,000,000
	McHenry	\$68,500,000
Total		\$348,500,000

DuPage County alone has spent \$300 million on open space in the last 15 years.⁸⁸

As a result of these publicly approved funds, all outlying counties have been adding thousands of acres to their holdings. The *Chicago Sun-Times* opined in 1999:

Preserving and expanding green space is an appropriate public policy issue for voters to address in a referendum....These referendums afford voters the opportunity to make informed decisions about the quality of life that will accompany development in their communities.

⁸⁴ *Crain's Chicago Business*, November 2, 1998.

⁸⁵ *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 4, 1998.

⁸⁶ Trust for Public Lands' presentation, Morton Arboretum, March 9, 2000.

⁸⁷ Source: Individual Districts.

⁸⁸ Robert Schillerstrom, Chair, DuPage Co. Board, March 9, 2000.

Our only regret is that Cook County Board President John Stroger has not offered Cook County voters the chance to decide whether to authorize spending to expand the county's current 67,000 acres of forest preserves.⁸⁹

The prime opportunity to act on the 1994 *Land Acquisition Plan* has been squandered—a dereliction of duty by the District's President and its Board, in our opinion—and is now farther away from fulfillment than ever, due to a difficult national economy and the disarray of District finances.

The Current Situation: Standing Still or Moving Backward

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the District has acquired just 137 acres of land in the last two years, the lowest acquisition rate in its history. In some ways, the District has been going the opposite way of increasing its land holdings.

As discussed in Chapter One (pp. 22–22) the District reduced its land holdings through the controversial 1999 sale of land to Rosemont. Proponents of this sale had argued, in part, that no one even used this land. But the Citizens' Advisory Committee foresaw this situation when writing the District document *Land Policy* in 1946:

Arguments to the effect that the Forest Preserve District holds lands which are not in intensive use actually fail to recognize the intent and the purpose of the holdings as described by the statute. These forests and meadows give spaciousness to the metropolitan scene where it is badly needed; they serve to dress the appearance of the entire region, to give dignity to and support the pride of the localities in which they lie.⁹⁰

If there are those who feel that the District caved into the powerful politics of Rosemont in its recent land sale, a review of *Land Policy* should provide some backbone. A half-century ago, village requests such as Rosemont's were summarily dismissed. So were the requests of sports clubs, school districts, the American Legion, Amvets, the VFW, the Illinois Armory Board, and a host of others. Oak Park even wanted Cummings Square, the site of the District's headquarters, for automobile parking. The University of Illinois sought the 300-acre Miller Meadow for a campus, to no avail. The Illinois Toll Highway Commission, planning its new roads in 1954, saw District lands largely as free rights-of-way, proposing for instance to bisect the 10,000-acre Palos Preserve. Here the District fought the state to a standstill, yielding only a fraction of the land originally sought. Even the federal government, which during World War II emergencies had been given

⁸⁹ *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 9, 1999.

⁹⁰ Letter included in *Land Policy* from Edward Eagle Brown, June 6, 1946.

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temporary use of 1,100 acres “for a highly secret war project” (the atomic bomb), had to return all the land.⁹¹

District President John Duffy summarized *Land Policy* best in his undated foreword:

The Board of Commissioners is aware that to give way to well-meant demands for allocation of its lands to municipalities and other organizations would be to destroy the true purpose for which the District was created. The Board realizes that our forests are a great cultural resource immediately available to all people and that under well-kept policies these forests may be used and enjoyed in perpetuity by the people of the County of Cook.⁹²

To date, the proposed benefits of the sale to Rosemont appear to be accruing to the District, though slowly: the District has purchased about 50% of the roughly 116 acres designated as the Tampier-McGinnis greenway.

The District appears to be losing land in other ways, too: through encroachment and through permanent leases.

A review of internal District memos in the mid-1990s found an employee observing “15 or more acres of District land” under encroachment on one site alone:

Upon checking the site it is apparent that almost every homeowner...has encroached onto District property. One homeowner has developed the entire lot width to a depth of over 200' with plantings, gardens, [and a] volleyball court complete with wood frame....Other homeowners have fences, swings, sheds, and gardens on District property. One person has installed “No Trespassing” signs as well.⁹³

We do not know whether these and other encroachments noted in these memos have been remedied.

Permanent leases can effectively give the land away to other entities without any sale. The District accumulated a 3.4-million-ton hill of limestone rock in Linne Woods as a result of the 1993–1996 Deep Tunnel project in that area. Under pressure from Morton Grove, and over the objections of General Superintendent Nevius, the District built a temporary haul road over its land to remove this material, rather than using existing public streets. This diversion apparently greatly alleviated traffic on nearby Narragansett Avenue, so much so that at end of the project local residents did not want the traffic back: “It’s made the quality of life so fabulous,” noted one. At its July 2000

⁹¹ *Land Policy*, p. 17.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁹³ Confidential personal communication about a District memo written in 1996.

Real Estate Committee meeting, the District sold Morton Grove (for \$75,000) a permanent highway easement over this temporary road, thus removing this land from conservation. The District's attorney, however, explained that title to the land would remain with the District, so the matter did not have to be reviewed by the state legislature. As a Commissioner noted at the time, "this is tantamount to giving the property away."⁹⁴

Perhaps the Commissioners might have taken a different position had they read their predecessors' opinion from 50 years earlier:

For *essential* highway needs...required in the interests of *all* the public, the District may accede to such [requests], in Court, or otherwise, on the basis of *full, fair market value* of the property acquired.⁹⁵ (emphasis ours)

A former employee put it succinctly:

Natural integrity was not the priority from the top. It was being run for short-term political efforts with very little sense of mission. There is a sense by a lot of municipalities that if this is land they want and try really hard to get it, they can—and I think that's been shown recently.⁹⁶

Today John Thill, a resident near this road, notes that both Morton Grove and the Morton Grove Park District are angling for more District land. "In my view, they were definitely emboldened by their success in getting this road."⁹⁷

Options for Moving Forward

Land purchases

The District's 2002 budget includes \$18,000,000 for land acquisition. Currently the District's efforts to buy land appear scattered, responsibility being shared by the planners and lawyers. Neither profession has all the required skills for this task, particularly in the complex real estate world of Cook County.

The District needs a land acquisition specialist, a person who combines an understanding of the principles of land conservation, negotiating (deal-making), and a basic knowledge of property law. Most of the region's private land conservation groups retain such people, as do several of the outlying forest preserve districts. Lake County, for instance, hired former Corlands Director Tom Hahn in 1999. Since then, that district's

⁹⁴ Notes taken at District's July 27, 2000, Real Estate Committee meeting. See also *Chicago Tribune*: "About As Low As One Can Get: Deep Tunnel Makes Mountain of Trouble," June 15, 1993, and "Residents Fight to Keep Blacktop in Sea of Green," August 5, 1999.

⁹⁵ *Proceedings*, Board of Commissioners of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, June 1946.

⁹⁶ Anonymous interview, May 14, 2001.

⁹⁷ John Thill, interview with Stephen Christy, February 5, 2002.

holdings have been increased by over 10%, including the completion of one deal that had stalled for 20 years and the rapid agreement of another with an international corporation.⁹⁸

The Forest Preserve District of Kane County, at 9600 acres only a fraction of the size of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, retains two land acquisition specialists for this work.⁹⁹

Another option is to contract out this work. Will County, at 16,000 acres, has both Corlands and The Conservation Fund under contract to do all its land negotiations. Mike Pasteris, Director of the Will County forest preserves notes, “They have three times more people to do this than we do, and it is very cost-effective at \$30–40,000 per year. It also removes the stigma of government meddling directly in people’s land.”¹⁰⁰

Perhaps the oldest such partnership is the one between The Conservation Foundation and the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County. Founded in 1972 as the Forest Foundation of DuPage County, the group supported DuPage’s efforts in early land acquisition. Over the last decade, this group has expanded and now offers land acquisition services to DuPage, Kendall, Will, and Kane Counties, having completed six purchases for Will and Kane in the last year alone.¹⁰¹

Alternatives to land purchases

There are several ways to preserve land. All these are based on fairly obvious practices, ably described in the District’s *Land Acquisition Plan* and summarized below. The District’s enabling statute primarily focuses on outright land purchase, which the District accomplishes through methods ranging from fee-simple purchase to tax scavenger sales. The District’s founders, however, did not foresee the need to consider other methods of property preservation that have arisen more recently. The District needs to encourage these methods, in addition to radically increasing the rate of traditional fee-simple purchases.

- ◆ *Gifts:* People do donate land for conservation. An early District acquisition was the 83 acres given by Mrs. McCormick in 1926 for the Brookfield Zoo.
- ◆ *Grant programs:* Starting in the 1960s, the District has been aggressively seeking these funds, and we commend the District’s Grant Coordinator Cathy Geraghty for her “haul” of nearly \$5 million in 2001.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Tom Hahn, interviews with Stephen Christy, December 6, 2000, June 10, 2001.

⁹⁹ John Duerr, General Superintendent, interview with Stephen Christy, April 25, 2000.

¹⁰⁰ Mike Pasteris, Director, interview with Stephen Christy, March 15, 2001.

¹⁰¹ Conservation Foundation, *Annual Report*, FY 2000–2001.

¹⁰² 2002 *Executive Budget Recommendation*, p. 103.

- ◆ *Leases:* The District does engage in some of this activity, but a recent report suggests this effort could be increased greatly, particularly with the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District.¹⁰³
- ◆ *Public-sector partnerships:* This is a common land preservation method wherein the District can gain additional protection over properties owned by other agencies. An example would be Orland Park's recent purchase of part of the proposed Tampier-McGinnis Greenway for local park purposes. The District could seek agreement from Orland Park that the land would remain permanent open space.
- ◆ *Public/private partnerships:* This is a promising but underused area at the moment, and it includes working with both landowners and nonprofit, private land conservation groups. The District is negotiating a developer donation as part of the Spring Creek Greenway, but this is stalled in a lawsuit between the developer and local village over the disposition of the rest of the land.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, the District will soon receive, through the efforts of its private partner Corlands, 115 acres to be added to its Thorn Creek holdings.¹⁰⁵
- ◆ *Conservation easements:* While not widely used by the District, these can be a tool of great potential if used carefully. DuPage has had trouble with these; recently a local park district built an ice arena on one by mistake.¹⁰⁶
- ◆ *Management agreements:* Often these "buy time" for later acquisition, since a landowner may be encouraged to properly maintain his or her land, leading to better stewardship, care, and the development of public appreciation for the time when monies may be needed to make its preservation permanent.¹⁰⁷

The next sections discuss opportunities currently available to the District in two of these areas: public-sector partnerships and public/private partnerships. Across the board, both public and private groups attempting to assist the District with its land acquisition efforts express frustration. Yet this is the single most fertile area to develop, particularly in the complex arena of Cook County real estate.

Opportunities in Chicago

At the time of its founding (1916), the District was already too late to effectively buy large tracts within the Chicago city limits. Much of the land within the city, recommended for preservation by Perkins, Jensen and others as early as 1894, was gone. Acquisition focused instead on large tracts in rural areas, with the expectation that the

¹⁰³ See *Rediscovering Our Mission*, Commissioner Quigley and staff, 2002, p. 10 and Appendix 2.

¹⁰⁴ Dave Kircher, Chief Landscape Architect, conversation with Stephen Christy, January 21, 2002.

¹⁰⁵ *Openlander*, Summer 2001.

¹⁰⁶ Dan Gooch, Executive Director, interview with Stephen Christy, February 15, 2001.

¹⁰⁷ *Land Acquisition Plan*, pp. 19–20.

park districts in Chicago, then 22 in number, would pick up the urban “slack.” The District did do an admirable job, however, in preserving the fast-vanishing Chicago River valley in Chicago proper, buying land down to Foster Avenue, and in purchasing Beaubien and Dan Ryan Woods on the south side.

Forest preserves in Chicago and the city-county connections never really occurred as envisioned in the original plan, though the 1994 *Land Acquisition Plan* resurrected and updated the idea of connecting Chicago to the preserves. Current examples in other counties give reason to believe both could be accomplished, however, given the will.

- ◆ Between 1975 and 1995, Lake County assembled a 558-acre forest preserve in a largely urban area between Waukegan and North Chicago. In the process, it bought and demolished over 20 houses. The Greenbelt Forest Preserve is now heavily used by the Hispanic and black populations in that area.¹⁰⁸
- ◆ Will County’s Mike Pasteris notes he will do “whatever it takes to get the job done.” Greenways are an important part of this agency’s mission; respondents to a 1997 needs assessment gave them first priority to provide access between preserves. This district partnered with Joliet, a highly urbanized area, to create the Joliet Junction Trail, 60% of which is within the city limits. Will County and Joliet split the responsibility for getting the land; each put in \$200,000, which was matched by an IDNR grant. The two public bodies again partnered to create the Rock River Corridor. Pasteris has no qualms about buying and owning small parcels of land, if they accomplish the goals of his Forest Preserve District.¹⁰⁹

This kind of “out-of-the-box” thinking will require some changes at the District. Efforts such as these would also take intense cooperation between the District and a multitude of Chicago agencies, including the Chicago Park District. In some cases, the District may need to reassess its reservations about buying parcels that are not large, adjacent to existing District lands, or environmentally perfect. The head of CitySpace says, “We are fully aware that potential District acquisitions in Chicago have environmental problems, and we are ready to help the District with experts from the IDNR and Chicago’s DOE.”

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Cemeteries

Sadly, the District has missed opportunities to purchase even the last of the clean, unused lands in Chicago: cemeteries. Ironically, these long-time holders of open space have become increasingly bottom-line oriented in the last decade as they have experienced the wave of consolidations and mergers prevalent in the rest of the

¹⁰⁸ Jerrold Soesbe, former Director of the Lake County Forest Preserve District, interview with Stephen Christy, January, 24, 2002.

¹⁰⁹ Mike Pasteris, interview with Stephen Christy, March 15, 2001. Interview, Mike Pasteris, March 15, 2001.

¹¹⁰ Kathy Dickhut, Assistant Commissioner, Chicago Department of Planning and Development, interview with Stephen Christy, October 23, 2001.

country's business economy. The District had an opportunity to add a large cemetery parcel to LaBagh Woods in the early 1990s; a shopping center and condominiums now cover that land. Rosehill Cemetery, once locally controlled but now part of a Texas-based conglomerate, still seeks to sell 25 acres of open space at its northwest corner; this is another opportunity. Just recently, owners of yet another cemetery announced their interest to sell for development.¹¹¹

CitySpace

On a positive note, the District should be commended for its participation in *CitySpace: An Open-Space Plan for Chicago* created by the City of Chicago, the Chicago Park District, the Chicago Public Schools, and the District. The plan was released in 1998. In it, President Stroger commented:

By working together in partnership with the City of Chicago and the Chicago Park District, we can meet the challenge of preserving and protecting more open space for the residents of Chicago, and all who enjoy nature's bounties.¹¹²

The report notes that the District owns 3,683 acres of forest preserves in Chicago proper, or about 5% of its holdings. Overall, however, Chicago ranks as 18th out of 20 major U.S. cities in terms of open space acres per 1,000 residents.¹¹³ *CitySpace* is quite specific in its action plan for the District:

The Forest Preserve District should target Chicago projects as a priority for land acquisition, ecological restoration, facility development and wetland mitigation....Priority projects have been identified within Chicago that will advance the FPDCC's mission and land acquisition goals. Greater efforts should be made to apply FPDCC funds to projects and programs in Chicago, where the majority of Cook County's population resides.¹¹⁴

Once again, however, reality appears to be different. *CitySpace's* Kathy Dickhut noted that "since 1998, the City of Chicago and the Chicago Park District have dramatically increased acquisitions within the city by working together to target grants and lands for preservation. However, besides the Burnham Greenway, the District has not participated." She believes that the District's criteria for land acquisition are too tight for remaining land in Chicago. But "The State of Illinois is buying and owning land in Chicago, and we are looking for the District to do so as well." When asked what the District might do to improve its participation, she responded, "The City is ready to work

¹¹¹ "Jewish Cemetery May Become Condos," *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 9, 2002.

¹¹² *CitySpace*, p. 10.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

with the District as we do with the Chicago Park District, providing matching funds, clean-up funds, and the like.”¹¹⁵

Calumet Region

A current draft of the *Calumet Open Space Reserve*, a product of Chicago’s Department of Planning and Development, shows the District holding 465 acres within the target site and proposes the District preserve an additional 443 acres.¹¹⁶ The crafters of this plan are more than willing to work with the District; in fact, “the City of Chicago has already targeted land for eventual long-term ownership by the District. We hope they’ll come on board.”¹¹⁷

Northeastern Illinois Regional Greenways Plan

The District was a financial sponsor of the *Northeastern Illinois Regional Greenways and Trails Plan*, prepared by the Northeastern Illinois Regional Planning Commission and Openlands Project and adopted by NIPC in June of 1997 with District backing.¹¹⁸ This plan envisioned strong District efforts at preserving additional open space in the area. Ders Anderson, Director of Openlands’ Greenways Division since 1994, has had mixed reactions to working with the District:

The greenway and trail desires of the various forest preserve districts were incorporated as a major part of the original plan. The District’s *Land Acquisition Plan* was well thought-out and absorbed into the regional plan in total. At Openlands we track land availability fairly well, and it’s been difficult over the past years to watch the District lose opportunity after opportunity to acquire lands as advised by their own plan.

But in two circumstances the District has done a commendable job. In 1995, after being initially reluctant to participate, the District became the lead agency in the Burnham Greenway Task Force, which was successful in acquiring and developing a bike trail on approximately eight miles of abandoned Conrail right-of-way in Chicago and the Calumet area. And in 2001, the District began acquiring a greenway along Thorn Creek to connect its River Oaks Golf Course to its large Thorn Creek holdings south of I-80.

Anderson sums up the District’s current land acquisition problems in discussing the Grand Illinois Trail, announced by the IDNR in 1995:

The District is a critical player in achieving this large project, and admittedly has some very difficult and expensive trail connections to

¹¹⁵ Dickhut, interview, October 23, 2001.

¹¹⁶ *Calumet Open Space Reserve*, Dept. of Planning and Development, discussion draft, April 5, 2001.

¹¹⁷ Dickhut, interview, October 23, 2001.

¹¹⁸ *Northeastern Illinois Regional Greenways Plan*, adopted June 19, 1997.

make. But the District represents by far the largest population and tax base in the Grand Illinois Trail and has lagged for years in completing some very key trail connections. In just a few more years most of this trail system will be completed, but hikers and bikers in the Cook County portion will still be forced to use busy streets in more than a few locations. I estimate that at the District's current rate of progress, it will be at least another 10–15 years to fill in all the Cook County gaps in the Grand Illinois Trail.¹¹⁹

Public-private partnerships

The District, as mentioned above, has worked with Corlands. In the last five years, several other nationally known private land conservation groups have established offices in Chicago. Chief among these are the Trust for Public Land and The Conservation Fund. Neither, to date, has worked with the District.

Long-term partnerships do exist, though these are the results of decades of effort. The Save the Prairie Society has a quarter-century relationship with the District focused on preserving the Wolf Road Prairie. The Save the Prairie Society was chartered in 1975 but, at the time of the arrival of current executive director Valerie Spale, had purchased only five of the 600 lots comprising the ground proposed to be saved. She was both shocked and determined: "I was an upstart who knew nothing."

Describing the work in hindsight, Spale stated the group adopted a "phased protection approach." Over a span of twelve years the District and Illinois Department of Natural Resources bought sixteen blocks of a 1920s subdivision of an original prairie, platted and sold but never built on. The original land having been preserved, the group went on to advocate the preservation of a 60-acre buffer area. The results today show the tenacity of this organization:

- ◆ IDNR purchase of sixteen acres for \$4.5 million
- ◆ Save the Prairie Society purchase of eight acres
- ◆ District intent to apply for an OSLAD grant for purchase of sixteen acres
- ◆ Fifteen acres currently in court over a dispute with a developer
- ◆ Five acres yet to be decided

The complexity of this long transaction shows the dedication of this group, including its political clout and permanence. "We have a unique and different situation. We have a good balance: volunteers conduct restoration activities, we are involved with restoring a building on the site as a nature center, and we do educational and public service tours. We own buffer property to the Wolf Road Prairie."¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Ders Anderson, interview with Stephen Christy, December 14, 2001.

¹²⁰ Valerie Spale, Executive Director, Save the Prairie Society, interview with Stephen Christy, January 23, 2002.

The District needs to develop and cooperate with more allied groups like this.

The Citizens' Advisory Committee, once a powerful force in setting and maintaining District policy, has not met in three years and is "moribund," according to one member. "It is toothless, with no influence anymore."¹²¹

Yet advocacy groups play a major role in other counties. As mentioned above, The Conservation Foundation began its life as an advocacy group for the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County, and it continues to help that and other districts in land acquisition efforts.

Lake County has perhaps the most effective advocacy groups. Of the several regularly helping that district, the chief one is the Partnership Council, a group of influential citizens that meets two to three times a year to provide that district input on operations and budget matters. The work of this group was crucial in the successful passage of two land purchase referenda in the last six years.¹²²

In 1998, the Friends of the Forest Preserves formed in Cook County, for the purpose of supporting the District and its mission.

Recommendations

Purchase land with available funds. The District should spend the \$18,000,000 allocated for land acquisition in the 2002 budget to buy land. The still-available land identified in the 1994 *Land Acquisition Plan* should be the highest priority.

Hire or contract with a qualified land acquisition specialist. Such specialists have contributed greatly to the success of surrounding counties in acquiring land for forest preserves. Acquisition in Cook County presents equal or greater challenges.

Radically increase partnering efforts for land preservation. The District should partner with the city of Chicago, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, and other agencies to secure additional natural lands.

Increase the physical presence of the District within Chicago, including lands identified in the *CitySpace* plan.

Include yearly acreage totals of lands purchased, newly leased, or newly under conservation easement in each annual budget. This information would help to keep the public informed about the status of District holdings. To its credit, the Board has just

¹²¹ Al Pyott, interview with Stephen Christy, January 18, 2002.

¹²² Interviews, Andrew Kimmel, Director of Public Affairs, November 29, 2001; George Covington, Council member, December 3, 2001.

adopted budget amendments directing the District to include acres purchased in each budget.

Where to go from here? Much expansion of thought is needed. Again, Dwight Perkins' enigmatic quote: "We have a right to dream—if we are wide awake dreaming it."¹²³

¹²³ *Chicago Times-Herald*, undated (as to day/month) clipping, 1904.

Chapter Four

Land Management

What Is a Forest?

The heart of the District's mission from the time of its founding was to "restore, restock, protect, and preserve" its holdings.¹²⁴ Dwight Perkins, Jens Jensen, and other District founders envisioned that the forest preserves would maintain wild nature as part of the Chicago region's evolving culture. It was a vision of nature for people—and yet the view of the nature that was being conserved was a profound one. Consider some of the language in the District's first publication:

Great forests of oaks and maples and hickory and elm, inhabited by every known specie of animal and bird life—those extinct are being revived—and carpeted with a variety of flowers and fauna worthy of a horticulturist's dream, are found here.¹²⁵

That 1918 report also sought to define "forest preserve," a new concept on this continent. It saw its roots in the classic English forest preserve, in which the word "forest" was used to denote, not a stand of trees, but a preserve of nature. As that report pointed out the word "forest" derives originally from Latin: *foris*, meaning "out of doors." It quoted Sir John Manwood, who in his *Lawes of the Forest* (1598) defined the classic English forest preserve as a

certain territory of wooded grounds, fruitful pastures, privileged for wild beasts and fowls of forest, chase, and warren, to rest and abide in, in the safe protection of the king for his princely delight and pleasure.¹²⁶

In updating the definition, the report invoked the more modern and utilitarian language of Gifford Pinchot, the first director of the U.S. Forest Service:

Forestry has principally to do with the supply of wood for various purposes, with the maintenance of water flow in streams, with the prevention of floods, and with the supply of forage for grazing animals within the forest.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ See enabling legislation; also quoted more fully later in this chapter.

¹²⁵ *Report of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County*, 1918, p. 27.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

Two years later the District's first president, Peter Reinberg, wrote in his last annual message to the Commissioners:

The spreading woodland and sward of our Forest Preserve are attaining the prime objective which inspired its creation—resort for healthful relaxation and recreation by all classes of our people to this great natural playground.¹²⁸

These summaries convey the fullness of the forest preserve concept. As envisioned by the District's founders, the preserves encompass bird and beast, trees and grass, water management and public use. As one would expect in a democracy, the pleasure of the king has been replaced by the welfare of the public. The word "forest" is used, somewhat confusingly, in two senses—"a community of trees" and "a reserve of nature." But when the word is used in the context of "a forest preserve," the language and illustrations of the District's early publications clearly include the full natural landscape of Illinois. The carpets of flowers, fruitful pastures or swards intermingled with groves of trees, and the wildlife that depends on the woodlands and grasslands—these make a forest preserve.

Thus, from the beginning, the District's challenge was to maintain and revive the wholeness of nature on its great natural parklands. In the District's early decades, how to "restore and restock" was, as yet, an unknown science. But the District began its work with what knowledge there was.

It also had another major challenge: to introduce the public to these new preserves. Much of the original land purchased by the District had already been used as private picnic groves, dance pavilions, recreation areas, and the like.¹²⁹ In its early years, the District had distributed flyers and other public relations material to attract patrons. All fences and other obstructions were immediately removed from newly purchased lands so that the public might have free and full access.¹³⁰ In short order (and made worse by the sudden proliferation of the automobile), the District found itself overrun with users, including people camping on District properties for months at a time "until they began to make the District their permanent home."¹³¹ By 1927, rudimentary rules were in place and enforced by rangers.

But what about "to restore and restock"? The ancient forests, prairies, and wetlands were the pride of the District, and it was assumed in the beginning that the only management they needed was to keep people from damaging them and to allow nature's processes to restart, helped with replanting if needed. Photographs from the

¹²⁸ *Report of the Forest Preserves of Cook County*, 1921, p. 172.

¹²⁹ See before and after photographs, John Morrill, *Parks, Forestry, and Recreation*, 1970 reprint, p. 17.

¹³⁰ *Annual Message of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County*, 1926, p. 9.

¹³¹ William Busse, interview of June 13, 1949, as related by William Hayes in his *Development of the Forest Preserve of Cook County*, 1949.

District's 1918 report reveal a landscape very different from what one sees today. District property showed the natural and handsome openness and ecological diversity.¹³² Ecosystems that we would today classify as wetlands, savanna, woodland, and prairie were all intermingled. But there was still little thought to the need to maintain the health or character of these landscapes, or their natural diversity, once they had been "protected."

The Evolution of Land Management

The science of ecology was in its infancy at the time the District was planned and founded. The University of Chicago's Henry Chandler Cowles and others had done pioneering work in the Chicago area,¹³³ which is ecologically one of the most diverse regions in the United States. They had come to understand that plants live in association with each other in particular environments, but they had yet to understand how these plant communities sustained themselves.

District personnel from an early date had some awareness that the grasslands needed maintenance to keep them from becoming brushed over. In the early years the District planted trees and managed meadows much as a farmer would. Its "forage" and "sward" were often maintained as pastures by grazing animals—cows, horses, and sheep—as they had been ever since the settlers had killed off the bison and elk and fenced the landscape to pasture their imported livestock. On other tracts, the District entered into contracts with farmers to cut hay, thereby maintaining the open landscape and its vistas, so appreciated by both naturalists and the general public.

Newly acquired land was also leased for corn, soybeans, and other row crops, as it still is today. In time, the District would decide whether to convert such lands to forest or grassland. For example, in the 1970s large parts of the newly acquired Paul Douglas Preserve were planted with pasture grasses, intermingled with copses of woodland. Any regular user of the Northwest Tollway (I-90) over the last 20 years has been able to watch cornfields turn into woodlands and meadow.

As agriculture moved out of Cook County, however, there were fewer opportunities for mutually beneficial land management partnerships with farmers. "Scenic meadows" and "play meadows" shown on District site plans now had to be mowed every few years if they were not to be lost to brush.

¹³² See also *Chicago Wilderness*, winter, 1999; H.S. Pepon, *An Annotated Flora of the Chicago Area* (Chicago: Chicago Academy of Sciences, 1927), and catalog for "The Treasures of Highland Park: Photographs by Jesse Lowe Smith."

¹³³ See for example Henry Chandler Cowles, *Vegetation of Sand Dunes of Lake Michigan* (1899); Cowles, "The Ecological Relations of the Vegetation on the Sand Dunes of Lake Michigan," *Bot. Gaz.* 27:95–117 et seq. (1899); Cowles, "The Physiographic Ecology of Chicago and Vicinity," *Bot. Gaz.* 32:73–108; 145–82 (1901); and Cowles, "The Plant Societies of Chicago and Vicinity," *Bull. Geo. Soc. Chicago* 2:1–76 (1901).

In keeping with accepted thinking nationwide (particularly the U. S. Forest Service and National Park Service), fire was considered the “worst enemy of field and forest,” as District publications noted then. The District’s thinking reflected the times: save the forests from fire and abuse, plant new ones, and above all let them recover on their own. Demands that the District allow the hunting of crows, foxes, and other perceived nuisance wildlife were firmly resisted. General Superintendent Sauers summed up this early view succinctly: “Nature left alone is always orderly.”

No one noticed that new plants were showing up on District lands—plants the early settlers had brought with them from the East Coast and overseas. These settlers had been eager to surround themselves with familiar trees and shrubs in a new and unknown landscape. The pioneering landscape architect H.W.S. Cleveland, who had an office in Chicago for a time, wrote extensively about this “need” and how to solve it in his 1870 publication *Landscape Architecture As Applied to the Wants of the West*.¹³⁴ In short order numerous species of non-native trees and shrubs were in demand.¹³⁵ It is popularly believed that Dr. John Kennicott, an early plantsman whose homestead is now preserved as The Grove National Historic Landmark in Glenview, first imported European buckthorn for its admirable quality as a hedge plant. So, too, with Japanese honeysuckle, eagerly sought “by those who do not value the rapidly-destroyed indigenous vegetation.”¹³⁶ These plants adapted easily to their new environs and spread rapidly from their original intended uses. The District’s lands provided thousands of acres of fertile ground.

At the same time, however, a science of conservation stewardship was gradually evolving. In the early 1930s the University of Wisconsin founded an arboretum. Influenced by Jens Jensen and others, one of the original goals was to recreate, in Madison, representative examples of all the landscape communities native to Wisconsin. John Curtis and others took on the prairie part of the assignment, gathering and planting seeds in an old cornfield—and also experimenting with controlled burns, with good results. By the mid-1960s, District staff was taking note and beginning restoration efforts, including the use of fire.¹³⁷

The local need for more sophisticated land management was first seen by researchers (including District staff) who focused on the rarest species and natural communities. In the early years of the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (INPC), land management guidelines explicitly prohibited controlled burning, cutting trees, and hunting deer in all dedicated nature preserves—many of which, at the time, were District lands, thanks to Sauers’s foresight and encouragement.¹³⁸ But scientists and lay people gradually noticed that the prairies were being blotted out by brush, and the INPC approved controlled

¹³⁴ Horace Cleveland, *Landscape Architecture as Applied to the Wants of the West* (Chicago, 1870).

¹³⁵ See again Chicago Park District archives for park planting plans from this era.

¹³⁶ George Cox, *Alien Species in North America and Hawaii* (Island Press, 1999), p. 105.

¹³⁷ See Chapter One.

¹³⁸ See Chapter One for a full discussion of Sauers and the INPC.

burns, reluctantly at first. In time, fire was demonstrated to be crucial management for prairies; the burned prairies thrived and the unburned ones vanished, along with all their plant and animal species.

In the 1980s, the INPC explored the question of the necessity of fire in the woodlands. Here the out-of-balance species were, often as not, native to the Midwest, but invasive in some ecosystems. For example, green ash had always grown in the floodplain forests, and sugar maple was common in protected ravines. But in the absence of occasional fire, such species could invade and obliterate the natural plants and animals of the upland oak woods. Again, in time, the need for management was demonstrated.¹³⁹ Control of deer was another issue, difficult and controversial at first, but the scientific data and practical effectiveness of control efforts were compelling. In unmanaged preserves, the biodiversity of plants and animals was gradually being lost.¹⁴⁰

In 1983, the INPC and The Nature Conservancy initiated the Volunteer Stewardship Network to recruit citizen help to assist owners of nature preserves with the new challenges of ecological management. The INPC focused its efforts on its high-quality nature preserves, including those that made up a very small portion of the District's lands.

In time both District staff and outside advocates broadened their thinking. The concept of restoration was entirely in keeping with the District's enabling legislation:

To acquire...and hold lands...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.

If restoration was good for the best lands, would it not also be good for lands of lesser quality? Along with the "natural forests," were not the "said lands" — the grasslands and wetlands—really all one piece, a continuous whole?

Before long, people who had been watching and studying changes on the land began to promote the view that the entire landscape was interconnected, a concept first popularized by Aldo Leopold in his now-famous book, *A Sand County Almanac*, published in 1949. To this day a plaque greets visitors to the Forest Preserve District's headquarters in River Forest:

¹³⁹ Mark Leach and Laurel Ross, eds., *Midwest Oak Ecosystems Recovery Plan*. (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 1995).

¹⁴⁰ See, for instance, the "enclosure" erected over a decade ago at Lake County's Ryerson Woods. This is a high fence that keeps deer out of a small section of the forest. Today, the trillium population outside the fence is but a fraction of that within, where the deer cannot over-browse.

A thing is right only when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the community, and the community includes the soil, water, fauna, and flora, as well as the people.

Aldo Leopold

In the Chicago region, people embracing such holistic views included some nationally recognized ecological authorities, such as Dr. Robert Betz of Northeastern Illinois University¹⁴¹ and Dr. Gerould Wilhelm,¹⁴² then at the Morton Arboretum. They noted that a prairie fire was associated not only with lightning but also with Native Americans. And prairie fires, such as those conducted on District lands, would not have stopped at the edge of the prairies. They would have continued through the forests, wetlands, savannas, and other landscapes—landscapes that now, as the INPC noted, were being choked by native and alien invasive species such as box elder and buckthorn. Comprehensive land management was needed.

The term “land management” may seem fairly new in the District’s lexicon, but it dates to a paper by then-Superintendent of Maintenance Roberts Mann (later the first Director of Conservation) entitled “Landscape Engineering in the Forest Preserves of Cook County”:

There has come into being a new profession: Landscape Management. Its field includes the administration of not only national and state parks, but also native landscape areas for mass recreational use, generally known as county parks, or forest preserves in metropolitan regions.¹⁴³

In this address, Mann noted that:

The [Citizens’] Advisory Committee carefully weighed, and the administrator constantly must hearken back to, that phrase “as nearly as they may be in their natural state and condition,” as well as the mandate implied in “for the purpose of the education, pleasure, and recreation of the public.”

It is upon this basis that the administration has refused to introduce any exotic species, whether it be a conifer tree, ornamental shrub, or bird.... Dozens of marshes and ponds drained for agricultural purposes by former owners have been restored.... There has been an amazing increase in the numbers and diversity of species of all forms of wildlife.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Robert F. Betz, “What is a Prairie?” in Korling and Torkel, *The Prairie, Swell and Swale* (Dundee IL, 1972).

¹⁴² Floyd Swink and Gerould Wilhelm, *Plants of the Chicago Region*, 4th ed. (Indianapolis: Indiana Academy of Science, 1992).

¹⁴³ Roberts Mann, “Landscape Engineering in the Forest Preserve of Cook County,” *Journal of the Western Society of Engineers*, June 1944.

¹⁴⁴ Mann, “Landscape Engineering in Cook County.”

As noted earlier, by the 1960s District staff had begun to assimilate Mann's words as well as the work of the University of Wisconsin Arboretum, Morton Arboretum, and others. Following forest and wetland restoration came the grasslands. Why plant the District's meadows with alien grasses? Prairie restoration efforts began, along with controlled burns to encourage and maintain these rediscovered and better-understood landscapes.

In the late 1970s, Superintendent of Conservation Roland Eisenbeis and Chief Landscape Architect Richard Buck fostered a volunteer prairie restoration group on District lands along the North Branch of the Chicago River. This group, organized principally by a local conservationist and volunteer named Steve Packard, became known as the North Branch Prairie Project. Soon the INPC hired Packard to organize similar efforts to care for the District's eleven other Illinois Nature Preserves, as well as for those in other forest preserve districts and in local and state parks.

The environmental movement had also come of age, and there were plenty of people willing to work on this problem—for free. In 1983 Packard moved from the INPC to The Nature Conservancy, which recognized that all the region's prairies and woodlands, many of which the Conservancy had helped to buy, were rapidly deteriorating. Now with the support of both INPC and the Conservancy, scattered volunteer efforts coalesced into a Volunteer Stewardship Network (VSN) spanning more than 100 sites in all six of the region's forest preserve and conservation districts.

For more than a decade, the District's volunteer program was considered the best in the region and a source of local pride. It was seen by many as a model of citizen participation in the work of government. Not only were the volunteers adding enormously to the District's existing efforts to manage its most ecologically important preserves, the volunteers were also the District's principal mode of outreach to neighbors and the general public, ambassadors for the District's mission to restore and restock. Through them, the District's program was featured regularly in the *Chicago Sun-Times* and *Chicago Tribune*, as well as local papers.¹⁴⁵ Their work was also covered extensively on regional and national television, magazines, and books.¹⁴⁶ The volunteer movement convened regular workshops and conferences attended by thousands,¹⁴⁷ and also led countless tours, published scores of local newsletters, and showed frequent slide

¹⁴⁵ See for example "Getting the word out about nature," *Chicago Tribune*, August 9, 1992; Stevenson Swanson, "Unearthing the prairie past," *Chicago Tribune*, November 19, 1995; Roy Harvey, "The evolution of a prairie," *Chicago Tribune*, July 7, 1996; Shirley Barnes, "Ah, wilderness," *Chicago Tribune*, November 3, 1996

¹⁴⁶ See for example Greg Breining, "The Case of the Missing Ecosystem," *Nature Conservancy* (November/December 1993), pp. 10–15; Stephanie Mills, *In Service of the Wild: Restoring and Reinhabiting Damaged Land* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); William K. Stevens, *Miracle Under the Oaks: The Revival of Nature in America* (New York: Pocket Books, 1995), and the PBS program *Scientific American Frontiers of Knowledge* in a segment that aired in 1991.

¹⁴⁷ Perhaps the best known of these conferences is the Northern Illinois Prairie Workshop, held every two years. The twelfth workshop took place at the College of DuPage in March 2001 and attracted approximately 1,000 attendees.

shows to community organizations. The District had begun to benefit from a powerful new phenomenon.

In 1992, the District hired its first Land Manager, Ralph Thornton—the first forest preserve district to do so in the region, according to Superintendent Nevius.¹⁴⁸ Thornton had worked for many years as a District naturalist and director of the District's adult education facility, Camp Sagawau. He remembers his childhood days on District lands:

When I was in the sixth grade I went on a hike in Cap Sauers [a forest preserve in the Palos area] with my dad. I can distinctly remember some of the places we went—prairies with flowers. When I went back years later as a naturalist, they were gone. It was covered with brush.

In his new position, he assembled a dedicated and talented staff, and wasted no time:

We did fires every two or three years. In the first year it would knock back the buckthorn, and by the third time the buckthorn would be gone. It's a form of land management that is cost-effective.... We saw plants coming back just from the burning, and we hadn't seeded any new species in there.¹⁴⁹

Restoration Criticized

Land management had always faced a variety of challenges. After the hugely successful public relations campaign of Smokey Bear, some found it hard to distinguish between destructive wildfires and restorative prescribed burns. The cutting of trees to thin forests of overpopulated or undesirable species had long been standard practice to foresters, but not to urban nature lovers. Controlling the numbers of deer seemed equally troubling to many, since the conventional wisdom was, as Sauers had believed, that nature would take care of itself.

In time, it was inevitable that the very principle of land management would be challenged by some. "Stewardship," as the management was often called, had been a common theme of the region's nature writers and television producers from the late 1970s through the early 1990s. In fact, writers of science and nature articles complained that it was an old story and begged for new angles. But then came an unexpected turn of events.

In DuPage County, anti-hunting activists challenged the forest preserve district's program to control high numbers of deer. Forest preserve staff had seen increasing degradation in some severely overpopulated preserves. Authorities also sought to protect the public, pointing to the high incidence of deer-vehicle collisions on roads adjacent to forest preserves.

¹⁴⁸ District press release, October 19, 1992.

¹⁴⁹ Ralph Thornton, interview with Debra Shore, May 10, 2001.

The deer-control and restoration issues became entangled when DuPage staff used the argument that the District's land management program was being undermined by the overpopulated deer, which had been gobbling up the recovering vegetation. DuPage's staff, as well as some forest preserve board members, deeply believed in the need for the District's land management program, and they were gratified that the restoration volunteers rallied to their defense. The out-of-control numbers of the deer were a sufficiently serious countywide problem, especially on the highways, that the culling had broad support.

In time, media interest in the deer protests subsided. But soon these activists made the front pages once again. Now they were opposing "killing trees" and "destructive burning" in much the same way that they opposed culling deer. In response to a blitz of charges and press releases, *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Raymond Coffey recognized a news opportunity and penned a front-page story headlined "Half Million Trees May Face the Ax."¹⁵⁰

Until this time there had been no visible opposition to restoration efforts in Cook County. But Coffey received calls from at least two groups of people with grievances. One consisted of homeowners in Chicago's Old Edgebrook and Sauganash neighborhoods; they resented the presence of restoration volunteers from other areas, including students in the Mighty Acorns program, coming to the forest preserves near their homes.¹⁵¹ Another group consisted of horse riders from the Palos region, who disliked the increased police enforcement of equestrian rules that required horses to stay on trails. They blamed the new restrictions, perhaps justifiably, on renewed interest in the quality of the preserves that had been fostered by the volunteers and new land management staff.¹⁵²

Soon Coffey was writing frequent columns attacking the forest preserve districts for lighting fires and cutting trees.¹⁵³ When challenged by readers, Coffey admitted several times that he could not substantiate his charges. In response to criticism, the *Sun-Times* noted that Coffey's writing was in the form of opinion columns, which did not require the kind of fact checking that news articles did.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 12, 1996.

¹⁵¹ Mighty Acorns is a grammar-school program that enables both local and inner city school children to participate in habitat stewardship as part of their science education.

¹⁵² John Sheerin, interview with Stephen Christy, April 15, 2001.

¹⁵³ Among Coffey's columns on this subject were "Forest Dist. 'Partners' Have Shady History" (May 31, 1996), "'Restorationists' Talk a Chic, but Vague, Game" (June 7, 1996), "Forest preserves at center of controversy — again" (April 11, 1997), "Burning issues at Nature Center" (November 27, 1998), and "A flame that won't go out" (December 21, 1999). All appeared in the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

¹⁵⁴ Larry Green, Executive Editor, *Chicago Sun-Times*, letter to Debra Shore, October 30, 1996.

Responses by Three Districts

News coverage of the charges stirred up major public concern in Cook, DuPage, and Lake Counties. It is instructive to compare the responses of the three forest preserve districts. In DuPage, a moratorium was declared, some hearings were held, and the staff and volunteers were fully back at work in a few months. In Lake County no moratorium was declared, but a series of hearings was held while the work continued. The matter was resolved in less than a year, with no interruption of land management work.

Scientific support of the need for restoration was strong and clear. Since most of the charges were unfounded—“cutting down forests to create prairies,” “destroying animals or animal habitat with fire,” “misuse of herbicides”—an airing of the issues should have been quickly sufficient to answer the legitimate questions of people who weren’t already familiar with land management, as it had been in the adjacent counties.

In Cook County, however, President Stroger imposed a moratorium on all restoration work in September 1996. Unlike the situation at other forest preserve districts, this moratorium remained in effect for years, some parts being gradually lifted while other parts still remain in effect today. During those years, a large part of the volunteer force dissipated. During this time, the District lost most of its knowledgeable and hard-working land-management staff who had spearheaded these efforts, including Ralph Thornton: “I’d probably still be working there if things were different.”¹⁵⁵

The District held a series of hearings on the matter that were often contentious. Testimony at most meetings was overwhelmingly in favor of land restoration, but by now the Board was nervous about all the publicity. The Commissioners adopted a set of “Land Management Recommendations” in the heat of media criticism. According to conservationists, volunteers, and some District staff, these guidelines have never received necessary clarification, review, or updating, and they hamper volunteer efforts to this day. Five years after the imposition of the moratorium, much of its effect continues, and all land management is still sharply reduced.

In 1997, with the adoption of the new “Land Management Recommendations,” President Stroger created a 21-member Community Advisory Council. Five members were chosen by President Stroger and one each by the other commissioners. The Council was to provide citizen review of the District’s land management plans and to ensure that community concerns were addressed.

The Council has reviewed scores of management plans and most of the District’s land management practices. Members have attended, and in some cases helped to facilitate, a wide variety of public meetings throughout the county, especially in neighborhoods where concerns had been expressed. Expert testimony and citizen input confirmed the

¹⁵⁵ Ralph Thornton, interview, May 10, 2001.

soundness of the techniques used by the District and the plans in which they were embodied. The Council forwarded recommendations to the Board, which received and filed those with which it concurred. At that point, the staff proceeded with the endorsed work, often with the help of volunteers.

But in the Edgebrook and Sauganash communities, sharp divisions continue to the present between those supporting and opposing some forms of land management. Although many components of the moratorium have been lifted from the rest of the District's holdings, sites such as Bunker Hill and Sauganash Prairie Grove, that had been receiving ecological restoration for 15 years prior, have been neglected for the last five years.

A mere six months after President Stroger imposed his moratorium on habitat restoration, District staff had already begun to calculate the decline in health provoked by this work stoppage. "Without a sound land management program," noted Ralph Thornton, then Land Manager for the District, "it has been estimated that the District's high quality natural lands decline at the rate of about 2% per year." He then compared the annual loss of 2% of the flora and fauna over large areas with the comparable loss of preserve acreage to development. "This loss of 2% of the biodiversity per year on sites under management within the District is already the equivalent of losing the biological value of the following sites as if they were totally paved over in asphalt:

- ◆ One fifth of Swallow Cliff Woods
- ◆ 14 Shoe Factory Road Nature Preserves
- ◆ One third of Busse Woods Nature Preserve"¹⁵⁶

Conversely, staff noted, areas of the District that had been actively managed showed concomitant increases in their ecosystem quality and health. According to Thornton, "My experience with restoration is that it raises the grade level by one letter every five to 20 years. In six months of work on 6,772 acres, we would raise the status of health by 1.2%. This translates to a raise in biodiversity within one concentrated area the size of 81.3 acres. Consider this [work stoppage] to be equivalent to the biodiversity on 81.3 acres being completely lost due to the moratorium every six months."

Many components of the new guidelines have not worked well. For example, 4" to 8" DBH "pencil trees" of invasive species are often a principal threat to the health of oak woods. None have been removed since the imposition of the moratorium, apparently because the staff cannot explain to the Board the need for this standard management practice.

The requirement that a District "supervisor" be present before volunteer work can start has also been a problem:

¹⁵⁶ Memo from Ralph Thornton to Superintendent of Conservation, June 10, 1997.

In theory, the District sends a paid manager to oversee us, but his or her arrival is very uneven. By contrast, Lake County, where parts of our efforts are, is very encouraging about our restoration work.¹⁵⁷

Volunteers pointed out that the “supervisors,” when they did show up, often sat in their vehicles while the volunteers did the work. Many other supervisors were dedicated and hard-working District staff, but they too bridled at the waste of time “baby-sitting” for experienced volunteers who often knew as much as they did.

Looking back, a seasoned observer summed up the restoration controversy:

How could five people who spoke against land restoration turn elected officials away from positive comments made by hundreds of people? Somehow, the District Commissioners bought it—agreeing with one out of 30 people who spoke up.¹⁵⁸

Today, as noted above, some restrictions on the restoration work have recently been loosened. To their credit, at their January 2002 final budget meeting, the Commissioners finally approved an amendment “to establish an accreditation program and policy for the Volunteer Land Management Stewards that will allow Accredited Site Stewards to supervise volunteer land management workdays at restoration sites.”¹⁵⁹

Seeking a more efficient and effective volunteer program is step forward, but, as can be seen from the following report on the state of the District’s land, a broader rethinking of the District’s policy and staffing for its land management program is needed.

The State of the Land Today

Much attention has been focused in the last eighteen months on the District’s fiscal state. But longtime supporters of the District remind us that we should be even more concerned about the state of its most important and valuable assets, the forest preserves themselves. Last summer, Friends of the Forest Preserves, the Sierra Club, and the National Audubon Society jointly conducted a study of the quality and health of the District’s natural lands.

By wise and longstanding policy, the District has determined to keep approximately 80% of its holdings in “a natural state.” The remaining 20% constitute the developed areas of the District—picnic groves, golf courses, parking lots and bike trails, and education centers.

¹⁵⁷ Anonymous interview, January 25, 2002.

¹⁵⁸ Anonymous interview, October 10, 2001.

¹⁵⁹ *Proceedings, Board of Commissioners of the Cook County Forest Preserve District*, January 24, 2002.

The District's core mission is to provide safekeeping for these natural lands. Its mission, as defined by its founding charter and confirmed many times since, is to acquire, restore, and preserve its lands "in their natural state and condition, as near as may be." The District's woods and prairies, marshes and ponds provide vital ecosystem services by helping to clean the air, control flooding, and reduce soil erosion. The plants they support provide essential habitat for thousands of species of animals, from foxes to birds to butterflies to frogs. They also provide a chance for urban people to escape the concrete of the city for a walk in nature. They are truly the natural wonders of our region—and irreplaceable assets.

But, how is this nature doing? More specifically, how well is the District fulfilling its mission of preserving, protecting, restoring and restocking these lands?

The three conservation groups conducted a land audit of the health of the District's lands. This is the first of its kind ever done in Cook County. This "natural audit" describes the condition of the District's preserves. It did not look at every tree. Instead, it used scientific sampling to draw conclusions about this vast sweep of precious natural land.

Methods

Wayne Lampa, former ecologist for the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County and currently senior scientist at the Conservation Research Institute in Elmhurst, designed the study. (A copy is attached as Appendix B, p 90.) Last summer the study's organizers recruited 89 monitors (most of them professionals working for Cook County and other conservation agencies, or highly knowledgeable volunteers) to conduct the audit in teams of two. Each team consisted of one expert who could identify plants and trees and one data-entry assistant. Lampa and his design team used scientific techniques to randomly select sites throughout undeveloped lands of the District. In June and July, study organizers conducted five training sessions to familiarize participants with the study procedures. The teams of participants received aerial maps of their assigned sites, each showing the transect start and direction. They received a copy of the instructions, a ¼-square-meter quadrat frame (about 10 inches on a side), and a "cruise stick" (something like a yardstick, but calibrated for measuring tree diameters at arm's length).

Each transect was 200 meters long, or about 650 feet. Every 10 meters (about 33 feet), the monitors inventoried the ground layer (grasses and wildflowers) in a ¼-square-meter quadrat, recording every plant species found in the quadrat, the percentage of the ground that the species covered, and the percentage of bare ground. In total, the teams sampled 87 transects including 1,738 quadrats.

Every 30 meters (about 98 feet), the monitors conducted a "point-quarter" sample. That is, in each of four 90-degree quadrants (northeast, southeast, southwest, and northwest), they recorded the nearest trees, in two size classes: first, those 15 inches or more DBH (the diameter of the tree at breast height) and second, those 1 to 8 inches DBH. Thus they

looked at the ancient canopy trees and the understory, including the future canopy trees. The monitors determined the closest trees' species, size, and distance in each of the four directions, recording data on a total of eight trees at each sampling point. A total of 5,560 trees were sampled in this way.

Teams conducted their sampling in July and August, primarily because this is the period when the most significant (and most threatened) components of forest plant life are in bloom and thus easily identified. The data and analysis presented here include only the most salient and accessible data. When analysis of the data has been completed, a scientific paper for a professional journal will be prepared; it will contain more detailed results.

Findings

We looked first at the health of the plant communities. The canopy trees and the grassy turf are the foundation of the forest ecosystem. They hold the soil, create the shade, transpire the air and water, and provide the food for the animals.

Question 1. What natural ecosystem types make up the District's lands?¹⁶⁰

First the good news. According to this study, forty-six percent (approximately 25,000 acres) of the District's natural land consists of wooded lands with forests of sufficient quality to be assigned to natural communities. These lands represent a major resource for Cook County, and for the region. An additional twenty-six percent (14,000 acres) is degraded or artificial woodland that, in the absence of restoration, has low ecological value. Five percent is oak savanna (approximately 3,000 acres). Thus in total, seventy-seven percent (42,000 acres) of the District's natural land is wooded land of some type.¹⁶¹

This study found four percent of the District's natural land to be prairie (approximately 2,000 acres). Four percent of the land sampled in this study was wetland (approximately 2,000 acres).¹⁶²

Eleven percent (approximately 6,000 acres) is artificial grassland that could be restored to quality woodland or prairie with substantial effort. The substantial acreage that the District rents out to row-crop farmers is also ultimately restorable, but it was not considered in this land audit.

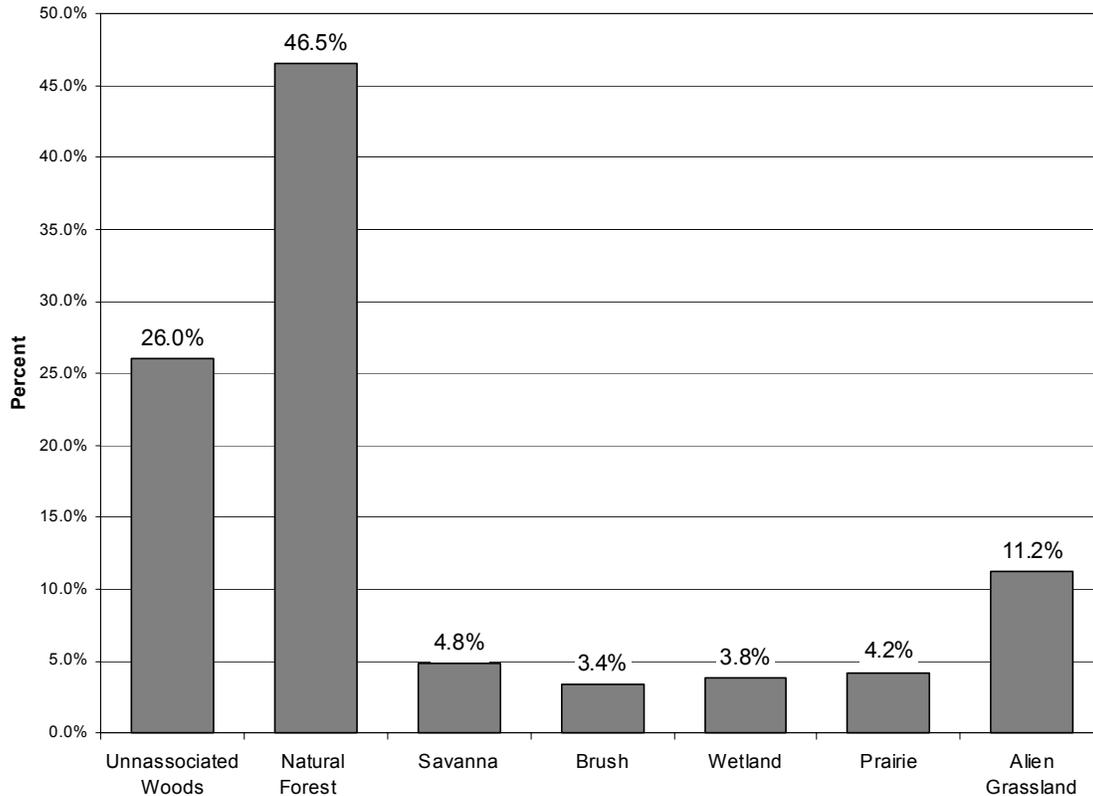
¹⁶⁰ These calculations are approximate. We randomly sampled the 80% (54,000 acres) of its lands that the District seeks to maintain in their natural state. This conceptual 54,000 acres has never been mapped by the District. We considered all lands not maintained as parking lots, mowed lawns, row crops, etc. to be part of the natural 54,000 acres. Parcels too small to contain a 200-meter transect are underrepresented in this study.

¹⁶¹ Quadrats were assigned to community type on the basis of the kinds of plants present. Since the samples were taken at random, approximate acreages were calculated by multiplying the percent of the total number of quadrats that represented a given community type by 54,000 acres.

¹⁶² Wetland figures as given here include marsh and sedge meadow. Floodplain forest, also a major wetland type, is included with the forest acreage. Deep-water aquatic areas were not sampled and are underrepresented in this study.

These results are shown graphically in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Proportions of ecosystem types in the Cook County forest preserves



Question 2. What is the quality of the various types of natural lands owned by the District?

Land managers use a variety of measures to keep track of the health of natural communities, to interpret lands to the public, and to assess and prioritize land management efforts.

Land of “very high quality” has most of the native flora and fauna that have constituted that natural community over the millennia. “High quality” areas have been degraded to some degree but are capable of recovering excellent ecological health with modest effort. High and very high quality areas are worthy of dedication as Illinois nature preserves and very much deserve the limited efforts needed to maintain them in good health. In the absence of appropriate land management, such land will lose its quality at the approximate rate of 2% per year.¹⁶³ “Good quality” areas still have most of their native species but may be seriously infested by invasive species or heavily over-browsed by deer. “Fair” and “poor quality” land is typically losing its value for ecosystem services, recreation, and aesthetics. It can be restored to good quality by management work over time. If neglected, however, the community will lose its natural character and

¹⁶³ Forest Preserve District of DuPage County, *State of the Natural Environment within the Forest Preserves of DuPage County*, January 1993.

restorability. When a forest has reached the point where it becomes “unassociated woods,” it can be restored to a healthy native community only with major effort and expense. Figure 9 shows the overall percentages of the District’s natural lands falling into each of these categories. Table 7 summarizes current quality of the 54,000 acres of the District’s natural land by community type.

Figure 9. Overall quality of the District’s natural lands

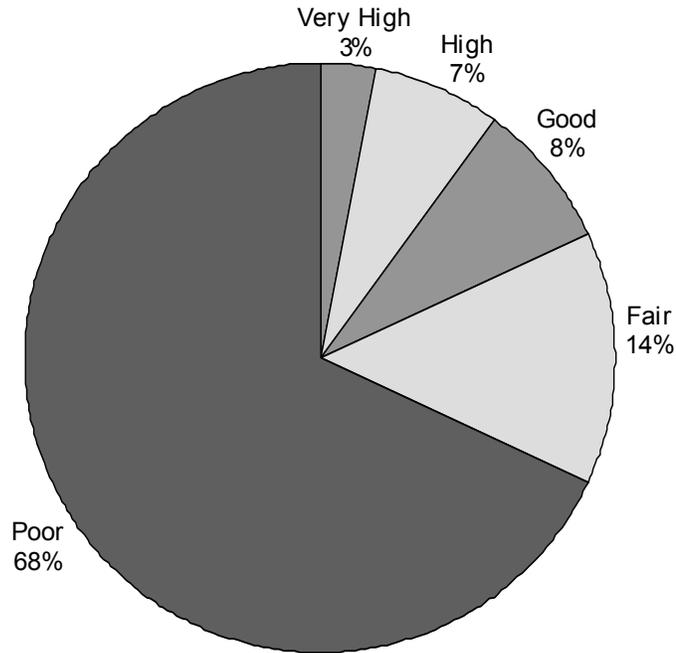


Table 7. Land quality by community type¹⁶⁴

Community	Acreage	Very High	High	Good	Fair	Poor
Forest	25,100	5%	9%	12%	17%	57%
Savanna	2,600	6%	17%	10%	11%	56%
Prairie	2,300	1%	4%	14%	13%	68%
Wetland ¹⁶⁵	2,100	5%	6%	2%	16%	71%
Brushland	1,800	5%	19%	16%	21%	39%
Artificial and degraded	20,100	0%	0%	1%	15%	84%
TOTAL	54,000	3%	7%	8%	14%	68%

A more detailed breakdown of these figures and additional notes on how they were calculated are given in Appendix C, “Community Quality Ratings” (p. 92).

¹⁶⁴ These figures, especially for the smaller communities, are approximate. See footnote 160.

¹⁶⁵ Floodplain forest is both a forest and a wetland type. For the calculations in this table, floodplain forest is included under forest and omitted from the wetland calculation.

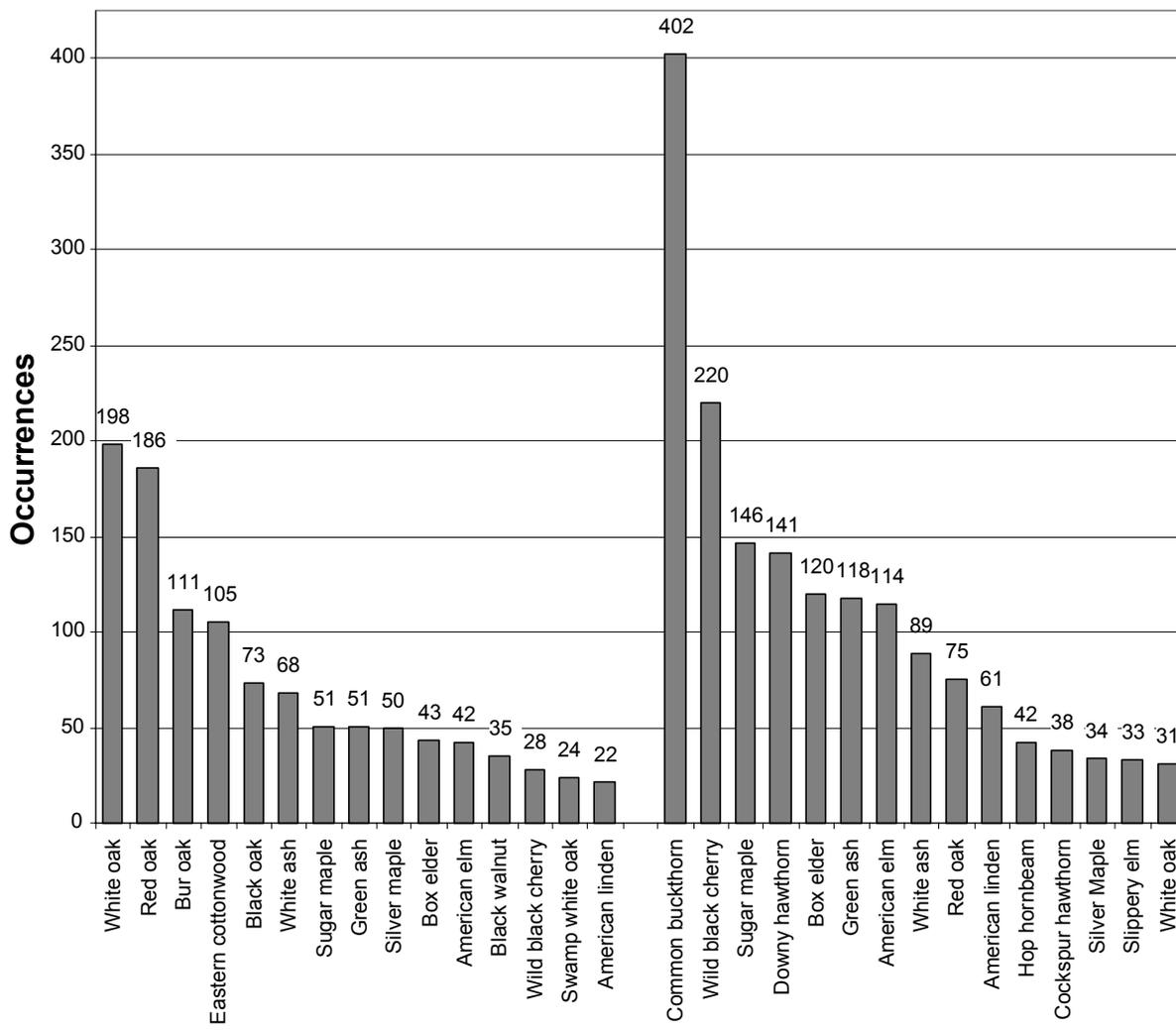
Question 3. How well are the forest trees doing?

First, the good news. As shown in Figure 8 (p. 75), mature trees of the species that characterize healthy natural forest ecosystems populate 46% of the District's lands. This figure indicates that approximately 25,000 acres of natural forest are either in good health or are readily restorable to an ecologically sound condition. An additional 26% of the lands are degraded or artificial forests ("unassociated woods" in Figure 8). These may not function well for biodiversity or wildlife conservation but may contribute to open space, provide some ecosystem services, and have future restoration potential if substantial resources can be found.

This study considered how successfully the trees are reproducing. This question is important for two principal reasons. The first reflects the conservation function of the preserves. The species of conservation concern generally depend on ancient ecosystems that have developed here for millennia. In other words, the survival of the birds, mushrooms, orchids, and butterflies of our historic woodlands depend on the reproduction of the major tree species. The second reason reflects ecosystem services that are immediately important to people (recreation value, protection from floods and soil erosion, etc.). There is a strong relationship between the health of forests and the provision of many ecosystem services.

This study found the preserves' most common large old trees to be, in this order, white oak, red oak, bur oak, cottonwood, and black oak (see Figure 10 on the next page). It is not surprising that most of the big old trees—those greater than 15 inches diameter—are oaks. Oaks were overwhelmingly the most common trees in the region for thousands of years. Cottonwood is the exception on this list. It is a quick-growing and temporary native tree of natural disturbance. It helps heal disturbed soil (as in the farm fields that made up large parts of the originally acquired preserve lands). In this study, these five species together constituted 61.9% of the large trees in the preserves.

Figure 10. Fifteen most common large trees and small trees



Mature Trees (15" DBH or More)

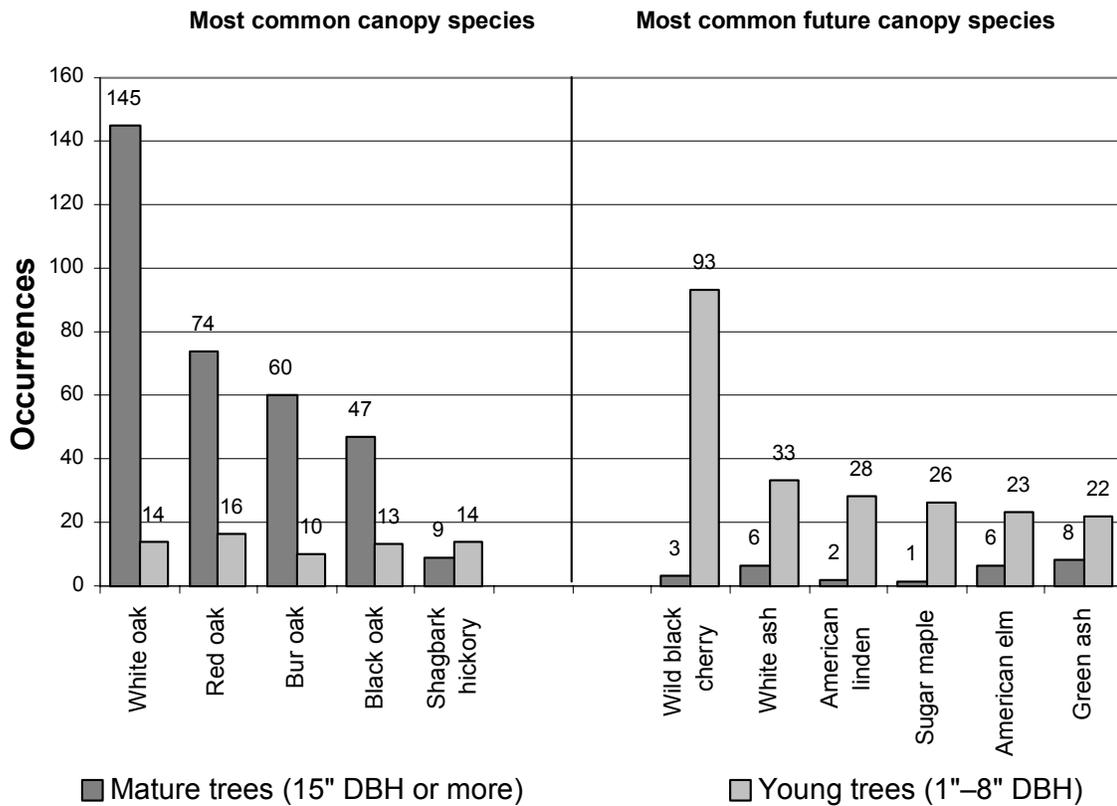
Young Trees (1"- 8" DBH)

In the healthy woodlands, the numbers of small trees would reflect (but not precisely duplicate) the distribution of the ancient canopy trees (in this case, mostly the oaks). However, this study found the most common young canopy trees to be, in this order, wild black cherry, sugar maple, box elder, and green ash.

These small trees, those between 1 and 8 inches diameter, speak volumes about the future of the forest if nothing is done. All four of these small canopy tree species are invasive in the oak woods, as are the next two most common, American elm and white ash. And then there was one other species of small tree that was not a canopy tree. It was overwhelmingly the most common tree in the preserves, the Eurasian species common buckthorn. Together these seven species make up 65% of the small trees in the preserves.

In contrast, the four species of oaks, keystone species of most of this region’s natural forests, make up only 8% of the young trees. The large old oaks are not reproducing in sufficient numbers to maintain themselves. (See Figure 11 on the next page, which shows the most common large and small canopy species in dry-mesic woodland.) Instead, invasive species are replacing the species that constitute native ecosystems. If this trend is not arrested and reversed, in the foreseeable future we will lose the entire oak woodland ecosystem that supports most of the woodland birds, butterflies, mushrooms, and salamanders that lived here for thousands of years.

Figure 11. Loss of canopy species in dry-mesic woodland



At a scientific symposium on oak woodlands sponsored by the Chicago Botanic Garden in January 2002, researchers reported that runaway populations of red maple were a major threat to the health and character of eastern forests. There is some indication, several scientists said, that the sugar maple is playing that role in the rich soils of the Midwest. This study, in fact, bears out this fear and identifies wild black cherry as an additional threat.

The data are especially compelling when they are separated out by communities (the various kinds of prairies, woodlands, etc.). Dry-mesic woodland was found to be the most widely distributed of all community types in the preserves. The reproduction data

for this community are shown in Figure 11. It compares the large, old canopy trees compared to the small, future canopy trees. It is clear from this data that, in the absence of management, all of our oak forests will be lost—along with the rich biodiversity dependent on them.

Question 4. What changes are taking place in the density of our forests?

It is a common mistake to think that the health of a forest is proportional to the number of trees. Ecologists and foresters have long known that pathological densities of trees can degrade a forest, especially where invasive species are concerned. Thus another way of measuring the sustainability of a forest is to determine whether it has too many or too few trees.

Consider the density of trees in the District's most extensive forest community, dry mesic woodland, or upland oak woods. The canopy trees are shown by the point-quarter data to have a density of 32 trees per acre. This figure is roughly comparable with the tree density of the ancient forests found by the region's first surveyors (the Public Land Survey of the 1830s). Thus the good news is that the ancient structure of these forests is relatively intact, when only canopy trees are considered.

The bad news is that in the upland oak woods the 1- to 8-inch trees have a stocking rate of 289 trees per acre. The data showed a similar unbalance between stocking rates of the large and the small trees in the District's other forest communities. According to project director Lampa, the presence of young trees at this density is a sure sign of serious deterioration in the Chicago region's oak woodlands. According to Lampa, "There are vastly too many small trees for a sustainable, healthy forest. That's a serious problem. Where little trees make that much shade, there's nothing growing in the understory, which is why there is so much bare ground in these forests."

Question 5. What is the state of the soil?

In the various woodland communities surveyed, the average amount of bare ground per plot was 57 to 70 percent.

According to Lampa, "A healthy woodland shouldn't have more than 10 to 15% of bare ground." For the soil to be well vegetated by woodland grasses and wildflowers means "that plenty of light is reaching the forest floor to support a healthy understory of wildflowers and grasses and the reproduction of young trees," Lampa said. Higher percentages of bare ground reveal that the soil is eroding and the tree canopy is too dense to permit a healthy groundlayer community—including seedlings of desirable trees.

Moreover, woods and forests lacking a rich understory of flowers and grasses do a much poorer job of controlling storm-water runoff and retaining water in floods. Instead, storm waters contribute to flooding downstream and carry away more and more topsoil, since there are few plants to hold soil with their roots.

Question 6. What is the overall state of the preserve's grasses and wildflowers?

The most common plants seen in the 1,738 ground-layer quadrats were, in order of occurrence, common buckthorn, tall goldenrod, Hungarian brome, Kentucky bluegrass, garlic mustard, tall fescue, and gray dogwood. These plants are, without exception, sources or indicators of ecological distress. The high proportion of buckthorn is especially troubling, since young buckthorn in the ground layer often indicates that most other species will eventually be shaded out.

A healthy ecosystem is full of “conservative” plants: plants that are characteristic of healthy, stable habitats. A weedy ecosystem, on the other hand, has few or no conservative plants. The most common plants found in this study are indicators of low floristic quality. In fact, they are mostly non-native. The only natives in the list above are tall goldenrod and gray dogwood; these two species are essentially native weeds. When they are the predominant species in an area, as in this study, they are symptoms of ecosystems in distress.

The results of the ground-layer study are shown in Table 7. It gives essentially the same message as the data for tree species, tree distance, and bare soil. This measure is also applicable to non-forested natural communities (prairies, marshes, etc.)

These degraded lands are not only poor habitat for many species but are also losing recreational value for the citizens of Cook County. Few people come to the forest preserves to see a thorn thicket or a forest of pole trees with bare-ground underneath. But, as the user survey found, many people come to walk through areas teeming with birds and butterflies and to enjoy open vistas filled with wildflowers under the branches of majestic trees.

These findings corroborate an earlier study conducted by Marlin Bowles, Jenny McBride, and Christopher Dunn of the Morton Arboretum, Michael Jones of the Natural Land Institute, and Tim Bell of Chicago State University in the fall of 1997.¹⁶⁶ They, too, wanted to determine what was happening in Cook County forest preserves and what effects forest fragmentation and loss of natural processes such as fire were causing. They investigated whether there was an increase in shade-tolerant species (such as maples) and a decline of oaks and loss of understory species, resulting in a negative impact on forest biodiversity.

These researchers tested their hypotheses by re-sampling high-quality oak forests that had been identified and sampled by the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory 20 years earlier, in 1976. At all sites they found troubling changes in the natural canopy trees or in the shrub layer. For example, in mesic old-growth forest at Busse Woods, sugar maple was replacing red oak as the dominant tree species. In dry-mesic old second-growth forest at Busse Woods, oaks had declined in all size classes. In both areas there was a significant

¹⁶⁶ *Twenty-Year Woody Vegetation Changes in Three Cook County, Illinois Forest Preserves*, October 1997.

decrease in richness and density of shrub-layer species and an increase in relative abundance of sugar maple saplings.

The researchers concluded that the preserves needed increased “disturbance processes” —the thinning and prescribed-burning work of the land managers. “These results suggest that increased levels of disturbance processes are needed to maintain canopy openings that will allow maintenance of shrub-layer species and oak regeneration in these forests. Reducing deer herd sizes also appears necessary to facilitate this process.”¹⁶⁷

The data reported here are similar to those of studies by the DuPage County forest preserves conducted in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s.¹⁶⁸ In that case, the studies led to the board approving a “Natural Areas Management Program,” initially funded at \$11,000,000. That program continues to this day.

Discussion

Today, we are at a crossroads. If the Forest Preserve District of Cook County continues on its current course of doing little (aside from restricted volunteer efforts) to care for its natural lands, we will continue to witness degradation. We will suffer loss of natural heritage, biodiversity, and ecosystem services. And the land will be decreasingly able to support the plants and animals that depend on healthy ecosystems for their survival.

But there is an alternative. The District could hire or assign adequate trained staff that are dedicated to natural land management. It could expedite the work of volunteers and hire private contractors to execute special projects. The success of restoration management has been proven many times over in this county and others. Where sites are managed using best management practices, the rich complex mix of plant and animal species flourishes. Where unmanaged and neglected, species disappear and the original ecosystem begins to die.

This study found a strong consensus among conservationists and even many staff members that a much higher priority should be put on stewardship of the District’s most valuable lands. The 6,500 acres of “good” to “very high quality” forests should not be allowed to deteriorate further. The 2,500 acres of “good” to “very high quality” savannas, prairies and wetlands also deserve prompt stewardship. Most of these lands are losing their quality at the rate of 2% per year. When that quality drops to “fair” or “poor,” the losses may be permanent and at best are expensive to remediate.

The 33,000 acres of “fair” to “poor quality” natural land is a second priority. Not all of it can be managed in the near future. Some of it may have problems for which no practical solution is now known. Some may be in the back yards of people who

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Forest Preserve District of DuPage County, *State of the Natural Environment within the Forest Preserves of DuPage County*. January 1993.

wouldn't welcome the attention. Because so much work is needed, the District may need to postpone dealing with areas that are of poor quality and that also pose management challenges. But much of this land has great existing value and greater potential. Plans should be made to restore half of it to good health in ten years.

The 20,000 acres of the most degraded or artificial land are the last priority. Yet, as other forest preserve districts have shown, and as Cook County has begun to show at sites like Bartel Grassland and Camp Sagawau, creative approaches can sometimes yield great benefits with modest investment.

All the other forest preserve districts in the region have substantial staff focused on land management. Cook County has no staff specifically assigned to do the physical work of managing its natural lands. Nearly all the work in Cook County is or was done by volunteers. But at many sites volunteers are no longer active, or they work in greatly reduced numbers. Also, because of a wide variety of limitations, where they do work they are not as effective as they could easily be. "We are committed to land management, and getting back to where we were four to five years ago," Superintendent Nevius has said.¹⁶⁹ But observers—and other forest preserve districts—see things differently. Five years ago the District was already far behind the surrounding districts in the stewardship of its natural lands. In recent years, most of the District's land management program, except for the limited areas cared for by volunteers, is in name only. The prescribed burns do not get done. The invasive species do not get controlled.

Why, then, has Cook County's land management bogged down, as surrounding forest preserve districts moved ahead? There are several reasons. Some stem from the controversy and resulting moratorium. At that time the leadership in other forest preserve districts stood up for their land managers and volunteers. These districts also quickly mounted effective board, community and media education campaigns. Board members became involved, learned the details, and took pro-active roles in reaching out to affected constituencies. In Cook County, this kind of leadership did not emerge.

The organization of the District is also to blame. There is currently no central department at the District charged with taking care of the 80% of its lands to be maintained in their natural state. The burden of this work falls on two District departments, neither of which was ever charged with land management. The Forestry Department was founded in the early years of the District, largely to plant and care for trees alone, and the Conservation Department in 1945, largely to handle public education. Both are severely understaffed, given their charge of caring for nearly 54,000 acres as well as operating all educational programs and nature centers. Both departments combined will have 169 employees in the 2002 budget, and this assumes full staffing.

¹⁶⁹ Joseph Nevius, comments before the Board, January 14, 2002.

Maintenance, on the other hand, will have 377 employees, nearly 2.2 times the size of the other two departments combined. Yet, unlike their efforts 50 years ago, maintenance employees seldom stray beyond the parking lots and picnic grounds.

Prescribed burning, a key aspect of land management, provides a valuable comparison between Cook and other districts. In 2001 Cook County burned 289 acres. Lake County burned 4,000 acres,¹⁷⁰ though it is a forest preserve district only 35% the size of Cook. Kane County, at only 9,600 acres, fields burn crews of up to eighteen people, who burn 700–800 acres per year—eight percent of its holdings. Significantly, Kane County’s maintenance department is a regular part of these efforts.¹⁷¹

In 1996, support from conservationists helped the District secure federal funds for a Seppi, a \$100,000 brush-cutting machine widely used in the counties surrounding Cook. Since the appearance of the critical columns in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, it has mostly sat in the shed. It could in that time have easily cleared the invasives from the 1,800 acres of deteriorating brushland shown in Table 7. When asked why the Seppi is so little used, staff members repeatedly explain that there is no one to run it, although three years would seem to be ample time to train someone.¹⁷²

To emphasize the lack of support for Conservation and Forestry, both superintendents hold only a grade 22 position, while all other department heads have at least a grade 23.

Observers believe that the weak land management program in Cook County may reflect the perception that the Board and the President in recent years were not supportive of the preserves. But some Commissioners have begun to ask tough questions about this program, demonstrating that they are not satisfied with the status quo.¹⁷³

Recommendations

Dramatically increase the acreage being actively managed. Otherwise large areas of the District’s finest lands will irretrievably lose their value for both conservation and recreation. The District has tens of thousands of acres in urgent need of invasive species control. Possible resources include:

- ◆ District staff, including Conservation, Forestry and Maintenance employees
- ◆ Sheriff’s Work Alternative Program
- ◆ Outside contractors (a resource recently well-used by the District at Bartel Grassland, Camp Sagawau, and Bergman Slough)
- ◆ Volunteers

¹⁷⁰ Ken Klick, correspondence with Stephen Christy, January 15, 2002.

¹⁷¹ John Duerr, General Superintendent, Kane County Forest Preserve District, interview with Stephen Christy, April 25, 2001.

¹⁷² Anonymous interviews, June 14, 2001; August 7, 2001.

¹⁷³ The Board’s most recent discussion of the state of the District’s efforts at land management occurred in the public hearing and board meeting on the District’s budget for FY 2002, held in February 2002.

Substantially increase education and outreach about land management. Far more effort needs to be made to explain to the public, neighboring communities, and the Board the reasons for and techniques of sound land management.

Completely map the District's natural communities within two years, and identify those sites most in need of active management. The District has already begun to map its natural communities, but the pace must be accelerated and priorities established soon.

Prepare management plans for all preserves of good to very high quality, and present a budget for managing them. The District should strive to have 10,000 acres under active management in two years, 20,000 acres in four years.

Redirect Maintenance staff to assist in land management. Currently, more than 60% of the District's employees (Recreation and Maintenance) take care of 15% of the land. The District should retrain and reassign up to 30% of these to further land restoration efforts.

Take greater advantage of resources assembled by Chicago Wilderness. The District should devote additional staff and resources to fully take advantage of grants and collaborations.

Expand and invest in the volunteer restoration program. The District currently has one volunteer coordinator on staff who is paid approximately \$37,000 per year. The contribution of volunteers in time and labor to the District is estimated to be \$400,000 a year. The District should devote more resources to recruiting and assisting volunteers—such as hiring a second volunteer coordinator—as this is an excellent way to leverage the District's resources and investment.

Lift the remainder of the moratorium still in effect. This temporary expedient has outlived its usefulness. The District should move ahead.

Review and revise the Land Management Recommendations. The existing guidelines were assembled hastily in response to negative publicity. The continuing moratorium on some standard land management practices (like the thinning of the four- to eight-inch-diameter "pencil trees," as they are commonly called, that currently overpopulate some forests) continues to hamper and erode the efforts of District staff and volunteers. Many of the guidelines are widely believed to need improvement.

Fill all open land management positions in the Departments of Conservation and Forestry by recruiting from among the ranks of this region's and the nation's best experts. As was true in the past, these key positions should be isolated from patronage influence.

Appendixes

Appendix A

Questionnaire for User Survey

To make the Forest Preserves of Cook County better for everyone, we would like to hear your views.
Thanks for your help!

1. How often do you go to a Cook County forest preserve?
 Never Less than twice a year 2–6 times a year 7–20 times a year
 21–60 times a year Over 60 times a year Daily

2. What forest preserve(s) do you visit most often? _____

3. How do you usually get there? (Choose one.)
 Car or motorcycle Public transport Horse Walk Bicycle Other

4. What do you do there? (Check all that apply.)
 Picnicking Walking/hiking Landscape restoration/litter clean-up
 Golfing Jogging Nature Center programs
 Swimming Bicycling District events (Haunted Forest, sugar festival...)
 Fishing Horseback riding Other events (concerts, rallies...)
 Sledding/tobogganing Cross-country skiing Photography/art
 Boating/canoeing Bird watching Scientific research
 Model airplane flying Exercising dog
 Other: _____

5. Please grade these aspects of your visit. (Circle one for each, from A for excellent to F for failing.)

	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Public information (maps, handouts, flyers)	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Entry and entrance signs (“curb appeal”)	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Parking and access	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Sanitary facilities	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Trash collection and disposal	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Picnic areas:.....	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Trails:						
Signage	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Surface (potholes, grooming) ...	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Access points	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Length, connections	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Golf courses:						
Tees	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Fairways	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Greens	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Rough	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Clubhouses	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Pools:						
Changing areas	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Water quality	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Nature centers:						
Exhibits	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Sanitary facilities	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Staff	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Tobogganing/sledding areas	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Boat/canoe launches	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion
Safety of the preserves	A	B	C	D	F	No opinion

6. Have you seen wildlife in the forest preserves?

Yes No

If so, what types? _____

7. Do you use the areas beyond the picnic groves, bike trails, or other developed spaces?

Yes No

8. How important is each of the following features of the forest preserves?

	Extremely important	Important	Not important
Peacefulness, chance to get away from urban life.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Habitat for wild plants and animals.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chance to see wild plants and animals.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recreation in natural setting (canoeing, walking...)...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recreation in developed setting (swimming, golf...)..	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9. How serious is each of the following problems for the Forest Preserve District?

	Extremely serious	Serious	Not a big problem
Poor maintenance of facilities, trails, bridges, etc.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Inadequate recreational facilities.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of public access.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Litter.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Deterioration of natural habitat.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Shortage of educational programs, tours, etc.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Corruption/patronage.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Need to acquire more land.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Public safety.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of responsiveness or channels for public input....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

10. Please provide more detail on your answers or any other comments below. Feel free to use additional sheets. _____

11. Would you be willing to participate in a future survey about the forest preserves? If so, check the areas in which you are particularly interested.

- Recreational opportunities Budget, policies, and organization
- Nature, wildlife, and restoration Educational programs

From (optional):

Name _____

Address _____

City, State, ZIP _____

Phone(s) _____

e-mail _____

Appendix B

Design of the Land Study

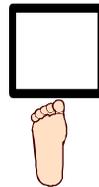
Methodology

For each randomly selected site, a 200-meter sampling transect will be established, and data will be recorded from 20 quadrats along that transect. The quadrat interval for the transect will be 10 meters. Each sampler will need to convert his/her steps into meters as measured on the training day (e.g., 12 steps = 10 meters).

Step-by-Step Procedures

1. Locate the randomly selected site to be sampled, as shown on the aerial.
2. Locate the randomly selected transect starting point that is shown on the aerial.
3. Record the site information on the data sheet.
4. Orient yourself in the randomly chosen direction indicated on the aerial by using a compass.
5. Starting at this point, locate the first quadrat two steps from the starting point in the direction of the transect.

6. The quadrat begins immediately at the end of the last step of a paced interval. Place the quadrat at the toe of the foot.

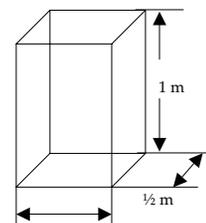


7. Place the balance of the quadrats at regular intervals of every 10 meters and continue until 20 quadrats are recorded.

Quadrat Data

The following data should be recorded:

1. Record the presence of all species that is inside the sampling area as depicted in the diagram. This includes branches and vines that are in the box but are not rooted in the quadrat.
2. Species name – use a six letter acronym consisting of the first 3 letters of the genus and the first 3 letters of the specific epithet. If unsure the acronym is a duplicate (e.g., *Baptisia leucophaea* and *Baptisia leucantha*) spell out the species. As a last resort, record the common name.
3. Cover of vegetation – record the approximate percent cover for each species using cover categories of 1, 5, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, and 100%. (Note: a 3x5 card in a $\frac{1}{4}\text{m}^2$ quadrat has about a 4% cover value.)
3. Cover of unvegetated area – looking straight down, use the percent cover categories to determine the area of unvegetated space. Unvegetated areas include bare soil, leaf litter, rock, dead branches, and large tree trunks.



Sampling rules:

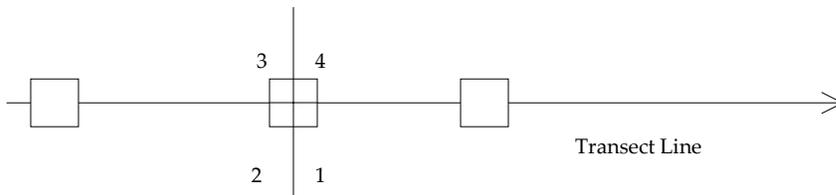
- If a species cannot be identified (NOTE: do not collect any plants), record the characteristics so it can be described to another person, draw a picture, or take a picture. Give the species a code name on the data sheet so the name can be recorded when the plant is later identified.
- Make a note on the data sheet when a plant community changes (e.g., left woods and entered field between quadrat 2 and 3, entered swamp at quadrat 10, steep north-facing slope between quadrats 13 and 19).
- If the transect crosses a maintained trail or road, count steps to the edge of the maintained path, cross to the far edge of the maintained path, take two steps and continue with the balance of steps, place the quadrat.
- If encountering a stream that can be crossed, continue with the regular pacing interval through the stream, do not skip over the stream.

Point Quarter Data (trees 1-8" DBH and 15" DBH and larger)

DBH is measured at 4½' above the ground on the uphill side of the tree. If the tree is multi-stemmed, record the DBH of the largest stem.

The following data should be recorded:

1. Two categories of trees will be sampled at every 3rd quadrat beginning with the 2nd quadrat
2. After sampling the herbaceous vegetation, stand at the quadrat and locate the four quarters to be sampled. This will divide the area around you into 4 quarters with you standing where the X crosses.



3. Sample the four quarters in a clockwise fashion.
4. For each quarter, record the large tree category first. Select the closest tree and record the species name. Pace and record the paces to the tree. Measure and record the DBH.
5. Categories:
 - A. Trees 15" DBH and larger
 - B. Trees from 1" to 8" DBH.

Sampling Rules:

- If a tree is recorded more than once, make a note on the data sheet. This may happen if the large trees are widely spaced.
- If there are no trees within 30 m, make a note on the data sheet.

Equipment

Site maps	Compass
Data sheets	Measured steps
Clipboard	Tree scale stick
Quadrats	Field guides
	Camera - optional

Appendix C

Community Quality Ratings

Table 8. Number of quadrats, C value, and natural quality percentages by community type

Chicago Wilderness Community Type	Number of Quadrats	Avg C	% Very high	% High	% Good	% Fair	% Poor	Total %
Dry-mesic woodland	324	2.2	0.92	2.07	2.47	3.68	9.30	18.44
Mesic woodland	72	2.1	0.34	0.40	0.52	0.57	2.47	4.31
Wet-mesic woodland	204	1.6	0.17	0.46	1.26	2.18	7.64	11.72
Floodplain forest	209	1.9	0.92	1.21	1.44	1.44	7.00	12.00
Shrubland	59	2.4	0.17	0.67	0.57	0.75	1.38	3.56
Dry-mesic sand savanna	39	3.5	0.29	0.86	0.46	0.34	0.29	2.24
Fine textured soil savanna	45	0.8	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.17	2.41	2.58
Fine textured soil prairie	63	1.7	0.06	0.17	0.52	0.40	2.47	3.62
Mesic sand prairie	11	1.7	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.17	0.40	0.63
Sedge meadow	20	1.9	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.57	0.57	1.15
Marsh	46	1.8	0.29	0.40	0.11	0.23	1.61	2.64
Cultural community tree	42	1.4	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.34	1.95	2.35
Cultural community tree plantation	88	0.9	0.00	0.00	0.17	0.11	4.77	5.05
Cultural community unassociated growth	322	1.1	0.00	0.17	0.52	2.76	15.11	18.55
Cultural community grass	194	0.4	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.46	10.68	11.14
Totals	1738	1.7	3.16	6.43	8.16	14.19	68.06	100.00

These assessments of land quality were determined by the use of the average coefficient of conservatism¹⁷⁴ per 1/4-square-meter quadrat. The Forest Preserve District of DuPage County has found this measure to be roughly correlated with other measures of forest health, including amount of bare soil, reproduction of canopy tree species, and degree of crowding in the sapling layer. But this method is the only one that works equally well for such communities as savannas, prairies, and wetlands. A related calculation, the Floristic Quality Index, is valuable in assessing short-term change and responses to management. But the mean coefficient is thought by many to be the best indicator of current state and recovery potential.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Floyd Swink and Gerould Wilhelm, *Plants of the Chicago Region*, 4th ed. (Indianapolis: Indiana Academy of Science, 1992).

¹⁷⁵ Wayne Lampa, personal communication, January 2002.