NEXT CENTURY CONSERVATION PLAN

for the Forest Preserves of Cook County

To the Residents of Cook County:

Thanks to the foresight of visionary civic leaders 100 years ago, every resident of our region has access to nature in the Forest Preserves of Cook County. We canoe and fish in the lakes and streams, we bike and hike 300 miles of trails, we picnic with family and friends, and we enjoy the relief the woods and prairies give us from the concrete of our large metropolis.

But we have not done enough to care for this treasure and to help nature, people and communities thrive. This is a plan to restore, expand and invite everyone to our forest preserves.

As the natural lands degrade, what was once wildflowers, grasses and oak trees become impenetrable thorn thickets. When we restore our woodlands, wetlands and prairies, we all benefit. Restoration helps clean our water and air, reduce flooding, improve property values, encourage investment in our communities and improve the health of nature and people.

I want to thank the civic leaders, organizations and staff who challenged us to be as visionary in this plan as the Forest Preserves' founders. Together, we can lead the way to protect and care for nature and people in the 21st century.

Toni Preckwinkle, President

Dear President Preckwinkle:

Thank you for the opportunity to craft a new vision for the Forest Preserves of Cook County. The Forest Preserves now protect an astonishing 11 percent of our county. But we have failed to invest enough in the fragile wild places that need our care.

Your leadership with the Forest Preserves Board of Commissioners to protect and expand our investment in the preserves will make our region a better place to live. We can conserve our woods and prairies, clean our air and reduce flooding, and get our children back outdoors.

This plan was created with the leadership of our fellow commissioners, supported by Metropolis Strategies and Openlands. We thank the committed conservation advisors and the staff of the Forest Preserves, who are already making the preserves better for nature and people. This plan was made possible by our lead sponsor, The Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust, as well as our other donors: PNC, The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation and the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

Next Century Conservation Plan Co-Chairs

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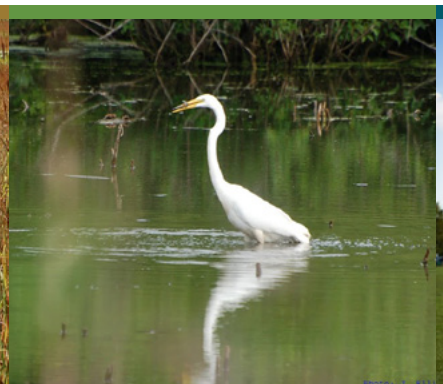

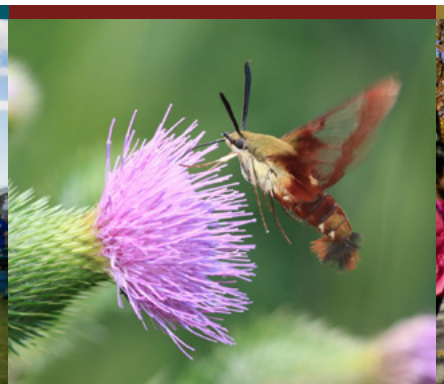

NEXT CENTURY CONSERVATION PLAN

for the Forest Preserves of Cook County

January 2014

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For more information and a technical report, see **nextcenturyconservationplan.org**.

Executive Summary: Our Preserves, Our Future

One hundred years ago, civic leaders had the foresight to leave us an extraordinary gift–the Forest Preserves of Cook County. Today, as we face the challenges of urban sprawl and climate change, we need our forest preserves more than ever.

Healthy natural land invites children and adults to discover nature and enjoy outdoor recreation. It reduces flooding, naturally cleans our air and water, increases adjacent property values and creates opportunities for investment.

It's time for a renewed vision. In the 20th century, we preserved the land. In the 21st, we must restore our preserves to health.

Benefits of implementing the Next Century Conservation Plan:

- A healthy, beautiful and safe natural environment where diverse plants and animals thrive
- Reduced flooding
- Cleaner air and water
- Opportunities for nature-related businesses, jobs and tourism
- Economic gains from increased property values
- People who are healthier thanks to outdoor exercise
- Educational enrichment for children and research opportunities for scientists
- Enhanced quality of life for everyone in Cook County

OUR VISION

The people of Cook County will celebrate and nurture our thriving woodlands, prairies and waters as world-class treasures that sustain our great metropolis.

OUR GOALS & PRIORITIES

GOAL 1 / NATURE

Native landscapes will thrive for generations.

- Invest in restoration and stewardship.
- Mobilize people to heal and nurture the land.
- Connect the preserves to a wider wilderness.
- Learn from and adapt to a changing environment.

GOAL 2 / PEOPLE

Everyone in Cook County will feel welcome at the forest preserves—and will seek them out for discovery, renewal and fun.

- Invite, excite and engage diverse visitors from all walks of life.
- Make the preserves accessible to all.
- Educate visitors and the community about the forest preserves' natural treasures.
- Provide programs in the preserves that emphasize health benefits.

GOAL 3 / ECONOMY

Communities will value the economic benefits of protected lands.

- Build the economic case for nature.
- Encourage nature-compatible business development.
- Market the forest preserves as an iconic element of metropolitan Chicago.

GOAL 4 / LEADERSHIP

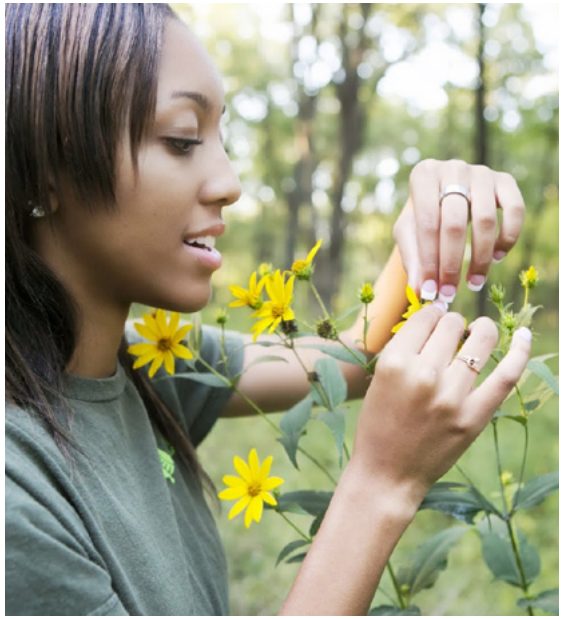
Visionary conservation leaders will safeguard, expand and bring increased resources to the Forest Preserves.

- Manage with excellence, transparency and sound financial practice.
- Provide enduring, focused conservation leadership and increased accountability.
- Maximize public and private resources and use them wisely to achieve the vision for future growth and restoration.

What will it take?

This Plan calls for transforming the forest preserves to places that foster diversity of plants, animals and habitats and welcome diverse people. It will require expert conservation leadership and a major infusion of new resources to:

- Restore 30,000 acres to good ecological health.
- Expand the forest preserves to 90,000 acres (from 69,000 today).
- Dramatically increase the number of volunteer stewards.
- Create a permanent conservation corps to train a restoration workforce.
- Make the preserves inviting and accessible to everyone.



What does success look like?

In 25 years, the people of Cook County will celebrate thousands of acres of healthy woodlands, wetlands and prairies, filled with thriving native trees, grasses, flowers, birds and other animals. Millions of children and adults who reflect the diversity of Cook County will enjoy hiking, biking, bird watching, walking, camping, fishing and otherwise discovering nature.

The Board of Commissioners will have the continued support and advice of conservation experts to advance restoration of the thriving preserves. And people from throughout the region will champion the preserves as a source of beauty, inspiration, economic vitality and health.

COLUMBIA WOODS

DES PLAINES RIVER TRAIL—RIVER TRAIL NATURE CENTER

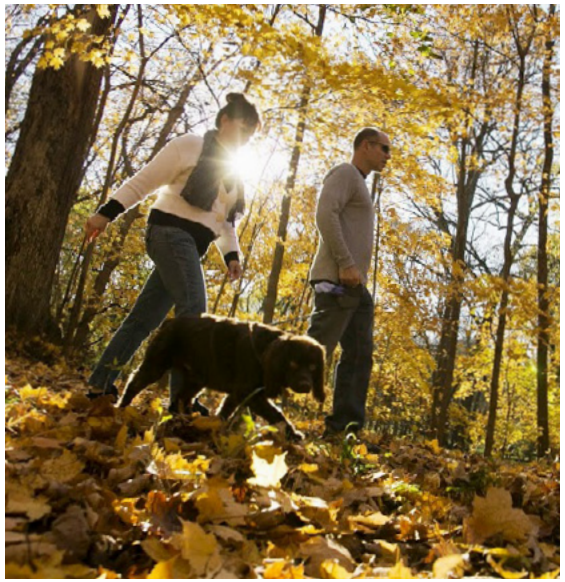
INTRODUCTION

Our Preserves, Our Future

One hundred years ago, as our young metropolis was quickly expanding, civic leaders in Chicago had the wisdom and foresight to leave us an extraordinary gift: the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

A century ago, this was a new idea comparable to the founding of the national parks: vast areas protected within an urban region to protect and preserve "flora, fauna and scenic beauties in their natural state... for the purpose of the education, pleasure and recreation of the public." Today, the forest preserves have grown to almost 69,000 acres.

In our modern era of urban sprawl and climate change, we need our forests, prairies, savannas, wetlands, lakes and rivers more than ever. The forest preserves

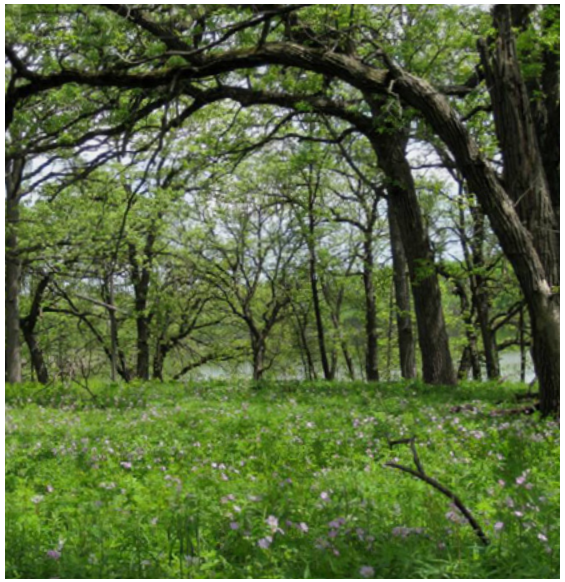


provide habitat for hundreds of plant and animal species. They help clean the air, absorb rainwater and store carbon. They can help us enjoy healthier, happier lives, and they provide endless opportunities for learning about the living world. Forest preserves can help strengthen our region's communities. They can be a treasured part of the fabric of life for millions.

But the forest preserves—our precious inheritance—are at risk. Decades of neglect have left rare plant and animal communities struggling to survive. Aggressive, invasive trees and shrubs have taken over, blocking the sunlight, choking out native plants and destroying the landscapes birds, butterflies and other wildlife need to thrive. The dedication of volunteers and staff has brought some of the preserves back to a flourishing state, but only a small portion—today only a few thousand acres are in good ecological condition.

It's time for a renewed vision. In the 20th century, we preserved the land. In the 21st, we must help it thrive and make it welcoming.

The ambitious goals and recommendations in this Next Century Conservation Plan may take decades to achieve. We need to commit fully to a program of renewal, restoration and engagement because nature's health is our health. The goals of this plan, fully realized, are essential to our future. Nature in Cook County depends on it, and so do we.



MISSION

> "...to acquire and hold lands...for the purpose of protecting and preserving the flora, fauna and scenic beauties...in their natural state... for the purpose of the education, pleasure and recreation of the public.
>
> 1913 Enabling Legislation

THE FIRST CENTURY

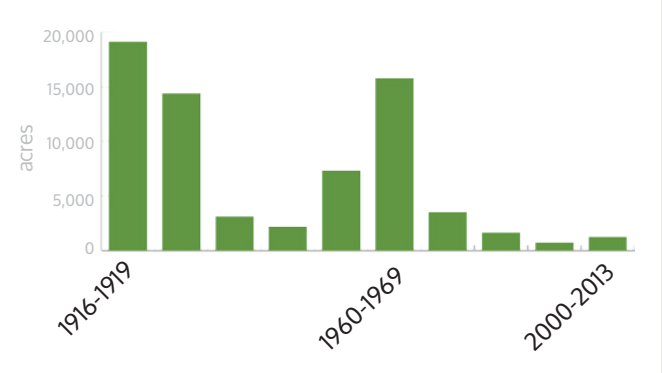
"No city conditions, however ideal in themselves, supply the craving for real out-of-door life, for forest and wild flowers and streams. Human nature demands such simple and wholesome pleasures."

Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett, *Plan of Chicago*, 1909

By the turn of the 20th century, it was clear that Chicago was fast becoming one of the world's great cities. It was also clear that the beautiful landscapes surrounding the city could soon vanish under the aggressive spread of houses and factories. With the ideals that led their contemporaries to found the National Parks, community leaders came together to propose an audacious idea: create a huge expanse of public land around the city's core, and protect it forever in its natural state.

The visionaries behind the idea included Jens Jensen, a landscape architect famous for celebrating Illinois' native plants, and Dwight Perkins, an architect who helped found the Prairie School movement. Starting in 1904, they advocated tirelessly for the creation of a permanent preserve system, engaging leaders such as Daniel Burnham and The Commercial Club of Chicago, and ultimately reaching thousands of people.

After ten years of political and legal struggle, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County was at last established. Thanks to their vision and persistence, one of America's greatest metropolitan regions now protects globally rare plants and habitats that demonstrate the interdependence of people and nature.



LAND ACQUISITION BY DECADE

The Forest Preserves of Cook County grew significanty in its first two decades. By the end of 1919, the agency held 19,115 acres, and by the end of 1929, it held 33,504. Today, the agency holds 68,725 acres.

VISIONARY AND PERSISTENT LEADERS

1904 Chicago landscape architect Jens Jensen and architect Dwight Perkins outline a vision for what would become an unparalleled system of regional forest preserves.

1908 Jensen, Perkins and others found the Saturday Afternoon Walking Club, leading hundreds on weekly hikes punctuated by scientific lectures and drama performances.

1913-14 Enabling legislation passes the General Assembly, and voters approve a referendum to create the Forest Preserve District of Cook County.

1915 First meeting of the Board of Forest Preserve Commissioners.

LAND ACQUISITION AND DEVELOPMENT

1916 The District acquires its first preserve at Deer Grove.

1929 Forest Preserve Advisory Committee issues a plan to guide land acquisition and policy for the next 40 years.

1931 The District opens the first of its six nature centers in River Forest.

1934 The Chicago Zoological Society opens Brookfield Zoo on forest preserve land.

1933-1942 Under the New Deal, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) hires thousands of workers who build the Skokie Lagoons and other recreational sites.

FROM PRESERVATION TO RESTORATION

1945 Influenced by Aldo Leopold's land ethic, the District creates a Department of Conservation.

1960s Statutory limit of the preserves is expanded from the original limit of 35,000 acres to 60,000 acres.

1965 The first prairie restoration is implemented at Camp Sagawau.

1970s Volunteer stewardship emerges.

1972 The Chicago Horticultural Society opens the Chicago Botanic Garden on forest preserve land.

1996 The District is one of 34 founding members of Chicago Wilderness, a coalition dedicated to protecting nature in the region.

2000 The Forest Preserve Act is amended to increase statutory authority to expand the preserves to 75,000 acres.

2003 The Department of Resource Management is created to protect, restore and preserve biodiversity.

2004 The Land Policy Ordinance prohibits land sales.

A NEW COMMITMENT FOR THE NEXT CENTURY

2012-13 The Forest Preserves creates operational plans for land acquisition, recreation and camping, and a Centennial Campaign.

2013 The U.S. District Court finds the Forest Preserves to be free of political considerations in hiring and employment.

2013-16 The Forest Preserves celebrates its centennial with multiple legacy projects.

RESTORING NATIVE LANDSCAPES

WHAT IS RESTORATION?

When settlers first arrived in Illinois, their towns were islands in a sea of nature. Bison roamed the tallgrass prairies. Bur oaks spread their majestic branches over a blanket of wildflowers. Today, nature exists as tiny islands in a sea of people. Urban development has fragmented and in some cases eliminated natural areas.

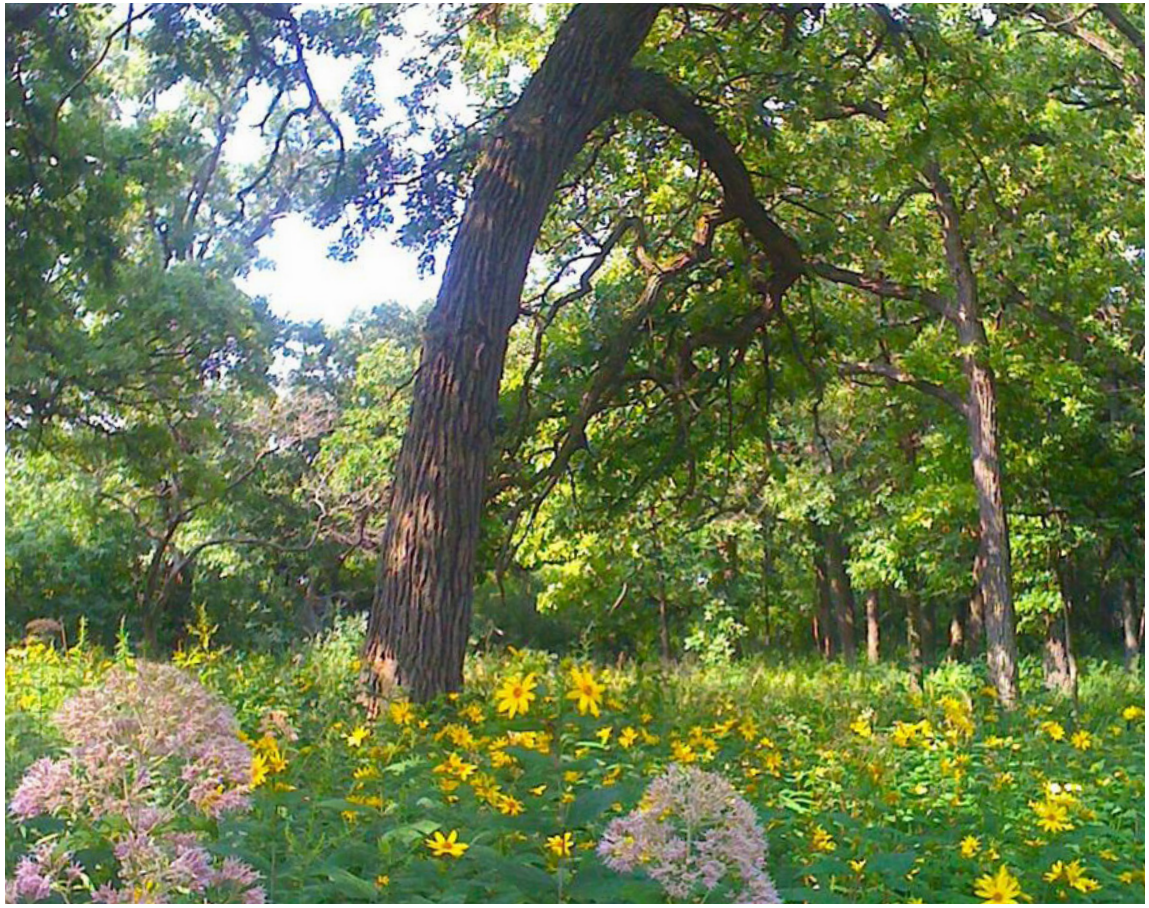
While some species—such as the passenger pigeon—are irretrievably lost, others are coming back to life as we begin to revive these lost habitats. Ecological restoration is the process of returning landscapes to health using scientific knowledge and recognized techniques to create an ecosystem filled with a diversity of native plants and animals.

Land stewards begin the restoration process when they remove harmful or overgrown plants. They collect and distribute seeds of native plants, rejuvenating the carpet of wildflowers and grasses. Prescribed burns by certified specialists perform a natural "spring cleaning," clearing unwanted brush, letting in sunlight and recycling nutrients to stimulate the growth and germination of native plants.

WHY NOT JUST LEAVE NATURE ALONE?

The mission of the Forest Preserves a century ago and today is to "restore, restock, protect and preserve…their flora and fauna…." The preserves have been altered dramatically by human impact, whether it was agricultural land acquired a century ago or fragmented parcels within urbanized communities today. While restoration ecology is an evolving science, it is a critical responsibility of the Forest Preserves.

Today, our prairies, woodlands and wetlands are overwhelmed with aggressive

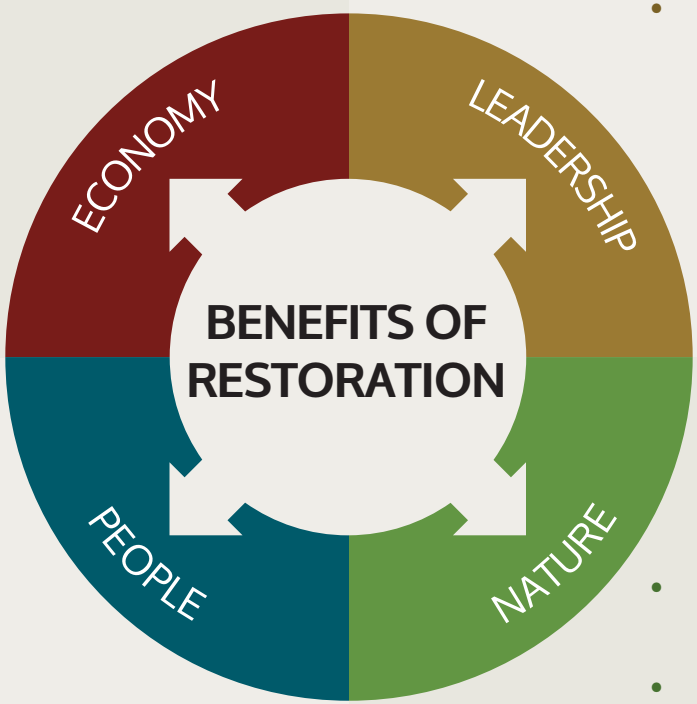


plants that need to be kept in check by humans. Decades of neglect have allowed our diverse woodlands and grasslands to lose their wildflowers and become impenetrable thorn thickets. Eroding soil silts our streams, ponds and wetlands. Native plants and animals are threatened.

With the loss of natural systems comes the loss of public benefits. Without a healthy restored landscape, our metropolitan region will be dirtier, hotter, less safe and less attractive.

BEFORE (top left) and AFTER RESTORATION (right)

One of Illinois' most significant native landscapes is the oak savanna. In an overgrown, brush-filled forest, such as the one shown on the left, native oak seedlings cannot get the sunlight they need to survive. In a restored savanna, such as the one pictured on the right, the dark, thorn-filled tangle of brush is transformed. Restored healthy open woodlands such as this one are filled with wildflowers, do a better job of absorbing stormwater and filtering the air, and are welcoming to plants, animals and people.



- Increase in property values
- Reduced and avoided costs of:
  - Flooding
  - Cleaner air and water
  - Health care
- Nature-related businesses, jobs and tourism
- Quality of life that attracts talented people

- Advancement of conservation science
- Model for ecological restoration in an urban setting
- Adaptation to climate change

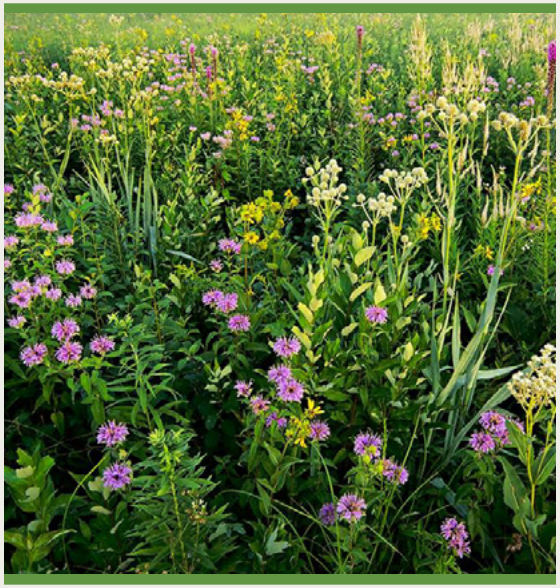
- A healthy and beautiful natural environment
- Nature discovery
- Outdoor education and recreation
- Active lifestyles and hands-on volunteer opportunities
- Relief from urban life

- A rich variety of native plant and animal species
- Habitat for rare, threatened and endangered species
- Thriving native landscapes that grace the Chicagoland region:
  - Oak savannas and woodlands
  - Tallgrass prairies
  - Clear meandering streams
  - Fens, bogs and marshes

OUR VISION

The people of Cook County will celebrate and nurture our thriving woodlands, prairies and waters as world-class treasures that sustain our great metropolis.

OUR GOALS



GOAL 1 / NATURE

Native landscapes will thrive for generations.

GOAL 2 / PEOPLE

Everyone in Cook County will feel welcome at the forest preserves—and will seek them out for discovery, renewal and fun.

GOAL 3 / ECONOMY

Communities will value the economic benefits of protected lands.

GOAL 4 / LEADERSHIP

Visionary conservation leaders will safeguard, expand and bring increased resources to the Forest Preserves.

CRABTREE PRESERVE

GOAL 1 / NATURE

Native landscapes will thrive for generations.

When the Forest Preserves' creators set out to "protect and preserve" nature, they could not have guessed how important their work would be. Today, more than 100 endangered and threatened species survive in Cook County—in habitat as rare as the rainforest.

The Forest Preserves has a central role to play in keeping these treasures safe for future generations. To do this, they need our help. While many sites in the forest preserves have extraordinary ecological significance, only a few thousand acres of the Forest Preserves' lands are in good or excellent condition today. Just as we recognize that a greater diversity of human cultures, backgrounds and values enhances communities, the preserves need diversity

of plants and animals—and the care of people—to be healthy and thrive.

Scientists, land specialists and volunteers have already demonstrated that careful work and ongoing vigilance and stewardship can bring even badly deteriorated areas back to life. On restored land in preserves such as Somme Prairie and Deer Grove, hundreds of rare plants and animals are now thriving. This kind of success is achievable in preserves all over Cook County. Thousands of additional acres are in the process of being restored. But restoration is not a one-time effort. Just as people need good food, exercise, sleep and regular check-ups with a doctor to ensure their long-term health, nature in an urban setting needs our ongoing care.

The forest preserves are waiting to be transformed. They are already unique: the largest network of urban preserves in the nation and one of the few places anywhere that offers rare natural beauty side-by-side with the attractions of a global city. Brought to their full potential, the preserves can be one of Cook County's most important landmarks and the pride of scores of communities. They could help the Chicago region advance its leadership in both ecological restoration and in taking action to adapt to climate change. Most importantly, the preserves could be one of the best gifts this generation will ever give to the future residents of Cook County.

PRIORITIES	ACTIONS
INVEST IN RESTORATION AND STEWARDSHIP.	• Manage all lands to support both biodiversity and public engagement, and tie activities to the ecological quality of the landscape. • Conduct a thorough evaluation of current holdings with experts through the development of the Natural and Cultural Resources Master Plan. • Double the acreage currently being restored to attain 30,000 acres in good or excellent ecological condition. • Allocate, raise and invest $40 million a year—eight times the current investment—for nature restoration and stewardship. • Recognize and dedicate restored forest preserve sites through designation of the highest level of protection in Illinois: Illinois Nature Preserves and Land and Water Reserves. • Promote the value of restored landscapes as safe, well maintained and inviting.

PRIORITIES	ACTIONS
MOBILIZE PEOPLE TO HEAL AND NURTURE THE LAND.	• Set high standards and increase resources for restoration by expert staff and contractors. • Dramatically increase volunteer engagement by partnering with community leaders and organizations. • Create a permanent Conservation Corps, working in partnership with workforce, justice system and community agencies to engage and train the next generation to restore and steward the land.

PRIORITIES	ACTIONS
CONNECT THE PRESERVES TO A WIDER WILDERNESS.	• Expand the forest preserves by 24 percent to 90,000 acres, prioritizing acquisition of lands with high ecological value, lands under threat of irretrievable loss, lands that secure our water quality and quantity, and lands that can engage new audiences. • Support ecosystem, greenway and trail connections, enabling people, animals, water and seeds to move easily through the Chicago Wilderness region. • Expand innovative partnerships with the Cook County Land Bank, NeighborSpace and local park districts, and capitalize on connections with government agencies and conservation organizations at neighborhood, regional and state levels to protect land and engage people.
LEARN FROM AND ADAPT TO A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT.	• Building on the research capacity of the Chicago Botanic Garden, Chicago Zoological Society and other institutions, advance our scientific knowledge of plants, animals, water and natural areas in a changing climate. • Practice water conservation and energy efficiency throughout the forest preserves, use native landscaping and permeable surfaces, and be a leader in adapting to and mitigating climate change. • Pursue LEED certification for new construction and redevelopment of properties, and pursue SITES certification for landscape design. • Expand relationships with sustainability advocates to repurpose abandoned or buffer properties for restored ecological functions, local food growing and native landscaping.

BARTEL GRASSLAND

TIMELINE OF TRANSFORMATION

The highlights here provide a small sample of all the Forest Preserves should expect to achieve, and the agency should assess progress and set new targets every five years.

SET AND REACH NEW TARGETS EVERY 5 YEARS

NOW

GET STARTED

- Gain a comprehensive understanding of the forest preserves' ecology and conditions by completing the Natural and Cultural Resources Master Plan (initiated in 2013).
- Adopt a plan to increase the number of acres in the Illinois Nature Preserves and Land and Water Reserves to 10,000 acres by 2015 and 20,000 acres by 2025 (from a baseline of 7,900 acres in 2013).
- Implement a consistent and thoughtful decision process for determining appropriate activities for specific lands based on their characteristics.

IN 5 YEARS

MEASURE PROGRESS

- All 10,000 acres that are dedicated Illinois Nature Preserves and Land and Water Reserves will be improved and restored to good or excellent quality.
- Financial and management resources will be dedicated to restoring half of the Forest Preserves' land by 2040.
- Forest Preserves restoration crews will work with at least 500 conservation corps members—built on partnerships that provide supportive workforce training for at-risk youth and young adults.
- Increase the statutory limit for land acquisition from 75,000 to 90,000 acres.
- Cook County will be known as a premier birding destination for grassland, woodland and migrating birds.

IN 25 YEARS

CELEBRATE OUTCOMES

- At least 30,000 acres will reach Illinois Natural Areas Inventory quality and be restored to thriving, high-quality natural areas and maintained over the long term.
- Healthy, transitional natural areas will account for most of the remaining 60,000 acres in the preserves, offering a variety of habitat, buffer areas and low-impact recreation opportunities, such as trails.
- All built "portals" that invite the public, such as nature centers, picnic areas, pavilions and more, will be landscaped to support nature.
- Due to flourishing, restored habitats, the preserves will be a nationally significant breeding and migration resting place for rare birds.
- Four hundred expert volunteer stewards will supervise thousands of volunteers to restore and maintain the ecological health of at least 30,000 acres.

A CONVERSATION OF THE FUTURE

Imagine the conversation of a family that discovers river otters in the forest preserves–a species that was threatened but will increasingly thrive here as restoration makes rivers and streams cleaner.

"Look there in the water. See it?"

"Where?"

"Right by that big clump of yellow flowers."

"It's a little dog! It's swimming!"

"Quiet, now. It's a river otter—just a young one, I think. There, he's coming up out of the water for a bit."

"I never saw an otter before."

"It's been a long time since they lived here."

"He's scratching his fur. Why didn't otters live here before?"

"It wasn't a very good place for them. They need lots of fish to eat, and you can't have fish without clean water and healthy plants and plenty of peace and quiet, too. The same things little humans need."

"He's scratching all over."

"He wants to get his fur just right. You know, I was one of the people who helped make this a good place for plants and animals, back before you were born. That was my very first job, working out here. It was pretty bad when we started. But the whole neighborhood got involved, and there were experts who came and showed us what needed to be done. And now here you are, and here's a little otter, too. Oh—there he goes, back into the water."

"He's swimming away now."

"Don't you worry. This is a good home for him now. He'll be back."

CRABTREE NATURE CENTER

BUSSE WOODS POW WOW

GOAL 2 / PEOPLE

Everyone in Cook County will feel welcome at the forest preserves—and will seek them out for discovery, renewal and fun.

Just about everyone in Cook County lives near the forest preserves—more than 80 percent of the population is within five miles. Many of these residents have no idea that a natural treasure is waiting for them right in their backyards.

The forest preserves have a lot to offer us all. Nature trails are ideal places for exercise, and the preserves have hundreds of miles of them. Free educational opportunities, from sites where Native Americans once lived to wildlife encounters to harvesting prairie seed, are available at the preserves year-round. And the preserves' picnic groves and campsites are places where we can build the social bonds that make our communities strong. Even those who don't visit the

forest preserves can appreciate the respite they provide from crowds and concrete, along with plants that clean our air, absorb rainwater and give beauty to our region.

The forest preserves may seem like Cook County's best kept secret because easily accessible entry points are hard to find, and it is sometimes difficult to know what to do when you get there. While the forest preserves are filled with picnickers on sunny summer weekends, many of these visitors do not venture beyond the picnic table.

To better connect people to the forest preserves, we need to find ways to get more people there—good public transit access is available to only 7 percent of the county's population. We also need to welcome visitors with better information by improving signs and facilities and by offering programs specifically designed to appeal to their interests—whatever their age, abilities or economic and cultural background. The Forest Preserves' staff and volunteers should reach out to communities, helping people make connections to nature wherever they are—and especially in the classroom.

The forest preserves belong to the public, every acre of them. We need to guarantee that every Cook County resident has the opportunity to enjoy and benefit from this great inheritance.

PRIORITIES	ACTIONS
PROVIDE PROGRAMS IN THE PRESERVES THAT EMPHASIZE HEALTH BENEFITS.	• Partner with health care providers and their patients on "nature prescriptions" that encourage children and adults to spend time outdoors. • Use local food as an entry point to nature through demonstration projects—such as the Oak Forest Center for Total Health pilot program and community gardens in campgrounds and picnic areas. • Create health guides for trail use to encourage outdoor exercise as a way to enjoy nature and improve fitness.

PRIORITIES	ACTIONS
INVITE, EXCITE AND ENGAGE DIVERSE VISITORS FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE.	• Engage new audiences with innovative recreation and nature discovery. » Tailor activities to the sensitivity of specific landscapes. » Turn entry points such as parking lots and picnic groves into engaging celebrations of nature with help from public artists. » Use technology to orient, educate and help people have fun in nature. » Seek new forms of low-impact but exciting recreation, such as canopy tours and nature playgrounds filled with hands-on activities. • Expand and commit to meaningful long-term community partnerships to engage underserved communities. • Create programs with cultural competence and sensitivity to the changing demographics of Cook County. » Provide programs, products and services in multiple languages. » Include historic relationships to Native Americans and other people and cultures in interpretive materials and programs.
MAKE THE PRESERVES ACCESSIBLE TO ALL.	• Partner with regional, state and local transportation agencies to ensure that at least 75 percent of Cook County residents can reach the preserves from their homes in 45 minutes or less by taking public transportation, biking or walking, or in 20 minutes or less by car. • Provide access for visitors with mobility impairments and other disabilities.

PRIORITIES	ACTIONS
EDUCATE VISITORS AND THE COMMUNITY ABOUT THE FOREST PRESERVES' NATURAL TREASURES.	• Dramatically increase on-site information, such as interpretive signs, to help people understand where they are and to provide opportunities for discovery. • Create a network of volunteer nature educators who can teach about restoration and responsible stewardship in schools and informal educational settings. Support and leverage existing education partnerships to expand offerings. • Work with partners to make sure that every town or neighborhood has at least one teacher or informal educator who can train peers to integrate nature and the forest preserves into their educational practice. • Integrate the Chicago Zoological Society's and Chicago Botanic Garden's expertise in education, programming and visitor services into the entire Forest Preserves system.

COMPOSITION

TIMELINE OF TRANSFORMATION

The highlights here provide a small sample of all the Forest Preserves should expect to achieve, and the agency should assess progress and set new targets every five years.

SET AND REACH NEW TARGETS EVERY 5 YEARS

NOW

GET STARTED

- Install interpretive elements already designed for Deer Grove and Tinley Creek, and develop consistent design guidelines for all new gateways and interpretive sites.
- Partner with transit agencies to develop a long-term public-transit access plan.
- Make all nature centers and visitor facilities ADA accessible, and complete an accessibility transition plan for appropriate areas of the forest preserves.
- Expand partnerships with the leadership of diverse community organizations to promote access to and use of the preserves.

IN 5 YEARS

MEASURE PROGRESS

- Multi-year interpretive plans for gateways, nature centers, picnic facilities and trailheads will be in place.
- Ten gateway areas will be improved and include weekend shuttle service for transit riders.
- Programmatic and educational partnerships will be established through schools and community agencies in 25 underserved communities.
- The Oak Forest Center for Total Health will have a robust outdoor education program that connects patients to the benefits of outdoor exercise and uses local food as a gateway to nature appreciation.
- The Forest Preserves will partner with the Cook County Department of Public Health to initiate a Health Impact Assessment that creates baseline wellness statistics.

IN 25 YEARS

CELEBRATE OUTCOMES

- All visitor facilities will be self-interpreting through art, technology and on-site signage.
- Public transit will be an effective and efficient way to access the forest preserves.
- Leadership, volunteers, staff and users will reflect the diverse population of Cook County.
- The Forest Preserves Health Impact Assessment will show a substantial correlation between outdoor recreation at the preserves and improvements in major health indicators, such as rates of heart disease, diabetes and other diseases.
- Forest preserve sites will be integrated into school educational programming at all levels.

A CONVERSATION OF THE FUTURE

Imagine a young girl walking along an accessible trail in the forest preserves with her grandmother and sharing all she knows about the native plants and opportunities for healthy living.

"You doing okay, Grandma?"

"Fine, fine. I like to walk when everything's looking so green and healthy."

"You're looking pretty healthy yourself, these days. Think you could go a little farther? There's something I'd like you to see."

"Yes, if there aren't any stairs."

"I checked the website, and this whole trail is accessible for people with disabilities."

"That's good, then, sweetheart. Now look at that flower there. So pretty! I've lived here 60 years and never seen one like that."

"That's purple prairie clover—my teacher showed it to us. It's really special, and it's starting to come back now. So you'll be seeing more of them."

"I like to think of something like that growing here in our neighborhood. Rare and special. Whose garden is this?"

"It's a community garden. For people with high blood pressure—your doctor had a poster up about it. They show you how to grow stuff you should be eating more of, and then you get to take some of it home. For free. Mom thought maybe it was something we could all do together."

"But you don't have high blood pressure."

"They give classes on how to cook healthy, too. Mom thinks I should learn."

"That's a good idea. Okay, we'll all get healthier together. You, me, and the clover!"

CHICAGO BOTANIC GARDEN

BUNKER HILL

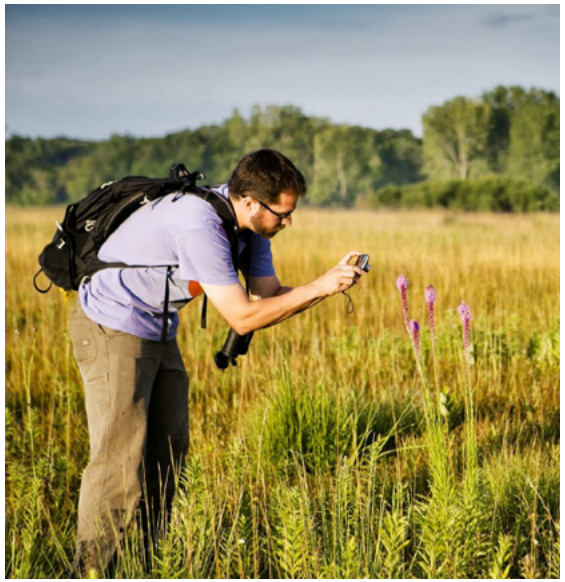
GOAL 3 / ECONOMY

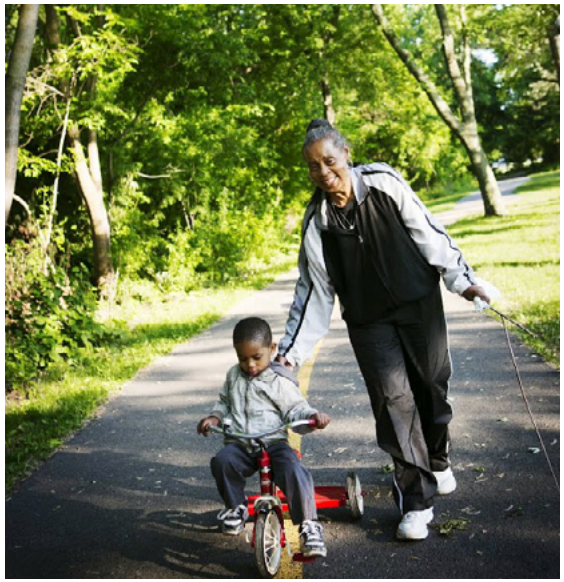
Communities will value the economic benefits of protected lands.

The Forest Preserves of Cook County were created to help our entire region prosper. As long ago as 1909, Daniel Burnham's *Plan of Chicago* made an economic argument for protecting them.

Burnham was right: the forest preserves' health and our region's economic health are linked. Research proves that natural green spaces can help our communities thrive by attracting residents and increasing property values. Green spaces and trails help tourism spending and investment stay at home and can reduce health care costs by offering free public outdoor exercise opportunities.

Just by being there, the preserves also provide our region with millions of dollars' worth of free services. They clean and cool

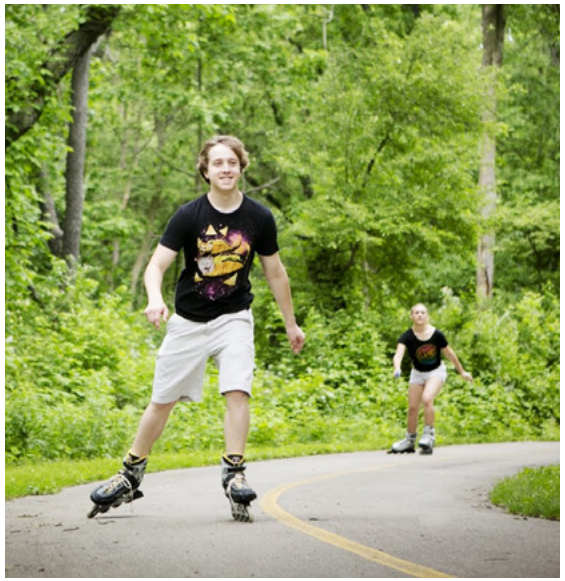




the air, purify the water and prevent flood damage and soil erosion.

The Forest Preserves' leadership can help communities and businesses recognize and build on the economic advantages of having protected nature nearby. Visitors to the forest preserves are an important market for small businesses that appeal to trail users and other outdoor enthusiasts. And the kind of young talent that businesses and residential developers want to attract includes outdoor enthusiasts who appreciate nature-conscious building practices and easy access to trails. The Forest Preserves can collaborate on marketing campaigns with neighboring communities, combining nature attractions with small business growth.

Nature is good for business, and the Forest Preserves has an important contribution to make.



> "The need for breathing spaces and recreation grounds is being forced upon the attention of practical men, who are learning to appreciate the fact that a city, in order to be a good labor-market, must provide for the health and pleasure of the great body of workers.
>
> Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett
> *Plan of Chicago*, 1909

PRIORITIES	ACTIONS
BUILD THE ECONOMIC CASE FOR NATURE.	• With research partners, document and publicize the dollar value and avoided costs of nature's benefits, such as reducing flooding, improving air quality and storing carbon, as well as offering free public health amenities. • Help local developers and property owners understand and market the advantages of proximity to protected land–such as higher property values, the growing attractiveness of compact development and access to green space. • Collect empirical data on forest preserve users in order to build the case for investment in small businesses nearby. • Demonstrate how restored habitats are more effective at soil erosion control and flood prevention than degraded landscapes, substantiating how an investment in restoration provides a sound economic return.
ENCOURAGE NATURE-COMPATIBLE BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT.	• Work with communities to find opportunities for trail and preserve-related retail uses, such as farmers' markets, coffee shops, bike rentals, canoe and kayak facilities or outdoor outfitters. • Help neighboring communities use the forest preserves to attract visitors and create markets for hotels, B&Bs, restaurants and retreat facilities nearby. • Track and publicize increased local investment and tax revenues from these new preserve-related businesses. • Increase habitat and enhance communities through collaborative projects, such as promoting native landscaping on corporate campuses. • Be proactive in publicizing clear policies, sharing information and anticipating how local economic development needs relate to nature conservation goals.

PRIORITIES	ACTIONS
MARKET THE FOREST PRESERVES AS AN ICONIC ELEMENT OF METROPOLITAN CHICAGO.	• Capitalize on shared marketing opportunities with the Chicago Botanic Garden and Chicago Zoological Society. • Creatively tie the preserves to tourism opportunities at Navy Pier, the Museum Campus, Millennium Park, Northerly Island, hotels and other destinations. • Package visitor opportunities with cultural and dining possibilities and a robust tour program.

Brookfield Zoo

Chicago Botanic Garden

SAGANASHKEE SLOUGH

TIMELINE OF TRANSFORMATION

The highlights here provide a small sample of all the Forest Preserves should expect to achieve, and the agency should assess progress and set new targets every five years.

SET AND REACH NEW TARGETS EVERY 5 YEARS

NOW

GET STARTED

- Establish partnerships with local chambers of commerce, tourism bureaus and community organizations to promote the market value of the forest preserves.
- Identify opportunities for nature-compatible development.

IN 5 YEARS

MEASURE PROGRESS

- The Forest Preserves will partner with public and/or private agencies to study the value of ecosystem services including green infrastructure benefits.
- The Forest Preserves and local partners will have in place tools for tracking how property values change as the forest preserves are restored and improved.
- There will be at least two examples of new nature-compatible development adjacent to the preserves and systems in place to collaborate with local officials and business owners to track the economic impact.

IN 25 YEARS

CELEBRATE OUTCOMES

- Data collection and analysis will demonstrate that increased investment in the care, maintenance and improvement of the forest preserves has a direct correlation to increased property values and sales tax revenue.
- Through partnerships with Cook County community economic development offices, at least 30 new businesses will be in place, each closely tied to the Forest Preserves' visitor market.

A CONVERSATION OF THE FUTURE

Imagine a young couple with their realtor discussing the benefits of living close to the forest preserves and the new nature-related businesses that will be in place 25 years from now.

"Quite a view, isn't it? The current owners say it's even more spectacular when the leaves turn."

"Yes, but what about when the next development goes up? We'll be stuck looking at somebody's fence, or the back of a strip mall."

"Not here. That land's all protected. And when the Forest Preserves finishes restoring it, they'll probably apply to have it dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve. That'll be a permanent addition to this property's value."

"That's what we've been looking for—a place that has some trees nearby. How hard is it to get around here by bike?"

"Well, the municipality planned their bike trails to take advantage of the preserves' trail system, so they're connected all over this part of the county. A lot of people here actually commute by bike. There's even a good bicycle repair store down by the post office."

"Listen to those birds! Are you sure those chirps aren't just coming from your phone?"

"No, that's the real deal, I promise! This place is famous for birds—a lot of tourists come out to see them. The little cafes around here do good business selling picnic lunches to go. We could go grab one, if you wanted, and visit the Birding Center. It's pretty interesting."

"Let's do that. It sounds like this neighborhood deserves a closer look."

NED BROWN PRESERVE

GOAL 4 / LEADERSHIP

Visionary conservation leaders will safeguard, expand and bring increased resources to the Forest Preserves.

Thanks to recent reforms and thoughtful leadership, the Forest Preserves' operational efficiency is increasing. But to achieve this plan's ambitious goals for a vibrant future, the agency needs additional resources and expert guidance.

To fully engage the public and restore the land, the Forest Preserves must have more financial resources. Other forest preserve districts in northeastern Illinois counties invest more per acre and per capita in their land. And our property tax contributions in Cook County don't measure up—per person or per acre—to the amounts neighboring counties devote to their preserves. The Forest Preserves' track record of relatively low taxes, conservative spending and light

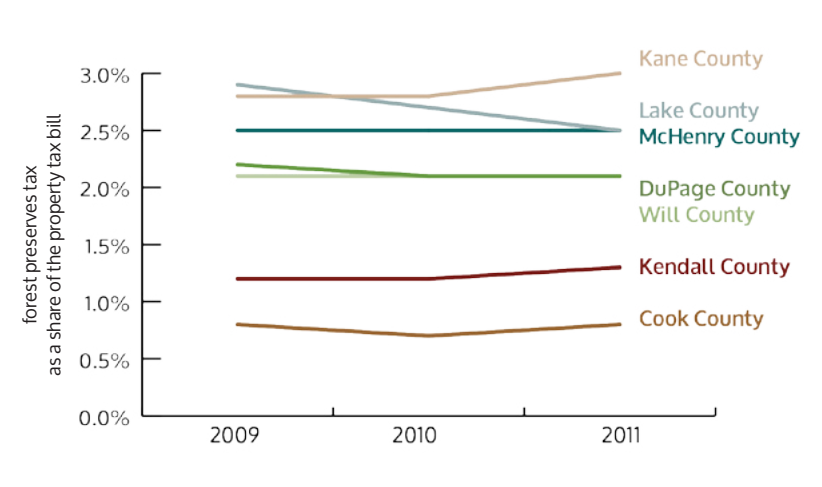
debt load position them well to consider measures that will increase revenues.

Conservation management is a complex and long-term activity. Restoration investments made today will require continuous conservation expertise to pay off in the future. The president and board have an opportunity now to make systemic changes that can enable the forest preserves to flourish for many decades to come. But in order for the public to feel confident that a long-term investment will pay off with significant habitat and quality-of-life benefits, the Forest Preserves needs the advice and active participation of skilled conservation leaders who have a singular focus on the long-term ecological and financial health of the forest preserves.

PRIORITIES	ACTIONS
MANAGE WITH EXCELLENCE, TRANSPARENCY AND SOUND FINANCIAL PRACTICE.	• Maximize operational efficiency by using metrics to set baselines, and evaluate performance of all operations. • Inform plans and decisions with market analysis, such as survey data that provide insight into the needs and interests of users. • Base investments and actions on plans, data and mission-driven policies. • Capitalize on partnerships with the Chicago Zoological Society, the Chicago Botanic Garden and Cook County government to achieve mutual goals. • Create a culture of customer service. • Maximize effective operations through cross-training and integration of management responsibilities. • Make information and data easily accessible to the public.

PRIORITIES	ACTIONS
PROVIDE ENDURING, FOCUSED CONSERVATION LEADERSHIP AND INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY.	• Create a "Forest Preserves Conservation Council" to provide continuous conservation leadership and expertise to the president and Forest Preserve District Board of Commissioners. » The Council will develop and annually update a five-year strategic and financial plan to operationalize the Next Century Conservation Plan and will review and make recommendations about the annual budget, policies and opportunities to maximize public and private financial resources. » The Council will consist of experts in conservation, ecology, education, management and finance who reflect the geographic and demographic diversity of Cook County. They will be appointed to serve staggered terms based on the recommendations of a nominating committee of expert organizations.

PRIORITIES	ACTIONS
MAXIMIZE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE RESOURCES AND USE THEM WISELY TO ACHIEVE THE VISION FOR FUTURE GROWTH AND RESTORATION.	• Expand non-tax financial resources through innovative enterprise operations, market-based fees for special purpose uses (e.g., facility rentals), public-private partnerships, sponsorships and donations in collaboration with the Forest Preserve Foundation. • Aggressively pursue regional, state and federal government grants. • Issue new bonds to fund well-planned capital expenditures for new acquisitions and restoration. • Capture the full value of statutorily allowed property tax resources. • Seek permission either from the Illinois General Assembly or by public referendum to exceed the tax cap for operations and debt service to achieve the vision of this Next Century Plan.



AN OPPORTUNITY TO INVEST IN THE FOREST PRESERVES

The Forest Preserves is in a good position to prepare a responsible financial plan to raise the funds needed to accomplish this vision. Compared to preserves in neighboring counties, total revenues are low, both per capita and per acre.

For example, this graph shows that Cook County's taxpayers devote a much smaller share of their tax bill to their forest preserves than other counties.

TIMELINE OF TRANSFORMATION

The highlights here provide a small sample of all the Forest Preserves should expect to achieve, and the agency should assess progress and set new targets every five years.

NOW

GET STARTED

- The president of the Forest Preserves Board of Commissioners will direct the general superintendent to recommend a nominating process, structure and schedule of meetings and activities for a new Forest Preserves Conservation Council, and the president will announce Council appointments within three months.
- Put in place a financial plan that will produce the $40 million annual investment needed to meet long-term restoration goals as well as the acquisition funds needed to expand the forest preserves to 90,000 acres in 25 years.

SET AND REACH NEW TARGETS EVERY 5 YEARS

IN 5 YEARS

MEASURE PROGRESS

- The Forest Preserves Conservation Council will have developed a second five-year strategic plan and will be deeply engaged with the general superintendent in recommending strategy and financial measures to ensure maximum return on restoration investment, public engagement and effective operations.
- The Forest Preserves will spend $200 million in new financial resources on restoration, and an additional $200 million will be available for the next five-year restoration program as a result of referendum, capital bond issue or other sources.

IN 25 YEARS

CELEBRATE OUTCOMES

- Due to excellent governance, increased resources and a 25-year $1–2 billion capital investment program, the Forest Preserves of Cook County will have successfully restored 30,000 acres, increased its protected land to 90,000 acres and be able to document that at least 25 percent of Cook County residents annually visit its improved interpretive facilities and trails.
- The Forest Preserves will have in place long-term goals for the next 25 years.

WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

In 25 years the people of Cook County will celebrate...

...thousands of acres of healthy woodlands, wetlands and prairies, filled with thriving native trees, grasses, flowers, birds and other animals

...thousands of young people working in the forest preserves as Conservation Corps members and building a long-term commitment to keeping nature healthy

...communities that recognize that healthy preserves are a sponge that absorbs rainwater, a filter that cleans the air and a source of beauty, inspiration and health

...visionary and innovative leadership that successfully manages investment in one of the world's largest and healthiest metropolitan nature preserves

...millions of children and adults who reflect the diversity of Cook County hiking, biking, birdwatching, walking, camping, fishing, learning, discovering and just enjoying quiet.

ABOUT THE PLAN

The Next Century Conservation Plan is a long-term vision document. Extensive background information, citations and further explanation of the ideas and recommendations in this plan are available in a technical report at **nextcenturyconservationplan.org**.

The Forest Preserves is also developing a suite of operational plans, some of which are already being implemented.

COMPLETED

Sustainability Doctrine (2010)
Five-Year Capital Improvement Plan (2012 update)
Final Land Acquisition Plan (2012)
Recreation Master Plan (2012)
Camping Master Plan (2012)
Oak Forest Heritage Preserve Master Plan (2012)
Centennial Campaign Plan (2013)

IN PROCESS

Natural and Cultural Resources Master Plan
Interpretive Plan for Deer Grove East and Tinley Creek Forest Preserves

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ADDITIONAL FUNDING PROVIDED BY

FOREST PRESERVES OF COOK COUNTY
PNC
THE RICHARD H. DRIEHAUS FOUNDATION

THE NEXT CENTURY CONSERVATION PLAN COMMISSION
appointed by Forest Preserves Board President Toni Preckwinkle

CO-CHAIRS
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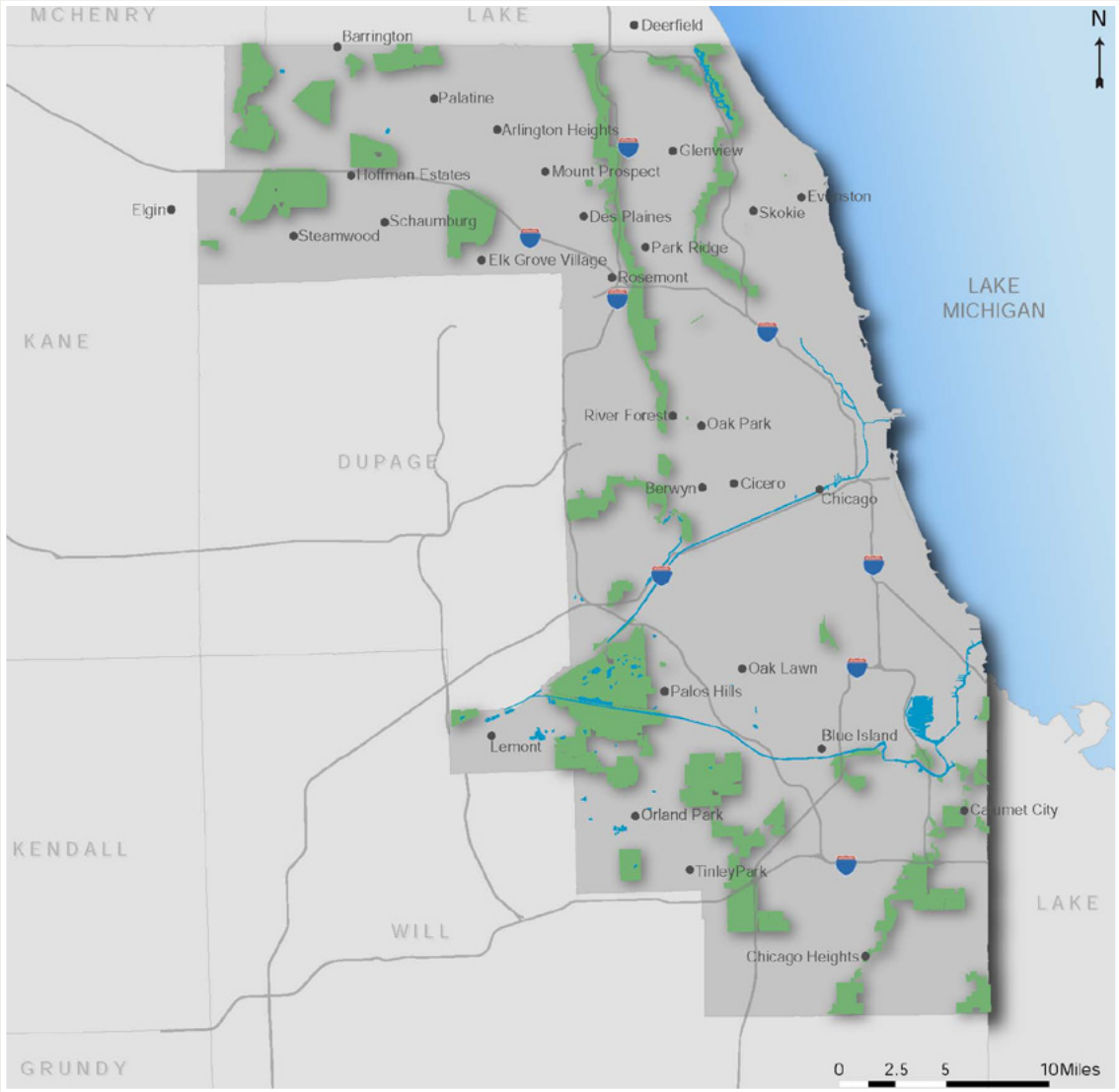
VISION

The people of Cook County will celebrate and nurture our thriving woodlands, prairies and waters as world-class treasures that sustain our great metropolis.



THE FOREST PRESERVES OF COOK COUNTY

The Forest Preserves' holdings include 24 dedicated nature, land and water preserves, 40 lakes and ponds, more than 300 miles of trail, three aquatic centers, two youth camps, ten golf courses, 21 boat and canoe launches, 274 picnic groves, six nature centers, Brookfield Zoo and the Chicago Botanic Garden.

nextcenturyconservationplan.org