

Forest Preserve and Conservation Districts in Northeastern Illinois:
Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century

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A comparative analysis of the important issues facing seven land preservation districts in northeastern Illinois

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- ☺☺ *Forest Preserve District of Cook County*
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- ☺☺ *Kendall County Forest Preserve District*
- ☺☺ *Lake County Forest Preserve District*
- ☺☺ *McHenry County Conservation District*
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INTRODUCTION

In northeastern Illinois, more than 170,000 acres are protected by a system of county-level land preservation agencies known as forest preserve districts and conservation districts. These public preserves are home to many endangered plants and animals and contain some of the nation's finest forests, prairies, savannas and wetlands. At the same time, these preserves are important sites for public education and recreation for a population of more than 8 million people. In order to meet the special challenges of the 21st century in a region with a rapidly growing population, the districts may be required to change their programs, priorities and operations to assure their long-term viability as organizations dedicated to the preservation and protection of land in the region.

Background and History: Countywide Land Preservation Agencies in Northeastern Illinois

The Chicago metropolitan region's county-level forest preserves and conservation districts were among the first urban land preservation agencies in the country. Forest preserve and conservation districts exist today due to the foresight of visionaries who saw the need for preserving vast tracts of land in their natural condition.

In the late 1890s, a civic group known as the Municipal Science Club initiated a study of Chicago's system of parks, playgrounds and open space. The Club's efforts inspired the Chicago City Council to formally establish the Special Park Commission on November 6, 1899, to develop a plan for the present and future needs of the city's park system. The Commission was composed of business leaders, attorneys, social reformers, aldermen, and prominent design professionals such as architect Dwight Perkins and landscape architect Jens Jensen.

After conducting an intensive study of the undeveloped lands at the outer region of the city, the commission identified the need for public agencies to acquire land in its natural state. The commission further recommended the creation of a crescent-shaped beltway of natural lands around the perimeter of Chicago.

In 1903, Henry G. Foreman, president of the Cook County Board, formed the Outer Belt Park Commission to move forward with the establishment of a countywide system of nature preserves. In 1905, a "Forest Preserve Act" was introduced in the state legislature but was held up by political debate. The renowned architect and planner Daniel H. Burnham incorporated the idea of a forest preserve system in his seminal *1909 Plan of Chicago*.

In 1913, the General Assembly finally enacted legislation authorizing the establishment of a forest preserve district for Cook County. The Downstate Forest Preserve District Act authorizing the development of other forest preserve districts in the state was approved in 1915 and within 13 years, DuPage, Kane and Will counties followed suit. Lake County established its forest preserves in 1958 and Kendall County created its system of forest preserves in 1964. McHenry County established a conservation district in 1971.

Purpose of This Study

As the northeastern Illinois region becomes increasingly urbanized, county-level land preservation districts face many challenges in their efforts to fulfill their mission to protect open space for conservation and for the enjoyment of their residents. This study analyzes how the six

forest preserve districts and one conservation district in the greater Chicago metropolitan region operate to meet those challenges. It includes the forest preserve districts in Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake and Will counties and the conservation district in McHenry County. This study is a comparative analysis which provides information on a variety of key strategic and programmatic elements. The research is intended to assist the districts themselves, potential future districts in the region's outlying counties, other conservation organizations and interested patrons of the preserves in understanding the complex issues and activities each district encounters. In addition to recommending changes to the current districts' operations, the final recommendations also give direction to establishing new land preservation districts.

Openlands and its affiliate CorLands are drawing on a more than 40-year history of working closely with governmental land preservation districts in the region to examine the issues these districts face. Openlands has assisted the districts with voter referenda for land acquisition, testified at budget hearings and assisted with restoration programs. Openlands staff members have frequently attended board meetings and worked with district executive directors, boards, program managers and other personnel on issues related to enhancing the quality and quantity of the preserves.

Each district has distinct policies, methods of operation and priorities. For some topics, it is difficult to make general recommendations that apply to each of the districts equally. The differences of each district often reflect the unique characteristics of its population, natural resources and government structure as well as the historical and political development. The recommendations made in this study are intended to highlight many of the positive policies and reform measures that have been adopted by individual districts and to suggest changes that will allow a district to address future challenges.

Methodology

This study is a comparative analysis of six forest preserve districts – in the counties of Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake and Will – and the conservation district in McHenry County. It does not include the districts elsewhere in the state because the demands on the land and the needs of the people they serve are vastly different than those in Northeastern Illinois.¹

The two-year study, March 2004 – April 2006, encompassed different types of research including personal interviews, review of official documents and publications and fieldwork. The initial research expanded upon Openlands' historical experience working closely with each of the districts. Staff researched the districts' operations by reviewing official district materials such as annual reports, newsletters, communication pieces and Web sites. Based on this information, a profile of each district was developed and a detailed list of topics requiring further study and analysis was created.

Openlands staff then conducted personal interviews with the executive director/superintendent of each district to address these topics. The discussions illuminated the different management styles of each director but also highlighted shared concerns. Openlands staff also spoke by phone and in person with many of the districts' department heads and other personnel to gather specific documents or information concerning the operation and management of each district. In addition, other experts who have worked with particular districts were consulted for their views on district

¹ Among Illinois' 102 counties, there are a total of 14 forest preserve districts and 5 conservation districts across the state. Most of the districts are located in the state's most populated counties.

operations. Studies of individual districts conducted by advocacy groups were also reviewed and incorporated into the analysis.

During the two-year study period, Openlands staff attended board meetings in each district and visited a minimum of three preserve sites in each district. In addition, Openlands staff attended virtually every Forest Preserve District of Cook County board meeting. Additional documents including policies, statutes, plans, budgets and newspaper articles were reviewed and assimilated with the information from the personal interviews, field work and experience to create the written report and recommendations. Openlands has attempted to include in this study the most current information available on each of the districts, however some older data was used for comparison purposes.

The resulting report is a compilation of the information, interviews and research. It explores the districts' similarities and differences in general management strategies and operational programs and makes recommendations for improving district operations. In addition, this report offers a blueprint for outlying counties that are considering establishing a land preservation district. As land preservation districts meet the new challenges of the 21st century, the report's recommendations can help balance the increasing demands on resources and to focus strategic direction for the benefit of the millions of residents living in the seven-county region.

BRIEF PROFILES OF THE DISTRICTS: OVERVIEW

This section gives a brief overview and statistics regarding each district in the study. The numbers are summarized on the following table. In addition, the map at the back inside cover shows the location of each district’s protected land.

Land Holdings by District				
County	Population*	Acres Of Preserves**	Acres of Preserves as a % of County Land	Acres of Preserves per 1,000 Residents
Cook	5,303,683	68,303	11.2%	13
DuPage	929,113	24,718	11.5%	27
Kane	482,113	14,683	4.4%	30
Kendall	79,514	1,050	.5%	13
Lake	702,682	25,190	8.4%	36
McHenry	303,990	20,020	5.1%	66
Will	642,813	16,913	3.1%	26
Total	8,443,908	170,877		

*July 1, 2005 population estimates from the Northeastern Illinois Planning Council and the U.S. Census Bureau.

**Acres as of April 2006

Cook County

With its holdings of 68,303 acres covering 11.2 percent of the county, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County is the largest single landholder in Cook County. Established in 1913 with its own enabling state legislation, the district was the first forest preserve district in Illinois. The mission of the district remains the same today as at its inception: to acquire and maintain lands to “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.”² In one of the most urbanized counties in the country, the district faces unique challenges in acquiring and protecting lands.

The district includes about 300 miles of paved and unpaved trails; six nature centers; five campgrounds for youth groups; more than 40 fishing lakes; 15 ice fishing areas; 11 boat ramps; 294 permitted picnic groves (185 with shelters); and 10 golf courses (4 with driving ranges). Nine rivers and streams pass through its holdings. In addition, 4,367 acres of district land are designated as Illinois Nature Preserves. The district sites receive an estimated 40 million visitors annually. The Botanic Garden and Brookfield Zoo together draw approximately 3.9 million visitors every year. These facilities are owned by the district and managed by the Chicago Horticultural Society and the Chicago Zoological Society, respectively.

The district serves about 5.3 million residents – more than all the other counties in this study combined. That population is projected to grow to 5.94 million by 2030. To keep pace with that

² 70 ILCS 810/7.

growth and maintain its current ratio of 13 acres per 1,000 residents, the district will need to acquire another 7,000 acres to reach its statutory limit of 75,000 total acres. Given how little undeveloped natural land is left and the cost of land in Cook County, that goal will be difficult to reach without an aggressive effort by the district. The Forest Preserve District of Cook County has never held a referendum to ask voters to approve the sale of bonds for land acquisition. The district would experience significant challenges in running a successful referendum as the majority of the voters live in the urban areas of the county where there are few opportunities to purchase large parcels of land. In 2004, the district was able to persuade the General Assembly to give the district authority to issue \$100 million in bonds for various capital improvements.

Years of financial mismanagement and questionable leadership have plagued the largest and oldest of the state's countywide land preservation districts. Operational and governance problems are exacerbated both by low funding levels relative to other forest preserve districts and disagreement among board members about key questions of district responsibilities and policies. With new management hired in 2003, key administrative changes have significantly improved financial management and the general state of the preserves. However, challenges still exist in many areas.

DuPage County

The Forest Preserve District of DuPage County is the state's second oldest, founded in 1915, and its third largest. As of April 2006, the district owns 24,718 acres at more than 60 sites, which constitutes more than 11.5 percent of the county. DuPage County is almost entirely built out, with a population of more than 929,000 that is expected to climb to slightly more than 1 million by 2030. Although the district owns about 27 acres of land for every 1,000 residents, that number is likely to decrease as population growth outstrips land available for the district to purchase. With so little quality natural land left that can be purchased at affordable prices, the district sought \$75 million in bonding authority in 1997 to help protect what remained. The measure passed with a 57 percent Yes vote. The District board approved borrowing an additional \$74 million in 2000 by accessing the debt service extension tax base and rolling over bonds.

The district's holdings include more than 140 miles of trails, 65 picnic areas, more than 600 acres of lakes and 60 miles of rivers and streams. The district owns three golf courses, an equestrian center, a nature education center, an 1890's living-history farm, a wildlife rehabilitation and education center and historic properties such as Graue Mill and the Mayslake Peabody Estate.

Kane County

The Forest Preserve District of Kane County was founded in 1925. Its 58 sites comprise 14,683 acres, which constitutes about 4.4 percent of the county. The county is experiencing intense development, with a population of more than 482,000 expected to soar to almost 700,000 by 2030. Despite planning efforts to concentrate growth in the eastern half of the county, urbanization is increasing rapidly in central and western Kane County as well. If the district were to choose to maintain its current ratio of 30 acres of protected land per 1,000 residents, it would need to increase its holdings to more than 23,100 acres by 2030. The district successfully passed a \$70 million referendum in 1999 with a sizable 66 percent Yes vote and conducted another successful referendum in April 2005 for \$75 million in bonds, which easily passed by 64 percent.

The district's holdings include many historic buildings and sites such as the 1850s Fabyan Dutch Windmill, the 1843 Durant-Peterson House, the Frank Lloyd Wright redesigned Fabyan Villa Museum and the Fabyan Japanese Garden. The district also owns one baseball stadium, three golf courses and one snowboarding facility and estimates that these facilities attract more than 1 million visitors each year. In addition, there are an estimated 2 million other visitors annually that include 600,000 at various events at the Kane County Events Center and 172,499 making reservations at forest preserve facilities. In total, the district makes what it calls a conservative estimate of more than 3 million visitors per year.

Kendall County

The Kendall County Forest Preserve District, established in 1964, is by far the smallest district in the seven-county Chicago region. As of April 2006, the district owned 1,050 acres at nine preserves and several smaller parcels. Its holdings have recently grown substantially with the purchase of the Hoover Outdoor Education Center, a former Boy Scout camp. The district now owns about 300 acres of the camp and leases the remaining 100 acres from CorLands, an affiliate of Openlands. The district anticipates purchasing the remainder in 2007. Voters approved a \$5 million referendum question in November 2002 with a 64 percent Yes vote for land acquisition.

Like the other counties at the edge of the Chicago region, Kendall is bracing for an influx of development. The county's population was less than 55,000 in 2000 but grew to nearly 80,000 in 2005. The City of Joliet plans to add 76,000 residents in Kendall County by 2030. Yorkville, Plano, Plainfield and Minooka are also set for rapid growth in upcoming decades. The county's population could well top 100,000 within 20 years. Today, Kendall is the fastest-growing county in the state and, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, it is the fourth-fastest-growing county in the entire United States. Moreover, the prospect of the Prairie Parkway, a proposed highway, slicing through the middle of the county is likely to spur additional development.

The district is well aware of these challenges and also of the need to protect more of the county's important natural areas. The district states, "[The district] is transforming from a collection of preserves used mainly as picnic grounds to an organization dedicated to natural resource protection and to providing residents with recreational and educational opportunities."³

Lake County

The Lake County Forest Preserve District was founded in 1958; more than 30 years after other Chicago-area forest preserve districts. It has grown quickly in that time, with more than 25,000 acres in holdings across the county. The district holds the second largest amount of land of any forest preserve district in the state. Lake County is projected to increase its population by almost 25 percent by 2030. Similar to other districts in rapidly developing counties in Illinois, the Lake County Forest Preserve District faces challenges in preserving open space such as rocketing real estate prices, insufficient funding for acquisition and competing public and private uses for land. Voted "Best in America" by the National Recreation and Park Association and the National Sporting Goods Association Sports Foundation,⁴ the district continues to be a model for many forest preserve practices.

³ Forest Preserve District of Kendall County, Master Plan, p. 7, November 2000.

⁴ In 1999, the District was the recipient of the National Gold Medal Award, which is presented annually by the National Recreation and Park Association to the nation's best conservation, park and recreation system.

A key component within the district's holdings is the Des Plaines River Trail and Greenway which now covers 7,700 acres and protects land along more than 85 percent of the river in Lake County, providing wildlife habitat, natural flood protection and outdoor recreation opportunities. The Des Plaines River Trail is nearly complete and connects 10 forest preserves with local parks and communities as it winds through the greenway from just south of the Illinois-Wisconsin border to Deerfield, ending at Lake-Cook Road. In total, there are more than 130 miles of multiple-use trails for hiking, bicycling and cross-county skiing.

The district also operates several special facilities such as museums, educational centers and visitor centers throughout its holdings. These sites include: Bonner Farm; Curt Teich Postcard Archives; Greenbelt Cultural Center; Independence Grove Visitors Center; Lake County Discovery Museum; Lake County History Archives; and the Ryerson Woods Visitors Center. Additionally, the district's golf courses have all been certified by Audubon International for incorporating natural resource management plans into their designs.

McHenry County

Established in 1971, the McHenry County Conservation District is the newest of the districts in the seven-county Chicago area. Nevertheless, it has acted swiftly to protect 20,020 acres, including 43 miles of hiking trails and 55 miles of multiple-use trails. The district's holdings provide an impressive 66 acres of open space per 1,000 residents. The county is under intense development pressure, however, as suburban development transforms the southern and eastern portions of the county. In addition, towns such as Richmond, Harvard, Woodstock and Marengo are growing rapidly. The county's population is expected to increase from more than 300,000 in 2005 to almost 450,000 by 2030.

Faced with this challenge, the district proposed a \$68.5 million referendum in 2001, which squeaked by with a 52 percent Yes vote. More than one-quarter of the district's 20,020 acres have been purchased in the last several years with money from the 2001 referendum. However, even with 20,020 acres, the district's holdings cover 5.1 percent of the county. That fact, plus the impending urbanization and rising cost of land, have prompted the district to set a goal of protecting a total of more than 38,000 acres by 2020.

Only 22 of the district's holdings are open to the public. In some cases the parcels include extremely sensitive natural areas that may never be open. For the most part due to the rapid pace of acquisition, the district is still developing master site plans and restoration plans for the new sites. The district is actively planning to open up more parcels in the near future.

Will County

Founded in 1927, the Forest Preserve District of Will County currently holds 16,913 acres of land across a large county with varying degrees of urbanization. The district owns 3.1 percent of the county's land mass and 26 acres per 1,000 county residents. Will is the one of the fastest-growing counties in the state. With development pressures both from the north, along southern Cook and DuPage counties, and from its own rapidly expanding City of Joliet, the district has increased its focus on land acquisition efforts. In 1999, county voters approved a \$70 million forest preserve referendum question with \$50 million in funds for land acquisition and

development. In April 2005, the district returned to the voters with a \$95 million bond referendum request. The voters responded with 53 percent support.

The district sites are very popular and provide visitors with a variety of activities. The district has 70 miles of trails for hiking, bicycling, cross country skiing and horseback riding. Special outdoor recreation activities are available at specific sites such as camping at Forsythe Woods, boating at the Monee Reservoir and sledding at the Goodenow Grove Nature Preserve. The Lake Renwick Heron Rookery provides habitat for a wide range of wetland bird species. Education programs are offered at the Isle a la Cache Museum, the Plum Creek Nature Center and the Environmental Learning Center.

STATUTORY AUTHORITY

Forest preserves and conservation districts operate under statutory authority granted by the Illinois General Assembly. The enabling legislation is the starting point to determine the scope of the districts' powers, duties and responsibilities. By statute, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County is distinct from all other forest preserves districts in Illinois. The differences between a forest preserve and a conservation district are evident in a comparison of the statutes that create each type of district.

Forest Preserve Districts

There are two statutes that govern forest preserve districts in Illinois: the Cook County Forest Preserve District Act⁵ and the Downstate Forest Preserve District Act.⁶ With the exception of the Cook County Forest Preserve, the Downstate Forest Preserve District Act controls all forest preserve districts in the state including those in DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake and Will counties. Although the statutes are similar, some distinctions are noteworthy.⁷

The enabling legislation of the Cook County Forest Preserve District Act and the Downstate Forest Preserve District Act both state that the mission and purpose of a forest preserve district is: "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."

Under the Cook County Forest Preserve District Act, the members of the county board also serve as the members of the forest preserve board and the president of the county board is the president of the forest preserve board.⁸ Historically, the members of downstate forest preserve district boards also served as county board members but, unlike Cook County, the president of downstate forest preserve districts was not the same as the county board president. Instead, the president of the board of commissioners is elected from among the commissioners themselves.⁹

The Downstate Forest Preserve District Act was recently amended and now has different structures of governance for downstate districts based on population. In counties with a population of more than 800,000 but less than 3 million (DuPage), the forest preserve has an entirely separate board from the county and the forest preserve board president is elected directly by the county voters.¹⁰

Another key distinction between the acts is the amount of land that the districts are permitted to acquire. The Forest Preserve of Cook County is allowed to purchase up to 75,000 acres while all other forest preserve districts may only expand their holdings up to 55,000 acres.¹¹ A further difference is that the districts do not have the same ability to borrow money and issue bonds. By statute, the Forest Preserve of Cook County can only issue debt up to 0.345 percent of the

⁵ 70 ILCS 810/0.01 *et seq.*

⁶ 70 ILCS 805/0.01 *et seq.*

⁷ This issue will be addressed in greater detail in the Governance Structure section of this study.

⁸ 70 ILCS 810/5.

⁹ 70 ILCS 805/3.5(c).

¹⁰ 70 ILCS 805/3c.

¹¹ 70 ILCS 810/21; 70 ILCS 805/13.

equalized assessed value of its property tax base.¹² All other forest preserve districts are able to incur debt up to 2.3 percent of the equalized assessed value of the county's taxable property.¹³

A final distinguishing characteristic between the Cook County and Downstate Forest Preserve District acts concerns the sale of forest preserve land. The Downstate Forest Preserve District Act permits districts to purchase, but not condemn a parcel of land and then sell the land for not less than fair market value pursuant to a resolution of the board. The resolution must be passed by an affirmative vote of at least two-thirds of all forest preserve board members within 30 days after acquisition.¹⁴ Further, the Downstate Forest Preserve District Act permits counties that have less than 550,000 residents (Kane, Kendall) to enter into land-swap agreements with individuals or any public or private entity.¹⁵ These districts may trade forest preserve land only after its board votes unanimously to approve the land swap and determines that such a trade would be advantageous to the district. The same districts are also permitted to sell parcels of forest preserve land that are less than one acre if the board approves the sale by a two-thirds vote.¹⁶ The Cook County Forest Preserve District Act is silent on the issue of the district's ability to sell or swap land.

Conservation Districts

In 1963, the General Assembly passed the Conservation District Act.¹⁷ Like forest preserves, conservation districts were created to acquire and preserve public open space. While forest preserves must be situated wholly within one county, the Conservation District Act permits up to five adjoining counties to band together to form a single conservation district. To create a conservation district, a county must have a population of fewer than 1 million people and it must not already have an existing forest preserve. Presently, five Illinois counties have established conservation districts: McHenry, Boone, Macon, Putnam and Vermillion.¹⁸

The Conservation District Act states that every conservation district "shall consider the preservation of natural conditions and the protection of flora and fauna as part of its principal purpose and to that end shall set aside a substantial portion of its land to remain in an essentially undisturbed condition."¹⁹ Thus, while the act authorizes conservation districts to operate recreational facilities,²⁰ these districts are required to make land preservation their first priority.

Unlike the forest preserve statutes, the Conservation District Act does not set any limits on the amount of land that conservation districts are able to acquire. In addition, conservation districts are expressly authorized to hold land that may be restricted from public access to ensure that it will be unimpaired and left in its natural condition.²¹

¹² 70 ILCS 810/21.

¹³ 70 ILCS 805/13.

¹⁴ 70 ILCS 805/6.

¹⁵ 70 ILCS 805/6d.

¹⁶ 70 ILCS 805/6e. The Downstate Forest Preserve District Act does include provisions that are designed to limit the districts' environmental liability regarding land transfers. If any district ever sells or swaps forest preserve land, they are required to impose as a condition of the land transfer, a covenant prohibiting the development or operation of a landfill on land formerly owned by the district. *See* 70 ILCS 805/18.6c.

¹⁷ 70 ILCS 410/1 *et seq.*

¹⁸ LaSalle County briefly had a conservation district but residents voted to dissolve the district in 1970.

¹⁹ 70 ILCS 410/11.

²⁰ 70 ILCS 410/15.2.

²¹ 70 ILCS 410/3.

Another distinguishing feature of conservation districts is that their boards are not elected by the public. According to the Conservation District Act, the board is appointed by the chairman of the county board.²² Conservation district board members must be qualified voters of the district who do not hold any other public office and are not officers of any political party. The Conservation District Act further requires that board members be selected “on the basis of their demonstrated interest in the purpose of conservation districts.”²³ Once appointed, board members then organize by selecting a president, secretary and treasurer from among themselves.²⁴ Board members hold office for staggered five-year terms. By statute, the McHenry County Conservation District has seven board members; all other conservation districts may have between five and seven board members.²⁵

Although conservation districts are separate and distinct units of government, they are somewhat less autonomous than forest preserve districts. The Conservation District Act requires that conservation districts consult with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources on all matters relating to their conservation and recreation policies and plans. The department also has the authority to adopt rules which will govern the activities and procedures of conservation districts. In addition, all conservation district plans for land acquisition, eminent domain and the development of real property must be approved by the department.²⁶ While the act allows the department to approve the plans and policies of conservation districts, traditionally it does not exercise its authority to control these districts. Rather, the practical implication of these statutory provisions is that conservation districts merely must fulfill the technical requirement of submitting periodic reports to the department.

Under the Conservation District Act, there are three areas where the McHenry County Conservation District is treated differently from the state’s other conservation districts. Conservation districts generally may incur indebtedness only up to 0.575 percent of the tax base’s equalized assessed value.²⁷ The McHenry County Conservation District, however, is allowed to incur debt up to 1.725 percent of the equalized assessed value of the county’s taxable property.²⁸ Additionally, the act is silent on the issue of a conservation district’s ability to sell land, except that McHenry County is permitted to exchange, sell or otherwise dispose of land it has acquired within two years of purchasing that interest in a property.²⁹ Finally, the district’s combined annual budget and appropriation ordinance must be adopted by resolution of the county board.³⁰

Lastly, the act contains provisions that allow conservation districts to dissolve.³¹ Only conservation districts that have been in existence for at least three years are eligible for dissolution. The dissolution process requires that the issue be decided by a countywide referendum that must have been petitioned by more than 10 percent of the voters. If a majority of the votes cast are in favor of the dissolution, the district will be deemed dissolved. However, if the vote is against the dissolution, the question cannot be raised again for a vote for a period of

²² 70 ILCS 410/5(d).

²³ 70 ILCS 410/5(c).

²⁴ 70 ILCS 410/6.

²⁵ 70 ILCS 410/5(a)-(h).

²⁶ 70 ILCS 410/10.

²⁷ 70 ILCS 410/5(b).

²⁸ 70 ILCS 410/15(d).

²⁹ 70 ILCS 410/12.

³⁰ 70 ILCS 410/13

³¹ 70 ILCS 410/18.

three years. When a conservation district dissolves, all money remaining after the business affairs of the district closes are paid to the county and all conveyances of property are subject to the approval of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission.³²

Key Differences between a Forest Preserve District and a Conservation District		
	Forest Preserve District	Conservation District
Organizational Structure	Boundaries can be smaller than the county's boundaries.	Boundaries must be the same as county's boundaries. Multiple counties (up to 5) can form a single district.
Board Structure	Board is comprised of all members of the county board unless boundaries differ. In DuPage County, the forest preserve board is separate from the county board.	Trustees are appointed by county board chair.
Board Compensation	Board members can receive a salary or per diem.	Trustees serve without compensation but may be reimbursed for expenses.
Ability to Hold Other Political Office	Board members can hold other political offices.	Trustees cannot hold other political offices or serve as an officer of a political party.
Term of Office	Board members serve four year terms and can run for re-election.	Trustees serve five year terms and cannot seek another term before one year has passed.
Illinois Department of Natural Resources Oversight	Operates independently from the IDNR.	Consults with IDNR on conservation and recreation policy. Land acquisition, eminent domain and real estate development require IDNR approval.
Power to Sell Land	With board approval by a 2/3 vote, part of holdings can be sold but only within 30 days of acquisition.	Property may be sold or exchanged within two years of acquisition.

³² Neither the Cook County Forest Preserve Act nor the Downstate Forest Preserve District Act contains provisions regarding the dissolution of forest preserve districts.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

The organizational structure of the districts differs slightly. Board structure may influence district performance, focus on mission and interaction with other units of government. In addition, the size of the board, its committees and opportunities for public involvement in decision-making at the board level have a direct impact on district operations.

Governance by County
<p>Cook County</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• County board serves as forest preserve district board• County board president serves as forest preserve district board president
<p>DuPage County</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Forest preserve District Board is elected by the voters separately from county board• Forest preserve district board president is elected by the voters
<p>Kane, Kendall, Lake and Will counties</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• County board serves as forest preserve district board• Forest preserve district board members elect board president
<p>McHenry County</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• County board chair appoints conservation district trustees• Conservation district trustees choose conservation district president

Cook County

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County is governed by a president elected at large by Cook County voters. The board is comprised of one commissioner from each of the 17 districts in the county. The president and commissioners all are elected to four-year terms.

By law, the president and commissioners perform a dual role because they also sit on the Cook County Board. All other forest preserve districts share this type of government structure except the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County. However, unlike all other forest preserve districts, the elected president of the Cook County board automatically becomes president of the forest preserve district board.

Cook County's forest preserve district board meets monthly, except during August. The board debates issues, hears testimony, questions staff and votes on resolutions related to the management of the district's 68,303 acres. The board's monthly agenda typically includes the approval of contracts to perform professional services, acceptance of grants, awarding of construction contracts and approval of intergovernmental agreements. The board also approves the district's annual budget. Virtually every board meeting is marred by personal attacks and political posturing.

The commissioners also serve on committees related to specific forest preserve issues. The committees are Annexation, Audit, Botanic Garden, Capital Improvement, Environmental, Finance, Industrial Claims, Litigation, Tax and Revenue, Land Management and Maintenance, Law Enforcement, Legislation and Intergovernmental Relations, Real Estate, Recreation, Rules and Zoological. Each committee has a chair and vice-chair and between five and nine members. Every commissioner is also a member of the finance and real estate committees. While the board has an extensive committee structure in place, some committees rarely, if ever, meet.³³ At board meetings, many important forest preserve issues are never referred to a committee for analysis and review.

Furthermore, at forest preserve district board meetings, the public comment period is always at the end of the meetings. As a result, the public is unable to provide meaningful input or to inform commissioners on the potential consequences of decisions before a vote is taken.

Until recently, interested citizens often had to rely on the professional courtesy of a board member's staff to get an advance copy of an agenda before a board meeting. In December 2002, the board adopted an amendment to the procedural rules regarding the posting of board meeting agendas. They are now available for the public to view no less than three full business days before any meeting. Since 2004, the agendas for board meetings are also posted on the district's Web site before meetings.

The Cook County Board is the main governing body of the county and oversees an annual budget of more than \$3.1 billion. In addition to their responsibilities as members of the county board, commissioners must manage the largest forest preserve system in the state in terms of acres, staff and budget. According to a 2002 study conducted by the Friends of the Forest Preserves and the Friends of the Parks,³⁴ commissioners generally spend about 30 percent of their time on issues related to the forest preserves.

The Civic Federation is a nonprofit government research organization working to increase the cost-effectiveness of government services in the Chicago region. It has concluded that, "separating the two governments would substantially improve the oversight and accountability of both governments."³⁵

Instead of separating the boards, in 2002, the board considered the opposite. The board discussed a proposal to merge the forest preserve district into the general purpose government of Cook County. Proponents of this alternative felt the merger would address budgetary failures and payroll inconsistencies and would be an attempt to streamline the administrative responsibilities of the district. Support for this proposal never materialized.

In January 2003, in an effort to separate the forest preserve district issues from county issues, forest preserve meetings were moved to a different day than county board meetings.

³³ The board's Finance Committee, however, regularly meets immediately before every board meeting. The Finance Committee approves award of contract bids. In 2005, the board created a Labor Subcommittee under the Finance Committee.

³⁴ Friends of the Forest Preserves and Friends of the Parks, *The Forest Preserve District of Cook County Study and Recommendations, Phase II*, October, 2002.

³⁵ Civic Federation, *Forest Preserve District of Cook County FY2005 Proposed Budget: Analysis and Recommendations*, January 31, 2005.

The forest preserve is administered by a general superintendent who oversees eight departments.³⁶ The general superintendent manages the day to day affairs of the district.

When the current general superintendent was appointed by the board president in August 2003, he inherited a forest preserve system in disrepair. For example, an article by the *Chicago Sun-Times* on July 6, 2003, began with the headline, “The preserves are a mess.” The article documented numerous accounts of a district marred by broken or closed toilets, vandalized picnic shelters, inoperable water pumps, gang graffiti and trash. The general superintendent, with support of the president and the board, has focused on improving maintenance, removing graffiti, cleaning windows in district buildings, cleaning up garbage, enforcing “no parking on grass” rules and working with area bait shops to urge fisherman not to leave empty bait containers at district fishing locations.³⁷ In addition, the district instituted a Comfort Station Program in 2004, an online picnic permit program in 2005 and pilot Picnic Table and Hot Coal Receptacle Programs with the FY 2006 budget.

Although the management of the district appears to have improved dramatically, much remains to be done. To what extent a change in board governance structure would improve district operations and management and encourage strategic policymaking is unclear.

DuPage County

The Board of Commissioners of the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County governs the district. For most of its history, the district’s commissioners were, by law, the same as the county board members. However, during the 1990s, frequent conflicts of interest between the district and the county arose. For example, the forest preserve district’s board, when serving on the county board, approved the location of landfills, expansion of roads and granting of easements on district land. The commissioners had difficulty making decisions in the best interests of both the forest preserve and the county.

In 2000, the Illinois General Assembly amended the Downstate Forest Preserve Act so that forest preserve districts in counties with populations of more than 800,000 but fewer than 3 million – DuPage County – are governed by a board of commissioners elected separately from the county board, with only one member from each county district. The new language also provides for the president to be elected by the county voters at large. Most of the district’s commissioners supported the separation. Only a few commissioners did not support splitting the boards; they said the combined clout of commissioners serving on both boards was positive for the county overall.

By statute, the members of both boards make the same annual base salary, except for the president of the forest preserve board, who makes 85 percent of the County Board president’s salary. Legislation passed during the 2006 Illinois Spring legislative session, however, allows the district’s board of commissioners to set the salaries of the board and its president independent of

³⁶ The different departments are: General Office, Finance and Administration, Resource Management, General Maintenance, Permit and Recreation Activities Administration, Law Enforcement, Legal and Planning and Development.

³⁷ See “A new day dawns: After a year on the job, forest preserve Supt. Steve Bylina cleaning up a system long rumored to be riddled with goofing off political pals” *Daily Southtown*, August 23, 2004; See also “County forest preserves offering great escapes” *Chicago Tribune*, February 6, 2004.

the salaries of the county board. If signed into law by the governor, the change would not go into effect until after 2010.

The separation of the boards allows the forest preserve board to focus solely on natural resource issues. In addition it has elevated the status of the district. County officials recognize the forest preserve district staff as experts in natural resource issues and seek them out for advice on those issues. Many forest preserve district advocates view the separation of the boards as an unqualified success. After the change in board structure, there are noticeably fewer requests by the county to expand roads and grant easements through forest preserve lands. Also, the board's interactions with district staff seem to have improved as board members are more focused on forest preserve district issues.

In addition, the legislation separating the boards reduced the size of the forest preserve district board from 25 to seven members, making it more manageable and less bureaucratic. The board has chosen not to have standing committees. Board members vote on agenda items at meetings without issues first going through the committee process. Occasionally, the board has created special committees to review certain projects and proposals, but these committees only last for the duration of the project.³⁸

While it appears that separation of the boards has been successful in the few years since the change, it is still unclear whether having a countywide vote for the forest preserve district president is in the best interest of the district. Since a countywide campaign for president is relatively expensive, the person with the most money at his or her disposal could win rather than the person most qualified for the job. An alternative proposal allows the commissioners to elect the president from among the board's membership. To make such structural change in governance, the Downstate Forest Preserve District Act would need to be amended.

As their populations grow in the next decade or two, Will and Lake counties will have populations that exceed 800,000 and they will become subject to the act, requiring their boards to separate.

Kane County

The Forest Preserve District of Kane County is governed by a board of 27 commissioners, which is, by statute, the same as the county board. The board chooses a president from among its members.

The board has four committees: Executive, Land Acquisition, Enterprise (which oversees use of Elfstrom Stadium, golf courses and other revenue-generating facilities), and Utilization (which addresses uses of district-owned lands, buildings and other structures, considers bids, oversees construction and demolition of facilities and oversees vendors and contracts for physical maintenance). The full forest preserve commission meetings immediately precede the county board meetings, but the various committees all meet at separate times and locations.

The forest preserve district benefits from a close relationship with the county. Administrative services are shared, which is a cost savings. In addition, the forest preserve district is able to participate in discussions regarding the development process in the county. Having the district at

³⁸ Examples of special committees of the forest preserve district board have included the St. James Farm Committee and the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee.

the table for those negotiations can bring about opportunities for the forest preserve district such as land donations, protection of natural resources at development sites and acquisition.

Kendall County

The district is governed by the Kendall County Forest Preserve Board which, by statute, is composed of the members of the Kendall County Board. Two members of the forest preserve district board are elected from each of five districts, for a total of 10. They serve staggered four-year terms. The forest preserve board elects its president from its ranks.

In Kendall County, the county board presidents have been supportive of the forest preserve district and its mission and activities. As the district begins to acquire land, potential political issues may arise regarding whether purchases of land will take place in certain commissioners' districts.

District staff believes it is helpful for county board members to serve on the forest preserve board in a small county such as Kendall because growth and land preservation are integrated issues. Overall, the Kendall County Forest Preserve District appreciates being part of the negotiations for development proposals as they go through county zoning approval process. The close relationship with the county provides that opportunity.

Lake County

The Lake County Forest Preserve District has a 23-member board, with each commissioner representing a single district. While commissioners are also county board members, the district commissioners select a separate president for a two-year term. The forest preserve commissioners meet regularly on the third Friday of each month. Forest preserve board meetings are not held on the same day as county board meetings.

There are four permanent committees of the board which meet twice a month (Development, Restoration & Planning; Education, Cultural Resources & Public Information; Finance & Administrative; Land Preservation & Acquisition). The Executive Advisory Committee meets once a month and the Rules Committee meets as needed. Committees are made up of seven to nine commissioners. There are also two ad-hoc committees (Wetlands Research Board; Diversity & Cultural Awareness Special Committee) and official board liaisons to the Youth Conservation Corps, Edward L. Ryerson Conservation Area and the Illinois Association of Conservation and Forest Preserve Districts.

Lake County's population is nearing the statutory level that will require the county board to be elected separately from the forest preserve district board, as is the case in DuPage County. Many board members believe that given Lake County's large population and expansive system of forest preserves, it is difficult to effectively serve on both boards at the same time. Accordingly, some members are in favor of separate boards. Lake County is assessing whether it should separate boards as soon as the county reaches the legislatively specified population level of 800,000.

The size of the board is also being considered. The current 23-member board can be unwieldy. However, reducing the size of the board to seven as the Forest Preserve District of DuPage

County has, means that only four people are needed for a quorum, and only three votes are required to adopt a motion.

McHenry County

The McHenry County Conservation District Board of Trustees governs the district's affairs. The board is composed of seven trustees appointed by the chairman of the McHenry County Board with the county board's consent. The County Planning and Development Committee solicits applications from the community. Individuals are interviewed by the committee and recommendations are made to the county board for approval. By statute, the selection of the trustees must be based on their demonstrated interest in the purpose of conservation districts. In addition, the district's trustees are appointed based in part on technical qualifications and geographic considerations. Trustees are not compensated. They serve staggered five-year terms and, after serving a term, must wait at least one year before seeking reappointment. Trustees elect a president from among their ranks.

A member of the county board also serves as a liaison to the Conservation District Board of Trustees, by attending meetings and participating in board discussion. The county board's oversight also includes the approval and adoption of the conservation district's annual budget and appropriation ordinance. Under the governing statute, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources also has limited oversight of the board.

The board has a Personnel Committee and a Finance Committee. Ad hoc committees of the board can be appointed as needed. In addition, the district has three citizens advisory committees: Community Relations, Sites and Trails and Education. These committees are composed of members of the community along with staff and trustee liaisons. They meet quarterly or as needed and provide community input on various issues but only operate in an advisory capacity.

Occasionally ad hoc task forces are developed for specific projects. These task forces are not standing committees designated by the board.

When the McHenry County Conservation District was formed in 1971, voters in the county deliberately chose to establish a conservation district. Proposals for a forest preserve district had been defeated twice. The intent from the start was that an appointed board would be apolitical and would be able to concentrate on conservation issues. The conservation district model has worked well in McHenry County.

In the last few years, there has been much discussion by the public, area legislators, county board members and candidates on whether trustees should be elected or continue to be appointed by the county board. After the passage of a 2001 referendum question, some citizens argued that trustees who have authority to spend \$64 million in taxpayer money should be more accountable to the public. Legislation has been introduced several times in the General Assembly to allow for a county vote to determine whether the trustees should be elected. This bill has failed to pass each time.

Will County

The Forest Preserve District of Will County Board is made up of 27 commissioners from nine three-member districts. The president is different from the Chair of the Will County Board. The board meets monthly as do three permanent committees (Finance, Land Acquisition and Operations). Most commissioners sit on only one of these three committees.

Will County is also considering the value of separating the boards as the population grows and forest preserve district issues become more complex. Strategies for addressing the impacts of major developments such as the construction of Interstate 355 and the proposed airport in Peotone have illustrated potential conflicts of the combined boards. Resolutions responding to these issues become diluted as forest preserve commissioners change to their role as county board members and advocate for county priorities rather than for forest preserve district priorities.

Many board members feel that the separation will allow the forest preserve board to focus solely on forest preserve issues and eliminate potential conflicts between the two boards. Proposals call for 18 members on the county board and nine on the forest preserve board. A committee is studying an amendment proposed by the Illinois Association of Conservation and Forest Preserve Districts and its ramifications for Will County.

Issues

The six forest preserve districts and the McHenry County Conservation District all have a slightly different governance structure. Board structure can affect the priorities of the district, its method of decision making, the degree of public involvement and accountability to residents. The counties each have their own peculiarities that make it difficult to recommend one form of governance to apply to all districts.

Separating the forest preserve district board and the county board

The following arguments are raised in favor of separate boards:

- Separately elected commissioners are more likely to be focused on forest preserve issues.
- Separate boards reduce the risk of forest preserve commissioners making decisions that benefit the county more than the district.
- A separate board may elevate the status of forest preserve districts relative to the county boards because it effectively makes it “equal” to the county board.
- A separate board can help shield the forest preserve district from political retribution.
- Separate boards potentially foster better working relationships with district staff.

However separate boards can also have a number of drawbacks:

- A separate forest preserve district board may have less clout than one that also serves as the county board.
- It can be harder for a separate forest preserve district board to work with the county board and staff.
- A separately elected board may have less visibility than a combined board and it may be more difficult for voters to make an informed choice. A separate board increases the number

of elected officials and, at least marginally, contributes to the fragmentation of local government.

- The total cost to taxpayers may be greater when the forest preserve district board is separate from the county board. With separate boards, districts lose their ability to pool resources for services like technology, health care, legal, etc.

In Cook County, while separately elected boards could result in better management of the forest preserve district and a greater commitment to its mission, it is likely that a separately elected forest preserve district board would be subject to many of the same political pressures that influence its decisions currently.

Size of the board

As the population in a county reaches the point that separate board will be mandated, board size will be an important factor. A large board of 23 or 24 requires the extensive use of committees to be effective in making decisions. It also is likely to be more costly. A small board of seven can be driven by the strong opinions of one or two members and may not have the benefit of a variety of viewpoints and expertise.

Election of the president

Many of the districts select the board president through different mechanisms. In Cook County, the voters elect one person who serves as both president of the forest preserve district and chairman of the county board. In DuPage, the president is elected by the voters and, in the others, the president is selected by the board itself.

Public involvement

Each district allows various amounts of public involvement in decision making. Meetings that are held during the day restrict participation to those who are available at that time. The opportunity for public comment during a meeting is sometimes placed after critical items have been voted on. Some districts have committees with members of the public who act in an advisory capacity.

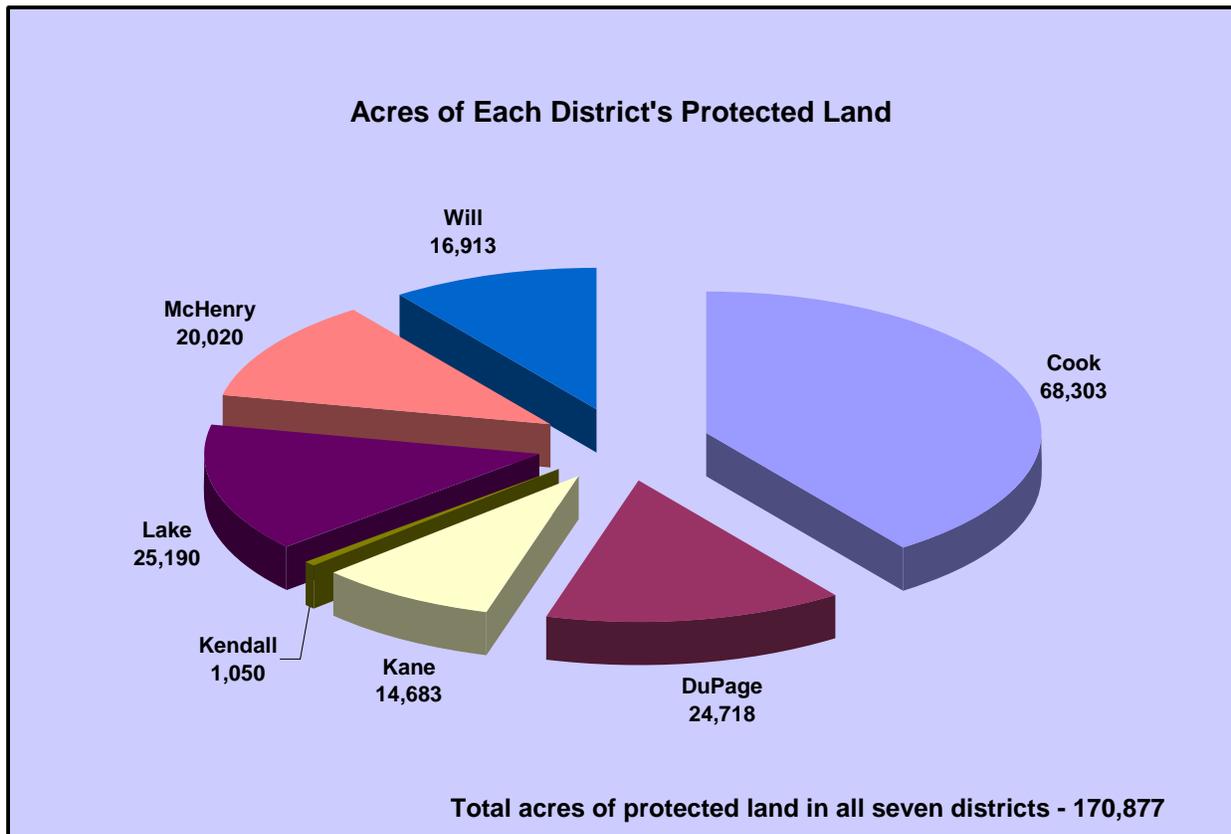
Election vs. appointment of conservation district trustees

For conservation districts, the issue is whether the trustees should continue to be appointed or, instead, should be elected by the public. To make this change, legislation would be required to amend the statute. Appointed conservation district trustees have tended to be less political. As a result, those who apply for conservation district trustee positions usually are truly interested in conservation issues. However, the argument can be made that elected conservation district trustees would be directly accountable to the taxpayers as they make land-buying decisions throughout the county.

Overall the variety of governance structures and techniques applied in the districts is indicative of their divergent political pressures, development priorities and dedication to conservation issues. As counties increase in population, activities and issues faced by both the county and district boards become more complex. Designing a structure that works most effectively to promote the mission of the district is a challenging and constantly evolving practice.

LAND ACQUISITION

Forest preserves and conservation districts were created to protect and preserve land in Illinois for the public benefit. The districts fulfill this mission by acquiring tracts of land throughout their respective counties. Over the years, the districts in northeastern Illinois have purchased a combined total of more than 170,000 acres.



Cook County

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County was approved by the popular vote of Cook County residents in November 1914. The board met for the first time in 1915 but took no action because legal proceedings were under way to test the constitutionality of the law under which the district was organized.

On February 16, 1916, the Illinois Supreme Court upheld the legality of the district.³⁹ Less than two weeks later, the commissioners authorized a bond issue of \$1 million for land purchases. The board also appointed a planning committee to “devise ways and means for the most expeditious, economical and practical method of acquiring land, the purchase of which is desirable for the purpose of the district.” The Planning Committee issued a report on June 26, 1916, that recommended the acquisition of about 1,000 acres of wooded tracts in Palatine Township. In September 1916, the first purchase made by the district was a portion of this area

³⁹ *Perkins v. Commissioners of Cook County*, 271 Ill. 449 (1916).

in what is now known as the Deer Grove Preserve. The district paid as low as \$70 per acre to establish its first preserve.

By 1920, the district had purchased 19,115 acres. Over the next 50 years, the district expanded its holdings to more than 62,000 acres, purchasing an average of 857.8 acres per year. During the same time, Cook County's population grew in size from 3 million to nearly 5.5 million. Cook County's population then declined in both the 1970s and 1980s, and so did the pace of the district's land acquisition. By 2000, the district's land acquisition rate dropped to its lowest level ever, averaging less than 100 acres purchased per year. According to the district, the downturn in its land acquisition occurred for two reasons: (1) since 1980 there has been a dramatic reduction in federal conservation funding that supported the district's land acquisition efforts through 50 percent matching grants; and (2) the price of land in Cook County increased dramatically.⁴⁰ Despite its relatively low rate of land acquisition in recent years, the district is the single largest property owner in Cook County. Under its enabling legislation, the district is authorized to purchase a maximum of 75,000 acres. About 11 percent of Cook County's total land mass is forest preserve land and the district owns 13 acres per 1,000 Cook County residents.

In June 1994 the district drafted the Land Acquisition Plan which was formally adopted in 2000. The plan was developed to enable district staff to better identify open land, evaluate property and generate public and legislative support to finance the forest preserve agenda. As part of the plan, the district took an inventory of the available land in the county that could serve as future forest preserve sites. Potential sites were targeted "according to known biodiversity data and other considerations such as greenway linkages, proximity to existing preserves, and relation to population centers within the county."⁴¹ The plan estimated that in 1994 there were more than 40,000 acres of land in Cook County suitable for potential forest preserves. The plan also contained a Forest Preserve Opportunity Map that identified potential locations for the district to expand but does not commit the district to any specific land purchases or action. The plan has *not* been changed since 1994, but the district updated the map in 2000. Since 2000, it is likely that some of the land identified on the map has been lost to development.

The district follows the procedures set forth in its land acquisition plan for evaluating properties as potential forest preserves. First, the district determines whether the potential site advances the district's mission and meets the needs of the public. The second test for evaluating property is whether a site can be affordably acquired or otherwise protected.

The plan states that, as a general guideline, the district favors large-scale properties that manifest significant ecological features while providing linkages to other forest preserves or open space properties. Sites that are greenways which protect ecosystems in existing forest preserves or that assist in the management of natural resources are the next priority. Land that has recreational, educational, historical or cultural value is also evaluated as a potential forest preserve site but is not considered a high priority.

The plan recommended that the district explore issuing land-acquisition bonds, something the district has not done for many years. Without additional funding sources, it will be difficult for the district to ever reach its maximum holding capacity of 75,000 acres.

⁴⁰ *Land Acquisition Plan*, p. 4.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 16.

Between 2002 and 2005, the district acquired 248.56 acres at an average price per acre of \$46,906. In the FY 2006 budget, a \$1 million operating transfer was made from the corporate fund into the Real Estate Acquisition fund. The district estimates that the balance in this fund will be \$15,727,051 which is available for appropriation. The FY 2006 budget recommends appropriation of \$8.1 million for land acquisition and \$225,000 for appraisers and court costs. Similar appropriations were made to the Real Estate Acquisition Fund over the past three years and only a portion of the appropriation was accounted for as acquisition cost during that time period.⁴²

DuPage County

The Forest Preserve District of DuPage County was created in 1915 and two years later the district enacted its first tax levy to acquire land. The district's first property consisted of 79 acres in York Township, initially known as Forest Preserve Number One, but now referred to as York Woods Forest Preserve. The district purchased the site for \$15,794, or \$200 per acre. By the end of the 1920s, the district had acquired a total of 832 acres at an average cost per acre of \$243.

Over the next 20 years, the district's holdings slowly grew to just more than 1,300 acres. During that time the district only once bought more than 100 acres in a single year. However, in the mid-part of the last century the population in DuPage County began to boom. DuPage County grew from about 150,000 people in 1950 to almost 500,000 by 1970. The district responded by aggressively purchasing land. In the span of just six years (1963-1969), the district more than tripled the amount of acreage it had acquired during its first 50 years of existence.

The pace of the district's land acquisition slowed during the 1980s and 1990s with mild upswings following the approval of four bond-issue referenda (1987, 1991, 1992 and 1997). Despite the high cost of land in DuPage County, the district is still expanding at a modest rate, averaging about 200 acres per year over the last 10 years. Recent purchases include 303 acres in 2003 with an average per-acre price of \$81,992 and 41 acres in 2004 with an average per-acre price of \$78,356. As of April 2006, the district owns 24,718 acres (11.5 percent of the county's total land mass). There are 27 acres of forest preserves per 1,000 DuPage County residents.

District staff use six base criteria to assign point values to each parcel considered for acquisition: (1) natural resource value; (2) size and configuration; (3) open space/recreation; (4) urgency; (5) funding; and (6) operations and maintenance. The first three provide the greatest guidance in determining which parcels the district should acquire. The district uses the latter three criteria to establish when parcels should be acquired.

Over the last 15 years, the district has spent more than \$245 million on its land acquisition efforts across the county.

Kane County

The Kane County Forest Preserve District first acquired property in 1926 by creating the Johnson's Mound Preserve in Blackberry Township. The district gradually expanded over the years to about 7,000 acres just prior to its first voter referendum in 1999. After the 1999

⁴² Forest Preserve District of Cook County FY2006 Budget p. 77

referendum, the district was able to leverage the \$70 million authorized in the referendum with county, state and federal grants to double the size of its holdings in less than six years.

As of April 2006, the district owns 14,683 acres or 4.4 percent of the county's total land mass. In the 2005 referendum, Kane County voters responded by a 2-to-1 margin to approve the issuance of another \$75 million in bonds for the district's land acquisition program. With this money, the district will be able to add an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 acres to its holdings. The recent expansion of the district's holdings has corresponded with the general population growth in the county. Population has expanded from 317,471 residents in 1990 to almost 500,000 today, a 40 percent increase in just 15 years.

The district has not adopted a formal land acquisition plan for evaluating prospective forest preserve sites. However, the district does consider whether prospective forest preserve sites will accomplish the following objectives:

- Protect and improve existing forest preserves by acquiring adjacent lands to buffer natural areas and expand educational and outdoor recreational opportunities;
- Provide better habitat for animals and plants, while creating a wilderness retreat for visitors to escape urban stresses;
- Preserve land along streams, rivers and wetlands to provide flood-water storage, thus avoiding costly property damage to homes and businesses while improving water quality; and,
- Preserve native wetlands, woodlands and prairies.⁴³

Before 1999 the district had never spent more than \$8 million on land purchases in a single year. Now the district annually spends more than double that amount. The district spent \$20 million for land purchases in 2003, \$35 million in 2004 and it budgeted more than \$30 million for land acquisition in 2005.

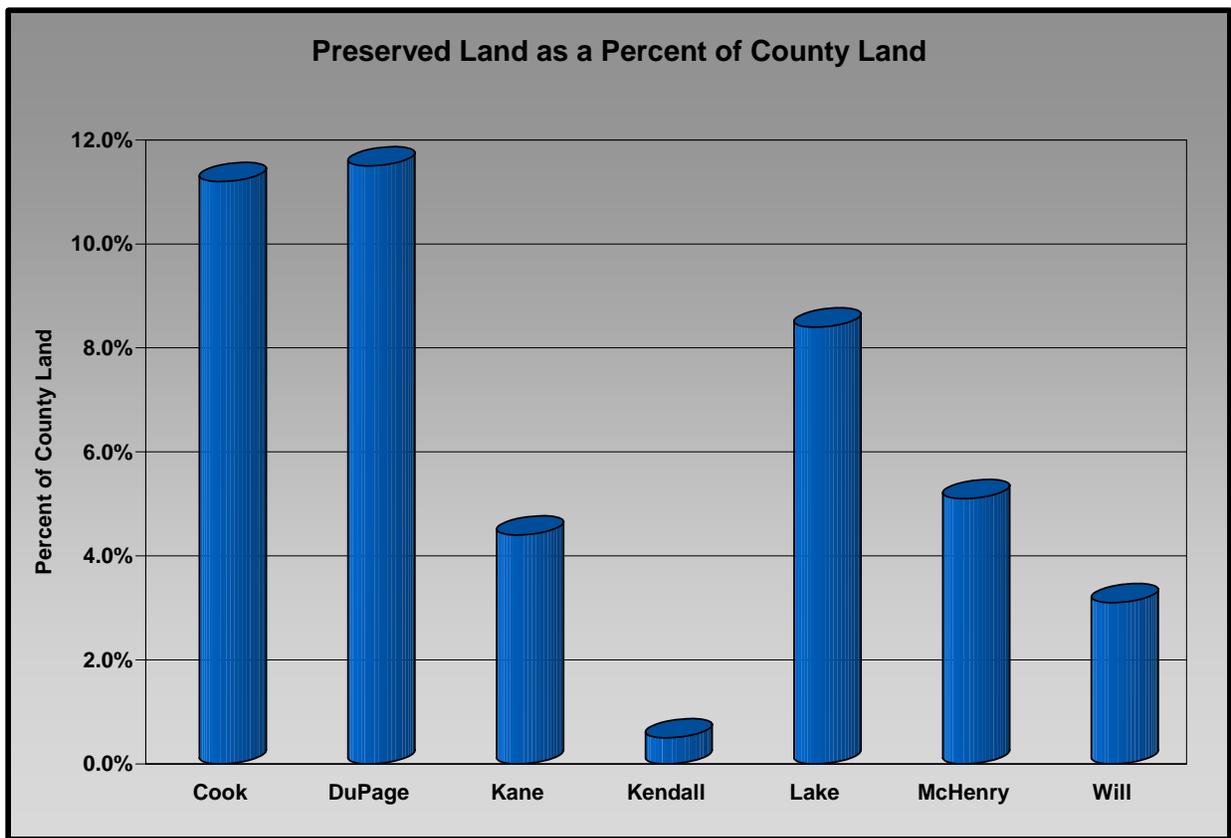
Kendall County

The Kendall County Forest Preserve District was established in 1964. By 1970, the District had accumulated 263 acres. However, during the next three decades the district only added another 182 acres to its holdings.

The district recently recognized the need to increase its holdings as the county has experienced a surge in its population. In fact, with its 33 percent growth rate in the last five years, Kendall County is now the fastest-growing county in Illinois. In 2002, Kendall County voters approved the issue of \$5 million in bonds for land acquisition by the district. The district plans to acquire the entire 406-acre Hoover Outdoor Education Center site in Yorkville. It has already purchased 300 acres at the site from the Chicago Area Council of the Boy Scouts of America and will acquire the rest of the site from CorLands, an affiliate of Openlands, by 2007.

As of April 2006, the district owns 1,050 acres. There are 13 acres of preserves for every 1,000 residents in Kendall County and the preserves make up less than 1 percent of the county's total land mass.

⁴³ *Forest Preserve District of Kane County Annual Report 2004*, p. 6.



Lake County

The Lake County Forest Preserve District was created in 1958. In 1961, the district purchased its first property, a 162-acre site, now known as the Van Patten Woods, near Wadsworth. During its early years, the district concentrated its land acquisition efforts along the Des Plaines River, purchasing land on both sides of the river throughout the county.

The district has been able to grow at a steady pace over the years, thanks to residents who have passed voter referenda questions in 1993, 1999 and 2000. The approvals have enabled the district to issue more than \$170 million in bonds for land acquisition in the last 15 years. With the influx of money, the district has purchased about 6,000 acres since 1993. The district's holdings now total 25,190 acres or 8.4 percent of the county's land mass.

In 1995, the district adopted a goal of preserving 40 acres for every 1,000 residents. Despite its aggressive efforts, the district has been unable to meet its target because of the rapid population growth. The county has grown 30 percent in the last 15 years, expanding from 516,418 residents in 1990 to nearly 700,000 today. The district owns about 36 acres for every 1,000 residents.

The district acquires land consistent with its 1998 Attitude and Interest Survey, which identified the loss of open space as the single biggest issue facing Lake County. Preserving ecologically important sites and wildlife habitats ranked as the most important land acquisition priority. The next most important land acquisition priorities are open space corridors for trails and protecting land adjacent to rivers and streams to control flooding. The district also considers purchasing land that has historical or cultural significance.

The district has spent more than \$10 million per year on its land acquisition program over the last 5 years, purchasing property at an average price of \$28,000 per acre. The district planned to spend another \$16 million in 2005 to acquire an additional 600 acres of preserves. Recognizing the need to continue to purchase land before prices were too high and availability was limited, in the fall of 2005 the district board discussed, and ultimately approved, a proposal to sell \$85 million in bonds for the purposes of acquiring land and improvement projects

In late 2005, the board approved accessing the debt service extension tax base from some older non-referendum bonds. Of the \$85 million of limited bonds, \$70 million are designated for land acquisition. The district will issue \$45 million of the limited bonds in 2006 and the remainder in 2008, or whenever the funds are needed. The funding plan will result in a net decrease in property taxes for Lake County residents.

McHenry County

The McHenry County Conservation District first purchased land in 1973, two years after its creation. Its first purchase was a portion of what is now known as the Beck's Woods Conservation Area in Chemung. Throughout the 1970s, the district's land purchases totaled 2,620 acres and it added another 2,354 acres during the 1980s.

McHenry County experienced rapid population growth during the 1990s, growing from 183,241 in 1990 to more than 260,000 in 2000, or more than 40 percent. To help balance development in the county, the district purchased more than 7,000 acres throughout the 1990s. With the proceeds from a bond issuance in 2001 following a successful referendum, the district was able to preserve more than 2,100 acres, its highest total for a single year. As of April 2006, the district owns 20,020 acres or approximately 5.1 percent of the county's total land mass. Conservation districts do not have a statutory cap on the amount of land they are able to acquire.

In its Strategic Land Acquisition Plan, released in 2002, the district set a goal of owning 51 acres for every 1,000 people in the county. The district currently exceeds this target by holding 66 acres for every 1,000 residents. However, if population trends continue, maintaining that standard calls for the district to acquire another 35,000 acres by 2020. The plan recommends that the district establish at least five preserve sites larger than 2,000 acres and at least 20 sites larger than 250 acres. In addition, the district developed the McHenry County Natural Areas Inventory, an assessment of parcels that have high natural resource value. This inventory is also consulted during land acquisition planning. An updated version of this inventory was produced and released by the district's Natural Resource Management department in May 2005.

The district recently purchased the 84-acre Abrams & Han site in Greenwood Township for \$1.1 million. This parcel was rated as the top priority by the district's land acquisition department. The average price for this acquisition and other recent purchases is \$13,000 an acre. The district has purchased at least 500 acres per year since 1997 and at least 100 acres per year since 1987.

Will County

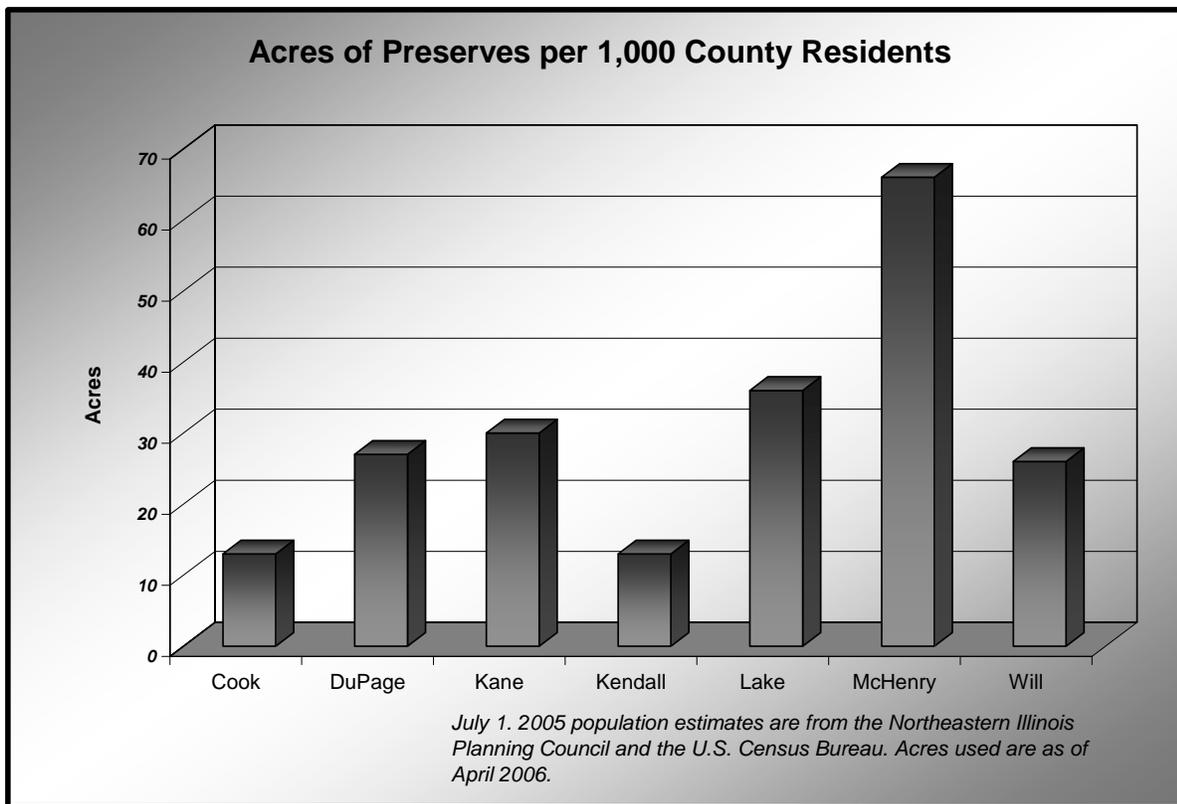
The Forest Preserve District of Will County was created in 1927. The first action by the district's board was the establishment of a committee "to map and survey the county and

ascertain suitable property available for forest preserve purposes.” In 1930, the district purchased its first property, a 90-acre parcel located in Homer Township, for \$125 per acre.

The district expanded by only 1,000 acres during its first 40 years while Will County remained mostly rural. As the county’s population began to boom in the early 1990s, the district began a major land acquisition initiative by purchasing more than 5,700 acres in just four years. In 1999, voters allowed the district to issue more than \$50 million in bonds to acquire land. The district purchased nearly 4,000 acres with that money. In 2005, voters narrowly passed another referendum question that will allow the district to purchase an estimated 5,000 additional acres.

In 1994, the district established a Land Acquisition and Protection Policy to guide the district staff and the district’s Citizen’s Advisory Committee in identifying and evaluating future forest preserve sites. Part of the policy is an evaluation system that employs principles of conservation biology, cultural resource preservation and land use planning to determine the relative merit of each prospective property. Potential forest preserve sites are analyzed as to how well they will achieve the following goals: 1) continue and complete preservation projects, 2) create a network of interconnected greenways, and 3) keep pace with rapid growth. Each site is then placed into one of the four land preservation categories: critical, high priority, priority or important. The district considers protecting waterways, watersheds and wetlands to be one of its main objectives.

The district has spent about \$5 million per year since 2000 on its land acquisition program. As of April 2006, the district’s holdings encompass 16,913 acres or 3.1 percent of Will County’s total land mass. The district owns 26 acres for every 1,000 residents in Will County.



Issues

All districts face pressure to acquire land before it is lost forever to development. Conflicting demands for land drive up the price of prospective forest preserve property. In growing counties, land that is appropriate for acquisition by the districts may also be desirable for residential development. As districts and developers compete for the remnants of undeveloped land in northeastern Illinois, the price for such parcels can skyrocket. Counties are also anxious to attract development (residential, commercial and industrial) to increase their tax base. While a larger tax base can result in more funding for land acquisition, the increasing pace of development drives up the price of prospective forest preserve land at an alarming rate.

One of the central challenges is determining what land should be acquired. Typically, the districts evaluate a prospective site for its natural resource value. However, other factors such as price, the threat of impending development, connectivity to existing preserves and the potential use for recreation/education are also considered by most of the districts. Overlaying these considerations is the need to provide preserves throughout the county so that they are accessible to all county residents. Many of the districts have developed land acquisition plans and/or policies to help guide their purchasing process.

While land acquisition is a high priority, the districts must balance resources of time and money with the need to improve the land they already own so that the public can better enjoy it. Districts are faced with difficult choices because of budgetary constraints. While pursuing land acquisition opportunities, the districts must invest part of their limited resources in capital improvements to existing holdings.

Districts are also forming partnerships with other government agencies and non-profit organizations for land acquisition purposes. These partnerships, especially when they are with other districts, promote the interconnection of trails, open space and habitat corridors across county lines. By pooling resources, the districts can leverage money from voter-approved bond issues and/or grants to acquire more land than they otherwise could alone. Additionally, partnerships can enable a district to acquire sites that are high in natural resource value, but that may be too expensive for the district to purchase independently. However, other entities such as local park districts may have different goals and objectives than the forest preserve and conservation districts. Before purchasing land as part of a partnership agreement, districts must carefully negotiate how a site will be managed after it is acquired.

LAND SALES, TRANSFERS AND ENCROACHMENTS

Forest preserve and conservation districts were created to acquire and hold lands in their natural state and condition for the purpose of the education, pleasure and recreation of the public. Once the districts acquire property, the preserves are intended to be held as public open spaces in perpetuity. The districts, however, are routinely under pressure from individuals, organizations, corporations and other government entities who seek to acquire or encroach upon district land.

Many different types of proposals to purchase district property come before district boards. In some cases the purchase is a cash offer but in other instances property owners offer to trade their land for property owned by a district. Districts frequently face such offers, but generally resist them.

Encroachments onto district land occur when a landowner, whose property abuts a forest preserve or conservation area, uses the preserve land as if it is his or her private property. Such encroachments can be intentional or inadvertent. They vary from the routine dumping of yard waste to construction of a permanent structure on district property.

Cook County

For most of its history, the Cook County Forest Preserve District resisted requests by outside interests to acquire district lands. The district's Land Policy of 1946 took a strong position against land transfers by stating that "the Board of Forest Preserve Commissioners is aware that to give way to the well-meant demands for allocation of its lands ... would destroy the true purpose for which the district was founded."⁴⁴

The policy documented many of the requests over the years for forest preserve land from school districts, sports clubs, the American Legion, Amvets, municipalities and the Illinois Toll Highway Authority. Even the University of Illinois sought to acquire district land south of Forest Park to build a campus for the University of Illinois at Chicago. Additionally, the district rejected an attempt by the U.S. War Department to purchase 245 acres of forest preserve land to establish a permanent research laboratory for the government's atomic bomb project during World War II.⁴⁵

In 1999, against the objection of Openlands and other conservation groups, the district finally gave in to pressure and sold some of its land to the Village of Rosemont. This land transfer involved the sale of 2.4 acres of forest preserve land in exchange for \$2.9 million so Rosemont could expand parking for a convention center. The revenue generated was dedicated to purchasing land in Orland Township to create the Tampier Lake Greenway Corridor Project. To date, the district has not completed this project due to on-going condemnation proceedings.

In response to the Rosemont land sale and numerous other requests for district land, in 2004 the district adopted a Land Policy and an ordinance which established new rules governing the

⁴⁴ The District updated its *Land Policy* in 1962.

⁴⁵ In early 1942, a representative of the University of Chicago requested the emergency use of 1,100 acres of district land for research and the development of the atomic bomb. The president of the board granted permission to use preserve lands for this purpose on a temporary basis provided that the use would extend only for one year after the termination of the war. Due to the extreme secrecy of the project, the subject was never taken before the board of commissioners for consideration in an open meeting.

conveyance of forest preserve land. The ordinance provides that the district may only sell land in the rare instance involving isolated parcels that are less than one acre and cannot be connected to the main system of forest preserves. Any land sale must be authorized by the Illinois General Assembly and approved by a two-thirds vote of the board.

Only a few months after adopting its new policy, the district considered, but ultimately rejected, a proposal to sell part of the Whistler Woods preserve in south suburban Riverdale. This proposal involved an offer by Mittal Steel (formerly International Steel Group) to exchange 31 acres for 21 acres of forest preserve land. Openlands and a coalition of conservation groups urged the district to reject this land swap proposal.⁴⁶ Due in large part to the public outcry, the proposal was withdrawn by Mittal Steel.⁴⁷

In February 2005, the district compiled a list of the top encroachments on its holdings and presented an encroachment report to the board. The list was part of a report presented to the board's real estate committee, which identified more than 150 instances in which district property was being improperly used. The board heard testimony by district staff and forest preserve advocacy groups on the recommended actions at each of these sites to remove the encroachments. The board referred the issue to the Real Estate Committee which received a status update regarding the encroachments in September 2005. To date, the encroachment report remains in committee.

Additionally, in 2005 the district went to private arbitration with Dominican University over the school's plan to build an access road across land that was thought to be part of Thatcher Woods in River Forest. Although the arbitrator ultimately ruled against the district, finding that the district did not own the land, the district's effort to dispute the school's claim on the property may serve as a deterrent against other potential encroachments on district land.

DuPage County

In 1963, the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County established a Land Use Policy concerning the sale of forest preserve land. The policy notes that with the county's rapid growth rate, the district has been the subject of increased demands for its land. The policy states that these requests from "individuals, governmental bodies and civic organizations for allocations of forest preserve lands should be treated with the fact in mind that they are beyond forest preserve law and are not within the legal powers of the district to provide." However, the policy concedes that there may be rare exceptions under which a public agency persists in efforts to acquire forest preserve land. Before such a land sale, the policy suggests that the board request a detailed report of the land sale transaction along with a full analysis of the property values for the forest preserve parcels that might be sold.⁴⁸

DuPage County faced pressure to sell a parcel of its land in 2005. This proposal involved a request by the Wheaton-Warrenville Unit School District 200 to acquire approximately 20 acres of Herrick Lake Forest Preserve. In exchange for the forest preserve property, which contained

⁴⁶ On June 18, 2005, the *Chicago Tribune* published an editorial titled "Preserve the forest preserves" urging the district to reject the Mittal Steel-Whistler Woods land swap proposal.

⁴⁷ The proposal from Mittal Steel was submitted to the district board on May 4, 2005 and referred to the Real Estate Committee. The proposal was withdrawn by Mittal Steel and in turn action was taken at the board level to remove it from Committee and withdraw the request from the board.

⁴⁸ In 1973, the district amended the *Land Use Policy* to reiterate its position against the sale of district land.

wetlands and an oak savanna, the school offered an isolated tract of about 30 acres of agricultural land. Ultimately, in July 2005, the board voted against the swap.

Additionally, the district has adopted an ordinance addressing encroachments on forest preserve land.⁴⁹ The ordinance authorizes the district to take any action necessary, including the initiation of legal proceedings, to remove encroachments. When the district finds an encroachment, the district will first request that the violator remove the encroachment. If it is not removed, the district will issue a citation and, if necessary, take the matter to court.

Kane County

The Forest Preserve District of Kane County does not have an official policy against land transfers. The district, however, has been consistent the few times that it has sold land, only selling parcels that are less than one acre. Typically, the district's land sales have involved situations in which the district purchases a large tract of agricultural land that has a farm house. The district will sometimes sell the homestead part of the property but keep and then restore the larger part of the property.

According to interviews with district staff, relatively few encroachments have occurred on district property and typically involve the dumping of grass clippings on district land. Verbal warnings have been enough to stop these violations.

Kendall County

According to district staff, the Forest Preserve District of Kendall County has not yet faced pressure to sell any of its land. Thus, the district has not found it necessary to adopt an official policy regarding land sale or transfer.

Although encroachments on district property are still relatively uncommon, they are becoming a problem as the district purchases more land. To prevent this, the district has recently made a stronger effort to mark its borders and meet with residents living adjacent to its holdings to clearly identify the property line. If an encroachment becomes severe, the district will involve the state's attorney.

Lake County

The Forest Preserve District of Lake County has not formally adopted a policy against land transfers but has firmly rejected all requests to purchase district land. According to district staff, rather than develop a formal policy regarding land transfers, the district is exploring alternative measures to prevent land transfers. For example, the district could place permanent deed restrictions on certain parcels that would limit how the land could be used in the future. The district is also considering dedicating more district holdings as Illinois Nature Preserves to greatly restrict the future use of these lands. The district is evaluating all of its holdings to determine which properties need these types of protections.

When the district discovers an encroachment, staff meets with the encroaching party and photographs the site. The district gives the violator 30 days to correct the situation, more if removing the encroachment involves a substantial effort, such as taking down a permanent

⁴⁹ An Ordinance Concerning Encroachments and Illegal and Unauthorized Use of District Property, Ordinance No. 92-359.

structure. If the problem is not corrected, the district writes the violator a citation, which includes a monetary fine. In 2004, the district brought a civil suit against a person living adjacent to a forest preserve site who cut down trees on preserve land to have a better view of Lake Michigan. The case settled in early 2005 with the violator agreeing to pay \$320,000 in fines to plant new trees and for bluff restoration at the Fort Sheridan site as well as \$25,000 to reimburse the district for its attorney's fees. This incident received wide newspaper coverage in the *Daily Herald* and the *Chicago Tribune*. The large fine and the district's vigilance in enforcing this matter serve as a strong deterrent against other potential encroachments.

For over 20 years, the district has had a boundary fencing program to prevent encroachments. Under the program, fencing is installed along the borders of district property where encroachments have been a problem and at properties that have the potential for encroachments, such as when a new housing development is built adjacent to a preserve site. The district has its own surveyors on staff who routinely visit preserve sites to check property lines and boundary markers. District staff say that monitoring by surveyors has helped reduce the number of encroachments.

McHenry County

In 2005, the McHenry County Conservation District explored the possibility of entering into a land swap agreement. The swap involved the district selling two acres at the Exner Marsh preserve site in exchange for 5.7 acres adjacent to another part of Exner Marsh. PAR Development proposed the swap to complete the construction of a shopping center. Part of the developer's land contains the nesting habitat of approximately 70 Blandings turtles, a state threatened species. Under the proposal, the nesting site would become part of Exner Marsh. The board never called the proposal for a final vote because there were several concerns over how to keep the turtles from migrating off-site to the developer's parking lot. The district asked the developer to improve a habitat plan that would better protect the turtles. Pending the developer's response, the proposal may come before the board again in 2006.

The district has not developed a formal policy on how to respond to encroachments. Generally, when the district finds an encroachment, staff interviews the violator and deals with the situation on a case-by-case basis. The district is flexible on the time frames for resolving an encroachment unless the encroachment is highly detrimental to district property. The district has never had to go to court to remove an encroachment.

Will County

The Forest Preserve District of Will County's Land Use and Development Policy adopted in 1995 sets forth specific guidelines regarding land transfers of district property. The policy provides that the "district acquires land for preservation, education, and recreation values; however, there may be extreme circumstances when forest preserve lands are disposed of by the sale or trading of parcels."

Prior to the disposition of forest preserve lands, the party requesting the transfer must perform an analysis of the district-owned parcels and the parcels offered to the district. The analysis must include a review of natural resource inventories, hydrology, wetlands, soils, geologic features, archeological features and impact on the preserve's design. The requestor is further required to procure appraisals of the fair market value of the parcels involved in the land transfer from a

district-approved certified appraiser. In recent years, the district has not been involved in any contentious land sale or land swap agreements.

The district also has an Encroachment Response Procedure to guide staff in the event of an encroachment on preserve lands. Under the procedure, after observation and verification of an encroachment, the district notifies the offender of the encroachment. If the encroachment is not removed, the district will inform the police, who will then issue a warning citation. If the encroachment continues, the district will remove the encroachment and send a bill to the violator for the costs associated with its removal and for restoring the property to its pre-encroachment condition.

Issues

Forest preserve and conservation districts work diligently to select lands for acquisition, formulate site development plans and restore preserve sites to a natural condition. District lands also have immeasurable value as habitat for wildlife and as places for the public to relax, exercise and enjoy nature. In addition, people purchase homes and rent office space based on proximity to district sites. The strategic priorities and general operations of the districts are based on owning the land in perpetuity. Selling the land or allowing encroachments undermines the fulfillment of these goals.

However, there may be instances where selling so-called “surplus” lands would be justified. According to Forest Preserve District of Cook County’s Land Policy, surplus lands are small parcels, usually less than one acre, which are not connected to the main system of preserves. Surplus lands are often vacant lots that are willed to a district or strips of district land that have been isolated by road construction. These parcels are virtually impossible to expand into a stand-alone preserve site or connect with another preserve area. In most cases, it is not fiscally appropriate for a district to maintain these sites, especially when they have little to no ecological, educational or recreational value.

Proposals to acquire district land sometimes come with a promise to provide increased economic opportunities to a community. For example, companies have argued that the only location on which they can expand their facility is district land. The companies claim that by expanding their facility they will be providing more jobs for residents and more taxable revenue for the county. These situations can expose a conflict of interest in districts where board members sit on both the forest preserve district board and the county board. When sitting on the county board, the board members may feel an obligation to maximize the economic opportunities for their constituents. On the forest preserve board, the same board members have a duty to be stewards of the preserves. When these types of proposals are before the forest preserve district board, it may be impossible for the board members to separate their respective roles and make a decision that is in the best interest of both the county and the district.

LAND MANAGEMENT AND RESTORATION

Over the years, human inhabitants have dramatically altered the natural environment in northeastern Illinois. What was once a landscape of prairie, wetlands, savannas and forest is now primarily farmland and urban and suburban development. In many of the remaining natural areas, people have changed the flow of rivers, introduced invasive species and disrupted ecosystems. Districts must address the challenges created by these activities to fulfill their mission of restoring land to its natural state.

Preserving natural areas involves both initial restoration and long-term land management. Restoration is the process of using ecological management techniques, such as controlled burns, reforestation, clearing of non-native plants, native seeding and removal of drainage tiles to re-establish natural processes and ecosystem structure. Districts usually try to restore land to a pre-settlement condition but not necessarily to any specific point in time. Typically, the goal is to restore an area to where the site is able to sustain healthy and diverse ecosystems. Districts determine the natural resource value of these sites and design a restoration and management plan based on the appropriate investment of financial and staff resources.

Long-term land management to restore natural areas prevents ecological degradation. It is necessary for districts to diligently continue land management and maintenance to assure that non-native and invasive species do not re-enter the site and disrupt balanced ecosystems.

A variety of land management and restoration techniques are used to replicate the forces of nature that have been eliminated or substantially reduced over the years due to human interference. In the pre-settlement prairie, fire swept across the landscape and was a crucial element in native ecosystems. District land managers use controlled burns as an effective way to remove invasive vegetation without damaging native plants. While there is widespread acceptance that these techniques are effective restoration and land management strategies, in recent years some of the districts have encountered varying levels of public resistance to their restoration efforts.

Cook County

Throughout most of its early history, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County focused much of its land management efforts on the reforestation of its preserves. Shortly after the district was created, its Forestry Department established a large nursery near the Des Plaines River, just north of the Village of Des Plaines, to supply a stock of trees for its newly acquired land. The district also established a nursery along the Salt Creek near the Village of Western Springs.

In 1927, the district formed a citizen's advisory committee to develop a land management policy. The committee studied issues such as promoting physical connections between the preserves, determining what land uses were within the district's legal mandate and evaluating the district's water supply and sanitation facilities.

The committee ultimately made several recommendations including the following land management formula:

- 75% of the district's land should be maintained in a natural condition;
- 5% of the district's land should be set aside for water recreation on rivers, streams, and lakes;
- 14% of the district's land should be developed as recreation centers, play fields and parking lots;
- 4% of the district's land should be for golf course development; and,
- 2% of the district's land should be set aside for a zoological park and an arboretum (the Chicago Botanic Garden).

This Land Use Distribution Policy was formally adopted by the commissioners in 1929 and continues to guide the district today. Recently, district ecologists determined that about 55,000 acres (or 80 percent) of the district's holdings are in a natural condition.⁵⁰

Later in the 20th century, the district, along with conservation agencies across the country, learned how to manage and restore natural resources based on the emerging science of ecological restoration. In 1963, district staff first used controlled burning as a method to restore and enhance its prairies and grasslands. In 1965, the district undertook a massive grassland planting effort on lands near most of its nature centers. By the late 1970s, a volunteer group called the North Branch Prairie Project obtained the district's approval to perform comprehensive restoration activities at a number of forest preserve sites located along the Chicago River.

In the early 1990s, the district formed the Office of Land Management to oversee and coordinate all restoration efforts performed throughout its forest preserve sites. However, in the mid-1990s, the district's land management practices were questioned by a small but vocal group of activists. The anti-restoration campaign was launched by members of the Sauganash and Edgebrook communities in northern Cook County.

The anti-restoration movement cited issues ranging from philosophical concerns about restoration to perceived safety problems for adjacent property owners. Philosophically, some critics believed that the district was interfering with the principle of letting nature take its course. Safety questions focused on the qualifications of those who applied herbicides, the strength of herbicide applications, sufficient training and supervision of restoration volunteers and the effects on air quality from controlled burns and tree removal. Finally, residents adjacent to district sites considered the trees and brush in the preserves to be a natural screen for their properties. When forest preserve vegetation was removed, it reduced privacy and residents claimed it caused property values to decline. Critics also felt there was insufficient planning and notification regarding the timing of tree removal and controlled burning.

In response to the anti-restoration outcry, in 1996 the district president declared a countywide moratorium on all restoration activities. The district conducted hearings on the ban during the fall and winter of 1996-97. In February 1997, the president lifted the moratorium at all but five sites (Miami Woods, Bunker Hill, Bunker Hill Oxbow, Indian Road Woods and Sauganash).

⁵⁰ In determining the acreage of natural area within the district, the analysis did not take into account lakes and ponds that are open for recreational fishing.

The District now allows limited restoration work, such as the removal of certain invasive plant species, but still prohibits controlled burning at each of these five sites.

Shortly after the ban was lifted for the rest of the preserves, a 21-member President's Community Advisory Council was formed to provide input into the district's ecological management planning process. The council includes a representative from each county district and four at-large members. Non-voting members of the council also may include the general superintendent and Department of Resource Management staff. The council makes recommendations on the district's conceptual site plans and provides input on schedules and criteria for controlled burns, brush-cutting and herbicide use.⁵¹

In 1998, the district adopted a set of land management guidelines that redefined the approved restoration activities performed by district staff and volunteers.⁵² The guidelines delineate the use of plant management, controlled burning and herbicides in the preserves. According to the guidelines, district staff directly supervises all restoration activities involving the use of herbicides, the removal of trees, the practice of girdling trees and controlled burns. Land management and restoration activities within the forest preserves are now performed by the district's Department of Resource Management as well as by many active volunteer groups who conduct work days at different sites throughout the year. Here are some examples of active restoration projects:

- 400 acres at Bartel Grasslands, \$460,000;
- 500 acres at Orland Grasslands, \$614,000;
- 85 acres of rare dolomite prairie habitat at Sag Valley, \$500,000; and
- 150 acres at the Bergman Slough, \$600,000.

These projects involve hydrological restoration, controlled burning, invasive species control and the planting of native seeds.

In October 2004, the district was granted authority to issue \$100 million in general obligation bonds to finance capital improvement projects. One half of the bond revenue is designated for the Brookfield Zoo and the Botanic Garden while the other half will fund projects within the forest preserves. Of the \$50 million that the district will spend on its forest preserve sites, 4 percent of the bond money is earmarked for ecological restoration projects such as shoreline restoration, streambank stabilization, multiple-use trail reconstruction and flood control projects. Ecological restoration equipment was also purchased.

Restoration activities during 2004 included controlled burning on 833 of its 68,303 acres. This was the largest number of acres burned in the last seven years. Also in 2004, volunteers contributed more than 56,000 hours restoring district preserves.

As part of its increased commitment to restoration, in 2005, the district budgeted a little more than \$1 million for land and aquatic restoration, up from approximately \$300,000 in 2004. The district is also beginning to train staff to become certified arborists. To date, 83 employees from various departments have been named International Society of Arboriculture Certified Arborists.

⁵¹ In December 2003, the board re-appointed the President's Community Advisory Council to a three-year term.

⁵² The guidelines were again revised and approved by the board in 2003.

DuPage County

DuPage County experienced a serious decline in the quality of its natural environment during the last half of the 20th century. A report, *State of the Natural Environment Within the Forest Preserves of DuPage County*, revealed that the native ecosystems within the county were generally in poor ecological condition. The report also stated that considerable restoration work was necessary to rehabilitate the county's forest preserves.⁵³ The district responded to this challenge by making land management and restoration a priority.

In 1988 the district substantially revised its Land Management Policy.⁵⁴ The policy defined four land classifications from Class I (Active Use Open Land) to Class IV (Highest Quality Natural Resources) to guide the district in the management of its holdings. The district classifies its land into appropriate categories as determined by a numerical natural areas ranking system.⁵⁵

The policy also established a goal of preserving 90 percent of the district's holdings in a natural state. The policy recommends that the district have no more than 10 percent of its land covered with maintained turf, trails, cropland, driveways or any facilities used for active recreation. The district's last assessment of this ratio, performed in the late 1990s, determined that 87 percent of its land is in a natural state. From 1982 through 2002, the district enacted a series of land management and restoration ordinances that address issues ranging from stormwater management to mosquito abatement.

Additionally, the district commissioners passed the Natural Areas Management Plan in July 1993.⁵⁶ The purpose was to restore the biological integrity of 7,000 acres of the highest quality natural areas to a condition which, thereafter, would require only regular management. The acreage was later revised to 9,000 acres and was divided into 191 distinct land management sub-units. Each unit was evaluated for the number of acres that needed brush clearing, controlled burning, herbicide application and seed planting. The district appropriated \$11.6 million for this program. Money was redirected from forest preserve construction and development budgets and general obligation development bonds to pay for the restoration activities. Projects funded through this program included fish stocking, mussel surveys, wetland bird surveys, endangered and threatened species habitat restoration and invasive species removal.

In the mid-1990s, the district experienced an anti-restoration backlash much like the anti-restoration movement in Cook County. The resistance began when the *Chicago Sun-Times* published a front-page story on Sunday, May 12, 1996, with the headline, "Half Million Trees May Face the Ax: DuPage Clears Forest Land to Create Prairies."⁵⁷ The anti-restoration outcry led the district to declare a temporary moratorium on all restoration activities. During 1996-97, the district conducted a series of hearings and public education forums on the benefits of restoration. In a matter of only a few months, the district completely lifted its restoration moratorium and resumed restoration activities.

⁵³ *State of the Natural Environment Within the Forest Preserves of DuPage County*, January, 1993.

⁵⁴ *Land Management Policy Statement*, Forest Preserve District of DuPage County Ordinance #88-474.

⁵⁵ The district's ranking system is based on *Plants of the Chicago Region*, published by the Morton Arboretum in 1979 and written by Floyd Swink and Gerould Wilhelm.

⁵⁶ Forest Preserve District of DuPage County Resolution #93-207.

⁵⁷ The *Sun-Times* editorial columnist, Raymond Coffey, would go on to write more than 30 articles over the next two and a half years attacking forest preserve restoration efforts in the Chicago region.

Volunteers assist in restoration activities. Site steward volunteers go through an application, interview and training process to perform some restoration work without direct district supervision. Site stewards organize and supervise volunteer restoration workday events that are open to the public. At workday events, volunteers cut brush, plant seeds, remove exotic weeds and collect seeds. Site stewards, if trained and licensed by the state, can also apply herbicides. None of the volunteers, including site stewards, are allowed to perform controlled burns or use power tools on district lands. All volunteer restoration work must be done in accordance with pre-approved district site management plans.

Today, the district focuses on five major active land management programs: (1) invasive species management (selective clearing and/or herbicide control); (2) deer population management; (3) re-establishment of natural hydrology; (4) seeding and planting for re-establishment or enhancement of conservation species; and (5) controlled burn management. The district uses controlled burning as a land management tool on approximately 2,000 acres each year.

Over the past decade, the district's restoration program has markedly improved the 2,900 acres of managed woodlands, has significantly reduced deer populations that exceeded 100 per square mile to less than 25 per square mile in 16 preserves and has allowed the district to restore 2,300 acres of wetlands and 1,800 acres of grasslands. These active restoration efforts have resulted in an improved wildlife community.

Kane County

Like DuPage County, the Kane County Forest Preserve District has a land management goal of preserving 90 percent of its land in a natural state. To help ensure that its highest quality land stays in a natural condition, the district created an ordinance that designates certain sites as Natural Areas. These designated sites harbor native plant and animal communities and represent the original landscape of Kane County. The district determines whether a site should be designated based on the following information: 1) listing in the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory; 2) locally known information specifying that a site is a high-quality natural area; 3) aerial photography of the site; and 4) field analysis of the site's resident flora and fauna performed by district staff. The district has designated 16 sites as natural areas.

The district also has adopted a land management plan to restore its forest preserves on a month-by-month and site-by-site basis. The restoration activities that are routinely performed are selective tree thinning, brush clearing, controlled burning, weed management, the use of herbicides, sowing native prairie and woodland seed mixes, reptile and amphibian surveys, planting tree seedlings, flora inventories, drain tile removal and seed harvesting.

In determining what restoration activities to perform, the district uses historical maps and surveyor notes that describe local plant communities prior to settlement. The district compares the old and new plant community information to chart a course for invasive species removal, the seeding of native plants and the general restoration of forest preserve land to its natural condition.

Once-a-month volunteer restoration workdays in the county are open to the public. Volunteers assist in seed planting, biological monitoring and surveys of plants. Site steward volunteers who have received restoration training can use herbicides on district lands. Only district staff,

however, may use power tools and participate in controlled burns within the district. All work performed by volunteers must be consistent with a district-approved land management plan. In 2004, the district planted 5,000 tree seedlings, conducted controlled burns at 15 sites and performed six major prairie seed planting projects.

Kendall County

The Kendall County Forest Preserve District has not adopted a formal land management policy. However, the district's master plan, approved by the board in November 2000, outlines specific land management objectives for many of its nine preserves. The district's goals are to finalize natural area management plans for all of its holdings, inventory the flora and fauna of each preserve site, monitor its preserves on a long-term basis and increase volunteer involvement in natural areas management.

The district has performed restoration activities on almost all of its sites within the past five years. The district's restoration activities include removal of non-native and over-populated vegetation, controlled burning, seed collection/distribution and stream monitoring. Each month, the district hosts "restoration work parties" at which volunteers such as schoolchildren, 4-H clubs and scout groups assist the district in its restoration and land management activities.

Lake County

Natural resource management projects within the Lake County Forest Preserve District are planned and coordinated by the district's Planning, Conservation and Development Department and field work is provided by the natural resource, forestry and other crews in the Operations and Public Safety Department. This department is supplemented by more than 2,000 stewardship volunteers.

In 2004, land management activities included:

- Controlled burning on 1,687 acres at 21 sites;
- Control of invasive species on 350 acres at six sites;
- Seeding of native plants on 263 acres at five sites;
- Planting of 1,092 trees on four sites covering 190 acres; and,
- Enhancement of fisheries in eight lakes covering 320 acres, including the stocking of 10,666 fish.
-

Over the past five years, district natural resource crews and project partners have been working to restore the Rollins Savanna site in central Lake County near Grayslake. More than 450 acres of former farmland have been restored at this preserve, including more than 200 acres of wetlands and the establishment of a native seed nursery.

The district does not have an official policy regarding how much of its land it plans to maintain in a natural condition. However, based on interviews with district staff, it is estimated that historically, the district maintains approximately 85 percent of its land in a natural condition while 15 percent is devoted to recreational use.

Many of the district's new land acquisitions are properties that are in agricultural production. In 2003, the district adopted a farm management program to manage these lands. The policy allows farmers to temporarily continue with agricultural production on the newly acquired district property. The farmers pay a license fee to the district that generates revenue while the district develops site-specific management plans. Farmers who rent district lands are required to use farming practices under a district-approved conservation plan that minimizes degradation of soil and water resources and protects wildlife habitat, flora, fauna and cultural resources. The district has more than 30 licenses covering 2,086 acres, generating about \$200,000 in annual fees.

The district's proposed \$110 million, five-year (2006-2010) Capital Improvement Plan outlines many of the land management and restoration priorities and projects for the upcoming years. Funds are also devoted to developing master plans for individual forest preserve sites that include elements of natural resource restoration. The FY 2006-2007 budget dedicates more than \$14.9 million for habitat restoration. Additional funding from grant and farmland management accounts result in more than \$17.3 million for habitat restoration projects. This project funding does not include funding for staff salaries related to natural resource management work.

The district is conducting an internal assessment of the land management and restoration needs at nine of its forest preserve sites. Eventually, a similar review for all of the sites will be undertaken. This assessment will be a guiding document for district land management activities.

McHenry County

In 1985, the McHenry County Conservation District enacted a comprehensive Natural Ecosystem Management Policy. The primary goals of the policy are to "maintain and reconstruct the best possible approximations of native communities by restoring natural ecological processes, structure and composition."⁵⁸ To carry out these goals, the district develops a master plan for each site. Master plans integrate soil analysis; topography (slope); past/current land uses and uses of surrounding area; natural resources inventory (Swink/Wilhelm floristic index, Illinois Natural Areas Inventory rating system, data on rare/threatened/endangered species, and known faunistic indices); wetlands, water bodies and flood plains; and natural resource management plans.

In some instances, the plans restrict public access to part of a site if there is an extremely rare natural area that requires a heightened level of protection. The district's board of trustees must approve all master plans. Agricultural production continues on some land through lease arrangements with local farmers. The district pays taxes to McHenry County on land used for agricultural purposes. Farming practices on district property must be consistent with a conservation plan that includes modern soil conservation practices. All new and renewing farm leases require a grass strip of at least 30 feet around the edges of all agricultural fields. The seed mix used in these buffer strips must promote wildlife habitat. Additionally, farming practices on District land must not hinder the site's eventual restoration to a native ecosystem.

Land management and restoration is performed by the district's Natural Resource Management Department. This department is divided into six sections: administration, land management, plant ecology, wildlife ecology, database and cartographic resources and Glacial Park Research Field Station. The district's restoration activities consist of controlled burns, removal of unwanted vegetation and the protection of native species.

⁵⁸ *McHenry County Conservation District Natural Ecosystem Management Policy.*

One of the district's most aggressive restoration efforts involved the re-meandering of a 3.2 mile stretch of the Nippersink Creek in 1999 within Glacial Park. This project reduced erosion and silt deposition, created pools and riffles for better habitat and increased overall water quality on the site and downstream.

In 2001, the district established a public hunting program to address ecological balance as well as requests from the hunting community for expanded recreational opportunities. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources also encouraged the district to expand the opportunities for public hunting on district sites. A series of public meetings was conducted before the program was adopted. When the program was proposed, a number of individuals and groups in the area were not supportive; however, the careful implementation of the program with strict guidelines and adherence to public safety concerns has dissipated further public expression of disagreement. The district is currently in the fourth year of its hunting program and allows hunting for deer, turkeys and waterfowl. The hunting program provides wildlife management advantages in addition to offering recreational opportunities on district land. To minimize potential hunting-related injuries, the district creates specific hunting zones and closes sites to the general public during the hunting season.⁵⁹ To be eligible for a district-issued hunting permit, every applicant must show proof of possession of all valid licenses, stamps and permits as required by federal and state law.

The district has a variety of restoration opportunities available for volunteers. The district offers volunteer workdays at which volunteers can survey plant and animal life, monitor stream, river and pond quality or clear invasive species. Volunteers also work on restoration projects such as the construction of a boardwalk or fence line, pond depth surveys and nest box construction. Volunteer site stewards manage the workdays for groups.

Will County

In 1995, the Forest Preserve District of Will County adopted a formalized Preserve Land Use and Development Policy. Under the policy, the district's land use goal is "to promote the highest and best uses of its lands for the enjoyment and understanding of present and future generations with minimal impact on a site's natural, cultural and scenic resources." The policy also includes a land use classification system for development, management and restoration based on a site's environmental sensitivity. The policy recognizes four land use classes: sanctuary area (high sensitivity); resource area (moderate sensitivity); recreational area (low sensitivity); and special-use area.⁶⁰ Each preserve may have several land use classifications due to the physical, ecological and archeological resources at each site. The purpose of the different classifications is to determine the appropriate intensity and type of land management that is incorporated into a site's master plan.

The district also has an established Agricultural Land Use Policy. Under this policy, agricultural property newly acquired, leased or managed (e.g., through a conservation easement) by the district is eligible for continued agricultural use based on the impact to local farm communities' economy and heritage if agricultural uses are not continued, the ability of the district to implement and manage an alternate land use on the property and the income generation for the

⁵⁹ Some forest preserve districts hire sharpshooters to cull deer herds at night.

⁶⁰ The district designates special-use areas to accommodate specific educational and recreational activities by individuals or groups. An example is an historic structure. Public access to such areas is generally controlled and may be restricted when use threatens protected resources or public safety considerations exist.

district. Typically, the district enters into multiple-year lease agreements with tenant farmers for a maximum length of three years. The property must be farmed within soil erosion guidelines established by the district. Money collected from farming leases is used for future implementation or management of the property for its intended land use consistent with the site's master plan.

The district's Department of Planning and Development implements land management and restoration activities within the district. This department does not have any official policy on the percentage of its holdings that are maintained in a natural condition. In 2004, the district restored 130 acres at six preserve sites and conducted controlled burns within 19 preserves totaling 810 acres. Prairie seed for more than 105 species was collected and dispersed. Invasive species of garlic mustard and purple loosestrife were removed from 15 sites.

The district also has a special focus on wildlife research projects and natural resource inventories resulting in extensive information on the flora and fauna within the preserves. Under these programs, the district recently completed biological surveys of lichen, birds, salamanders, turtles, and the Eastern Massasauga rattlesnake.

The district hosts volunteer work days for the public to participate in restoration activities. Volunteer site stewards manage designated preserves. Site stewards complete the same annual training in restoration and land management as district staff. Site stewards arrange and supervise volunteer workdays and do general maintenance at their sites. Due to their high level of training, site stewards can perform restoration work, including restoration with power tools and herbicides, without direct district staff supervision. All work performed by volunteers and site stewards must be in accordance with site pre-approved district land management plans.

Issues

Districts determine how much of their land should be restored, preserved and maintained in a natural condition and how much should be available for public recreation. Many residents value the preserves as a place to engage in outdoor recreation. However, recreational activities on or adjacent to high quality natural areas can damage critical plant and wildlife habitat. Both recreation and preservation are important parts of the districts' central mission and finding the appropriate balance between these different land uses is challenging.

Land management and restoration are critical to the mission of each forest preserve district and conservation district. While moratoriums on restoration activities can be enacted temporarily to address public concerns, arbitrary long-term restoration moratoriums can disrupt site management activities and master restoration plans. Moratoriums disrupt ecosystems, allowing invasive species to return.

In counties that are still partly rural, districts allow farming to continue on properties that have recently been acquired. While preserving an historic farmstead for educational field trips may be appropriate, allowing farming to continue on districts holdings long-term may be beyond the district's mission.

RECREATION

The mission of each forest preserve and conservation district in this study includes explicit language regarding the necessity of offering recreational opportunities to residents. The districts try to offer recreational activities that are diverse, affordable and innovative, but also in harmony with the goals of environmental and fiscal responsibility.

By offering a variety of outdoor recreational activities at their sites, the districts promote healthy lifestyles that combat health risks related to obesity. Fitness trails, hiking clubs and bicycling programs are offered at many sites. In addition, the accessibility of the sites to the general public allows for different cultures to participate in a variety of different activities.

In addition, recreational activities draw visitors to sites, where they learn about preservation and restoration of natural areas. The challenge for many districts is to balance popular recreational activities that draw large crowds with the potential negative impact to sensitive natural areas at district sites. Some recreational activities or facilities are able to enhance the district's revenue stream through fees and contract arrangements, while other activities drain the financial resources of the district. All of these issues need to be considered when deciding to offer a particular recreational activity.

Cook County

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County offers a wide variety of recreational opportunities and activities. The trail system boasts more than 300 miles of multi-use trail available for walking, hiking, bicycling and horseback riding. One hundred miles are paved for, but not limited to, the specific use of bicyclists. The district recently improved access points for bicycling trails, making gates more visible at night and erecting warning signs at trail heads. There are also trails for horseback riding and cross country skiing. Snowmobiling is also permitted at designated sites but not on any district trails.

Fishing is another popular activity at more than 40 lakes. Ice fishing is permissible on 14 lakes. Rainbow trout are stocked twice a year in three lakes, with other sport fish stocked annually. It is estimated that tens of thousands of boaters annually use the 12 bodies of water available for boating. Only the Des Plaines River and the Little Calumet River allow outboard motors.

The district offers equestrian activities, inline skating, nine model airplane fields, model boating areas, 263 picnic groves, eight sledding areas and youth organization camping. The district also has a 25-acre dog park area in Beck Lake in Des Plaines. There are 11 concession stands at preserve sites. Due to the high usage rate of the picnic facilities at the preserves, the district administration has made the updating and repair of picnic tables throughout the county a priority. Permits are required for special uses and special activities, camping, equestrian and dog park areas. In 2005, permits for reserved picnic groves became available over the internet as well as in person, facilitating easier access. The district also offers hiking and canoe trips designed to introduce patrons to the county's recreational opportunities.

During the FY 2006 budget presentation and hearings, the district announced a pilot picnic table program to phase in new tables. At that time, the district also announced a program for the safe disposal of hot coals throughout its picnic groves.

The district also offers swimming and owns three swimming pools. Whealan Pool Aquatic Center is the only pool currently in operation. Cermak Pool, at one time the largest pool in Illinois, and Calumet City's Green Lake pool and beach are both closed until further notice. The pools were originally constructed in 1929 as a sanitary alternative for swimmers using forest preserve lakes and rivers. Historically, the pools were open to the public free of charge and the costs of operating the pools were significant. Admission for the Whealan Pool is now \$5.00 per person, \$3.00 for ages 4-12 and free for children under three. The net cost for the district to operate Whealan Pool in 2005 was \$70,000.

The pools are 75 years old and require substantial renovation. The district is evaluating the significant cost of renovating and reopening the two closed pools. The district proposes spending \$8 million in 2006 and 2007 to rehabilitate the pools.⁶¹ That represents 8.2 percent of the \$97 million proposed in funded capital projects through 2010.⁶² The costs of operating the pools are also significant.

Cook County also owns and previously operated toboggan slides. The slides were built between the 1920s and 1940s and are now all closed.⁶³ The slides at Caldwell Woods, Swallow Cliff and Beemis Woods were officially shut down in January of 2005. Citing the danger and high cost of operating the toboggan slides, the district board has discussed replacing the slides with sledding hills. Like the pools, the toboggan slides historically generated minimal revenue relative to their high operating costs.⁶⁴

DuPage County

The Forest Preserve District of DuPage County boasts more than 140 miles of trail, which includes more than 70 miles of multi-purpose trails for walkers, hikers, bicyclists, cross-country skiers and horseback riders. Dog sledding is permitted at Blackwell Forest Preserve in the McKee Marsh area on designated multi-purpose trails.

The district also maintains 25 reservable picnic shelters and areas, five model-aircraft and model-boating areas, one family campground with 46 sites at Blackwell Forest Preserve, five youth group camping sites, one youth group cabin at Herrick Lake Forest Preserve and seven off-leash dog areas, all of which require a permit for use. In addition, private boating is allowed on four district lakes, also with a permit. Permits are available through the district's headquarters in Wheaton; daily private-boating permits are also available at each of the four lakes. Rowboats, kayaks and canoes can be rented at the Herrick Lake and Blackwell sites.

⁶¹ The funding for the renovation of the district's pools at Cermak and Green Lake was part of a grant proposal to the Illinois First Program in 2002. The State of Illinois awarded the grant but did not release funding for the pool rehabilitation until the fall of 2005.

⁶² Civic Federation, *Forest Preserve District of Cook County FY2006 Proposed Budget: Analysis and Recommendations*, November 29, 2005.

⁶³ On February 2004, the board granted the district authority to issue a request for proposals for the management, operation and maintenance of the toboggan slides. In July 2004, the district presented to the board one response from a potential vendor to operate the Swallow Cliff Slides. The board referred this response to the Recreation Committee. In September 2004, the board approved a report of the Recreation Committee which rejected the sole bid and directed the district to re-bid the proposal.

⁶⁴ Civic Federation, *Forest Preserve District of Cook County FY2006 Proposed Budget: Analysis and Recommendations*, November 29, 2005.

A high priority within the district is the promotion of fishing. Fishing is allowed in all of the district's 30-plus lakes, both branches of the DuPage River, Salt Creek and in all tributary creeks. Ice fishing is permitted on most preserve lakes although district rangers do not monitor ice thickness. Numerous lakes are stocked, including Blackwell's Silver Lake, which draws many anglers and hosts the "Just for Kids Fishing Derby" every June. Live bait can be purchased at the Blackwell and Herrick Lake boat-rental areas, and patrons can also borrow fishing poles for no charge at the two areas or through the district's East Division office.

Popular winter activities are tubing and sledding on Mt. Hoy in the Blackwell preserve site however, only district tubes are allowed and are rented at the base of the hill. Snowshoeing, cross-country skiing and ice fishing can be further explored through the district's "Wonders of Winter" event, which provides clinics and information on these activities.

The district also operates an archery range at Blackwell Forest Preserve in Warrenville. Visitors can use seven Olympic-type targets for free. The range has become very popular for both children and adults. Trained district staff offer classes to students. In addition the district hosted the Prairie State Games archery competition at Danada Forest Preserve in June of 2005.

The district is also working on establishing a more cohesive network of greenways and trails. Neighboring communities have benefited from connections to regional trail systems.

The district recently completed a major project at Springbrook Prairie Forest Preserve. In 1994 the Springbrook Prairie Advisory Committee was formed to generate a master plan for the development of the preserve. The district worked closely with the City of Naperville and the Naperville Park District on the plans. Recently completed, Springbrook Prairie is now home to an extensive 8.5-mile self-contained trail system, a 36-acre off-leash dog area, three bridges, and three sections of boardwalk.

Kane County

The Forest Preserve District of Kane County offers both traditional and unique recreational opportunities. The district is known as a national leader for the creation and maintenance of its bicycle trail system. The district places a high priority on the 87-plus miles of bicycle trails, which continue to be expanded and improved. It is a model for other districts in the region. There are four main trails that run through the county: the Fox River Trail, the Great Western Trail (which goes 14 miles, then into DeKalb County), numerous branches of the Illinois Prairie Path and the Virgil Gilman Trail.

Kane County is committed to coordinating and connecting its trails with those of other municipalities and park districts. The district works closely with municipalities on a number of joint projects. For example, in Elburn, the district is working with village officials to make connections from existing district trails to trails in a new housing development. They are also working with the City of Aurora on a bicycle trail. According to the district's land acquisition report, providing trail linkage is a high priority when considering which lands to purchase.

An estimated 2 million visitors participate in other activities offered by the district. Camping is available at Paul Wolff and Buffalo parks from May 1 to October 31. The use of recreational motorized vehicles (e.g., ATVs or dirt bikes) in the preserves, on or off the trails, is strictly prohibited.

In the winter, snowmobiling is allowed on designated trails if there is at least four inches of snow. Buffalo Park has a snowboard park on an old ski hill. Patrons of the forest preserves can also enjoy cross country skiing and sledding at all of the preserves. Ice skating is prohibited.

There are two off-leash dog areas, and picnicking is provided throughout the preserves at shelters and picnic areas. In 2004, the district implemented a new reservation system that accommodated a large number of groups (1,735) and residents (172,499) who wished to use the district's amenities. Birding field trips are also provided at various preserves within the Fox River Valley.

Recreational activities and facilities that fall beyond the traditional scope of other forest preserve districts include the Elfstrom Stadium, home to the minor league baseball team, the Kane County Cougars. Constructed in 1991, the stadium also hosts the Illinois High School Association's division AA baseball tournament. Numerous other high school, university, and organized leagues play their games at Elfstrom and the stadium generates non tax-based revenue for the district. The district baseball license generates 39 percent of special revenue and enterprise funds.⁶⁵ Under an agreement with the Cougars, the district receives 8 percent of the gross revenue earned at the stadium and \$100,000 for parking annually. For the fiscal year ending in June 2004, district revenue from the Cougars totaled \$708,170.

The district also operates the Events Center Park, adjacent to Elfstrom Stadium. Campbell House is used for special events and occasions. In 2004, the Events Center hosted 467 specialty events. Evenings of free, live entertainment such as "Stars under the Stars," are staged at the adjoining picnic grounds. The district heavily promotes its trail system, Events Center Park and Elfstrom Stadium on its Web site.

Kendall County

The Forest Preserve District of Kendall County provides recreational opportunities to county residents. The district's master plan of November 2000 states that while "the majority of facilities are maintained well ... some are in need of improvement."⁶⁶ However, the vast majority of the old and poorly maintained sites have been greatly upgraded since the Master Plan was written. Seven preserve sites now have picnic shelters and associated facilities and an additional seven preserves have nature trails.

Among the district's preserves, the Harris site, southwest of Yorkville, is the most developed site for active recreation. One of two baseball diamonds at the Harris site was removed approximately 4 years ago. In addition, the site offers a sled hill, horse area, equestrian trail, fishing and a picnic area.

The only bicycle trail within the district is at the Blackberry Creek site north of Yorkville. The only canoe launch is on the Fox River west of the village of Millbrook in the western part of the county. Fishing, picnic shelters and nature trails are available at four different locations, and another ball field exists at the Houses Grove, a preserve leased from Seward Township.

The district works closely with municipalities. Projects listed in the master plan include an agreement with the Oswegoland Park District to construct the Fox River Trail through Oswego.

⁶⁵ *Forest Preserve District of Kane County Annual Report 2004.*

⁶⁶ Forest Preserve District of Kendall County, Master Plan, p. 18, November 2000.

Like other districts, the district forms partnerships with organizations along the Fox River to develop the Fox River Water Trail, which promotes canoeing and kayaking on the Fox River.

The district is also a partner in the 2004 Kendall County Trails and Greenways Plan along with numerous other municipalities. The plan aims to create a broad network of trails and greenways throughout Kendall County. Out of the plan's identified 200 miles of trail, 20 miles of multi-use trail are completed. The current trail is located primarily in the northeastern portion of the county.

Lake County

The Forest Preserve District of Lake County has recently established many new trails and recreational facilities. District improvement projects focus on creating trails, increasing public access to the preserves and additional outdoor recreational opportunities.

The district has 130 miles of multi-use trails, with bicycling, hiking and cross-country skiing allowed on all of them. There is one groomed trail specifically for cross-country skiing at the winter sports area in the Lakewood Forest Preserve. Over 50 miles of trail are available for horseback riding, including equestrian only trails at the Lakewood Forest Preserve, and three miles can be used for horse-drawn vehicles. The district also includes two sledding areas and seven different snowmobiling locations, encompassing nearly 50 miles of trail. The 2005 Attitude and Interest Survey reports that 60 percent of trail visitors use the trails for walking and 37 percent for bicycling. New stretches of the planned 35-mile Millennium Trail are opened each year.

For those interested in boating, water trails along the Des Plaines River offer 32 river miles for canoeists and kayakers. In the summer of 2002, the restoration of a shoreline and the creation of a new boat launch and marina were completed in the Fox River Forest Preserve.

The Lake County 2020 Transportation Priority Plan proposes the development of a countywide network of bicycle trails that will connect local facilities in municipalities with the forest preserves throughout the county. Currently, 123 miles of this system are open and functioning.

Independence Grove has the highest attendance of any Lake County forest preserve. According to the 2005 Attitude and Interest Survey, which updated a survey conducted in 1998, 37 percent of all preserve visitors reported visiting Independence Grove. The 2004 annual financial report states that more than 226,000 patrons visited the preserve in the 2003/2004 fiscal year. Independence Grove is the only preserve in Lake County with boat rental facilities and a swimming beach. The marina at Independence Grove rented 11,000 boats generating \$96,000 in revenue, and 24,000 swimmers used the beach during 2004. The lake, used for swimming and boating, is man-made and was once a quarry.

Fishing and boating are also popular activities in Lake County. There are 14 fishing locations and ice fishing is allowed at two preserves. Boating is allowed at seven locations with the newest launch area on the 74-acre Sterling Lake at the Van Patten Woods Forest Preserve.

There are 23 picnic shelters and one large pavilion available for public use. Permits are required for any group exceeding 25 people. Permits are also required for the use of the dog exercise areas, dog sled areas, model aircraft flying fields, horse trails or for horse-drawn vehicles. In

May 2002, the fourth forest preserve dog exercise area opened at Duck Farm in northwest Lake County.

McHenry County

McHenry County Conservation District sites offer a variety of recreational activities including hiking, bicycling, cross country skiing, horseback riding, fishing and boating.

Trails are a high priority with 43 miles of trail within 22 sites. All trails can be used for hiking and most are available for cross-country skiing. There is a 26-mile multi-use trail available for bicycling, a total of 20 miles of trail dedicated to horseback riding throughout four different sites and 17 miles of trail available for snowmobiles.

The district attempts to facilitate connections among McHenry County communities with alternate routes of travel. The very popular Prairie Trail stretches from the southeast corner of the county up to the Wisconsin border and is monitored by district safety watch volunteers. Trail expansion in the district is largely in the planning stages. Site analysis and engineering studies were completed for additions to both the North Nippersink and Crystal Lake-to-Woodstock trails. Construction began early in the spring of 2005 on a 3.5-mile stretch of the Huntley-Union-Marengo trail system which is set for a grand opening in June 2006.

The district offers fishing at 13 sites. Some of the sites allow non-motorized boats or canoes. Seven sites accommodate group camping and 15 provide picnic and shelter facilities. Winter camping is only permitted at the Marengo Ridge Conservation Area. Permits, required for the use of any campground, picnic or shelter facility, are available on first-come, first-served basis and cannot be purchased online. In October 2005, the district opened the 1,500 acre Pleasant Valley Conservation Area. This site has an educational focus and also includes six trails that total over five miles.

The district promotes cross-country skiing and ice fishing excursions for youth and candlelight cross-country skiing on select Friday and Saturday nights throughout winter. To promote recreational opportunities, the district started the Century Hikers Club. For an entrance fee, patrons in the program are rewarded with T-shirts, badges and pins when they hike 100, 250 and 500 miles. Upon hiking 1,000 miles, the hiker's name is engraved on a plaque.

In recent years other recreational facilities have been upgraded and improved. Two popular preserves were reopened in September 2004 after improvement plans were completed. The Marengo Ridge conservation area is enhanced with new restrooms, trails and a picnic shelter. Also, improvements at the Fox Bluff Conservation Area include a new shelter, restroom, drinking fountain, landscaping and a paved trail to give patrons access to the shores of the Fox River.

McHenry County Conservation District is the only land preservation district in the area that also offers a recreational hunting program. The program, now in its fourth year, is used as a restoration and land management technique to control the deer population and also provide recreational opportunities for hunters in the area. The program has strict guidelines regarding application, fees, restricted access to various sites and safety requirements.

Will County

Currently, the Forest Preserve District of Will County has 70 miles of trails, 52 of which are bicycle trails, 37 of which permit cross-country skiing, and 18.2 of which permit horseback riding. The entire trail system is designed for non-motorized use only. The district has worked in partnership with the City of Joliet on creating and maintaining a trail system throughout the two jurisdictions.

Use of the preserves is increasing. In 2004, the total permitted attendance was recorded at 541,000, up from 326,000 in 2003. The Monee Reservoir is the most popular destination among patrons. It includes a boat rental facility and a concession stand and also rents snowshoes during the winter.

The district offers picnic shelters at 19 locations, camping at five locations, five canoe launches, six visitor centers, fishing at eight locations and two dog parks. During winter, sledding tubes can be rented at the Plum Creek Nature Center within Goodenow Grove.

Money generated through a referendum in 1999 facilitated the creation of a number of recreational projects including trails, bridges, picnic shelters and dog parks. Other improvement projects in 2002 and 2004 included the renovation of the Isle a la Cache Museum and purchase of canoes, fishing equipment, cross-country skis and bicycles for rent to visitors. Trails and campsites were also expanded at Theodore Marsh and Thorn Creek Woods.

On April 5, 2005, the voters of Will County approved \$95 million in bonds for land acquisition and capital improvements. Of this, \$13 million is dedicated to improvements including the following:

- Hiking and bicycling trails throughout the county that link neighborhood trail systems with district trail systems;
- New areas for outdoor recreation, such as picnicking, fishing, camping and dog parks; and
- Repair and upgrading of infrastructure, such as picnic shelters, bridges, latrines, roadways and paths.

The district also plans to create a 78-acre public recreation area on the Des Plaines River known as Moose Island. The property was purchased by the district for \$4.5 million and has a \$3.75 million renovation plan. The district plans to rename the area McKinley Woods, with the public use area being known as Sheridan Grove. The Moose Island project will include an outdoor amphitheatre, a boardwalk, a deck and an environmental education center. The construction will take place in three phases. The first, projected to be complete by the end of 2006, will open the area to hiking and fishing. The second phase is the creation of the amphitheater and environmental education center, scheduled to be complete by spring 2007, and the third is the construction of two lodges to be completed by 2009.⁶⁷

Issues

Offering a variety of recreational activities to the citizens is central to the mission of the forest preserve districts and conservation district. Citizens enjoy the activities that in many cases are

⁶⁷ Cindy Cain, "Moose Island Development Goes to Bid," *Daily Southtown*, January 8, 2006.

free of charge on accessible public sites. Districts try to choose recreational events, activities and facilities that match the expressed need and interest of the citizens. The districts offer a mix of activities ranging from hiking, canoeing, bicycling, camping and bird watching to swimming, archery and dog parks. All of these activities invite the public outdoors to a natural area, river, prairie or woodland for family, individual or group activities. While participating in these activities, members of the public have the opportunity to develop an appreciation for the natural environment.

Some recreational activities and facilities may be more suitably managed by park districts or parks departments. If recreational activities duplicate those offered by other groups in the same communities, districts should evaluate their relevance and viability. However, not all municipalities or unincorporated areas have such an entity, nor do the residents of these areas have access to them. In these cases, districts may be the appropriate entity for offering the recreational opportunity.

Finally, there are some activities that may be considered inappropriate for forest preserve or conservation districts to offer because of their impact on the natural sites, their relevance to the mission or their costs.

GOLF COURSES

Golf Courses by District			
	Name	Location	<i>Number of Holes</i>
Cook County	Billy Caldwell	Chicago	9
	Burnham Woods	Burnham	18
	Chick Evans	Morton Grove	18
	Edgebrook	Chicago	18
	George W. Dunne	Oak Forest	18
	Highland Woods	Hoffman Estates	18
	Indian Boundary	Chicago	18
	Joe Louis	Riverdale	18
	Meadowlark	Hinsdale	9
	River Oaks	Calumet City	18
DuPage County	Green Meadows	Westmont	9
	Maple Meadows	Wood Dale	27
	Oak Meadows	Addison	18
Kane County	Deer Valley	Big Rock Township	9
	Hughes Creek	Elburn	18
	Settler's Hill	Geneva	18
Lake County	Brae Loch	Grayslake	18
	Countryside	Mundelein	36
	Fort Sheridan	Fort Sheridan	18
	Thunderhawk	Beach Park	18
Districts without golf courses: Kendall McHenry Will			

Forest Preserve and Conservation Districts are specifically permitted to operate golf courses on district lands as part of their authority to provide recreational activities to the general public. Of the districts surveyed in this study Cook, DuPage, Kane and Lake own and/or operate golf courses. Each district varies widely in the number of courses owned, how the courses are managed and how profitable the courses are as business enterprises.

Cook County

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County has the largest number of golf facilities of any of the districts, with 10 courses and four driving ranges. The district owns both 9-hole and 18-hole courses that are located across Chicago and the suburbs. The district's golf courses and driving ranges encompass approximately 1,400 acres of land.

Before 2003, the district operated all of its own golf courses. However, the 10 courses combined were running deficits of about \$1.5 million annually. In fact, audits demonstrated that the district was losing about \$4 on every game of golf played at its courses. As a result, on July 9, 2002, the board voted to privatize its golf course operations. The district continues to own its golf course properties, but management of the courses was turned over to the Billy Casper Golf Co., a firm based in Vienna, Virginia. Billy Casper Golf assumed the operation of the district's golf facilities on January 1, 2003.

According to the terms of the 10-year contract with the firm, the district will receive a base fee annually of \$350,000 from the firm, paid in three annual installments of \$116,000. The firm also must share a percentage of its revenue from the courses with the district beyond the base fee, including revenue from alcohol sales. Additionally, the firm is required to invest another \$3 million in capital improvements at the courses during the contract period. The firm assumes the responsibility for all maintenance, repair, replacements and upkeep of the facilities but the district retains the authority to regulate greens fees and golf cart rental fees.

The district has benefited tremendously from the privatization of its golf courses. After losing money on its golf operations for many years prior to privatization, the district realized more than \$1 million in profits during the years 2003 and 2004. Rounds of golf also increased by about 100,000 per year after the firm assumed management of the courses. The district does not incur any expenses for its golf course operations. Therefore, in less than three years, the district's golf courses have been transformed from a multimillion dollar drain on its budget to a significant source of revenue for district's operations.

At a board meeting in April 2006, the district announced that all 10 of its golf courses received Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Status from Audubon International. To achieve this recognition, the district must follow certain planning, construction, management and pesticide use practices.

DuPage County

The Forest Preserve District of DuPage County owns three golf courses. The courses are Green Meadows, a 9-hole course in Westmont; Maple Meadows, a 27-hole links-style course in Wood Dale; and Oak Meadows, an 18-hole course in Addison. About 100,000 rounds of golf are played each year at the courses.

All three of the courses were previously privately owned. The clubhouse at Maple Meadows, however, was constructed after the district acquired it. The district has also made several substantial capital improvements and course layout modifications at each of the courses over the years.

The district currently manages and operates all aspects of all three courses, including the food and beverage concessions and the banquet hall at Oak Meadows. In recent years, the courses have been running budget deficits. In FY 2003-2004, the district's three courses collectively posted a negative cash flow of \$7,200. However, for FY 2005-2006, the district is projecting positive revenues as it re-evaluates all aspects of its golf course operations.

Kane County

The Forest Preserve District of Kane County also owns three golf courses. The courses are Deer Valley, a par-3 course in Big Rock Township; Hughes Creek, an 18-hole course in Elburn; and Settler's Hill, an 18-hole course in Geneva.

The district bought Deer Valley and Hughes Creek as pre-existing golf courses. Settler's Hill, however, is unique because the course is situated above a former county landfill. Kane County operated a landfill at the property until 1985. The landfill has been capped to protect contaminants from reaching the surrounding aquifer, and pipes have been installed to drain off methane used by Waste Management Co. to produce electricity for the corporation and the City of Geneva. After the landfill's closing, the county turned the property over to the forest preserve district and reimbursed the district for the costs of building the golf course. Settler's Hill opened in 1987 as a 9-hole course and the second nine holes were added by the district in 1991.

The Forest Preserve District of Kane County has the distinction of being the first in Illinois to convert a brownfield property to a golf course. Due to the success of that venture, the district is considering adding additional golf holes and a driving range adjacent to Settler's Hill golf course. Kane County currently operates another landfill that surrounds the Settler's Hill course on three sides. That landfill will close at the end of 2006. It is anticipated that the county will again pay the district to build the new golf amenities on that property, which could open as early as 2008.

All three of the district's golf courses are operated by a private management firm. Prior to 1993, the district operated its own courses but lost money every year. According to its contract with the current operator, the district receives a fixed percentage (14.5 percent) of the gross revenue from all three courses. In FY 2003-2004, the district received \$396,303 from the private golf management company. The golf course operators also owe the district guaranteed minimum payments of \$380,000 per year through 2008, \$332,500 in 2009 and \$190,000 per year from 2010 to 2012. Thus in Kane County, golf courses serve as both a source of revenue for the district and as a valuable land use redevelopment tool for the region.

Lake County

The Lake County Forest Preserve District owns five 18-hole golf courses. The courses are the ThunderHawk Golf Club located in Beach Park, the Brae Loch Golf Club located in Grayslake, the Fort Sheridan Golf Club (currently closed for renovation) located in Fort Sheridan and two courses at the Countryside Golf Club in Mundelein. Three of the courses (Countryside, Brae Loch and Fort Sheridan) existed when the district acquired those properties.

All of the courses have been certified by Audubon International as part of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System. ThunderHawk is even classified by Audubon International as a Signature Sanctuary, Audubon's highest ranking, making it the first golf course in Illinois to

attain such status. To be eligible for Signature Sanctuary certification by Audubon, the district must successfully complete and implement a Natural Resource Management Plan to Audubon International's specifications. The golf course must also successfully pass an on-site environmental audit after the project is completed and site audits are required to retain the Signature Sanctuary designation.

The district receives more than \$1 million in profits annually from its golf course operations. The golf courses are set up by the district as enterprise operations with the business philosophy that the courses must be financially self-supporting. The district uses a business model to run its golf courses putting a premium on advertising, marketing, clean bathrooms, customer service and aesthetically pleasing courses.

Issues

With more than 600,000 rounds of golf played by residents each year, public golf courses are historically among the most popular recreational activities the districts provide. They offer recreation while also providing a potential source of revenue to support other district operations.

From an environmental perspective, golf courses can be controversial. A typical course uses a significant amount of water and can generate soil, groundwater and surface water pollution from fertilizers and insecticides. However, if managed properly, golf courses can provide some environmental benefits by protecting valuable open land from development, offering habitat for wildlife and providing stormwater storage. Golf courses are also among the best ways to restore contaminated properties, such as landfills, to productive use. In recent years, many course designers have been promoting practices that avoid the worst environmental problems and favor natural landscape designs that include native vegetation.

While acquiring golf courses protects open space, courses do not preserve the county's remaining wetlands, prairies and forests in their natural state and their purchase may have a high opportunity cost. Some forest preserve advocates question whether preserving or creating golf courses falls within the mission of forest preserve districts.

There is some evidence that the market is already oversaturated with golf courses. If so, golf courses may be a cash drain rather than the cash cow they were once expected to be.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Educational and Nature Centers by District

Cook County

- Crabtree Nature Center, *Barrington*
- River Trail Nature Center, *Northbrook*
- Sand Ridge Nature Center, *South Holland*
- Little Red Schoolhouse, *Willow Springs*
- Camp Sagawau, *Lemont*
- Hal Tyrrell Trailside Museum, *River Forest*

DuPage County

- Danada Equestrian Center, *Wheaton*
- Fullersburg Woods Nature Center, *Oak Brook*
- Kline Creek Farm, *Winfield*
- Mayslake Peabody Estate, *Oak Brook*
- Willowbrook Wildlife Center, *Glen Ellyn*
- James "Pate" Philip State Park Visitor Center, *Bartlett*

Kane County

- Tekakwitha Woods Nature Education Center, *St. Charles*
- Pioneer Sholes School, *St. Charles Township*

Kendall County

- Laws of Nature Education Center, *Yorkville*

Lake County

- Ryerson Woods Nature Center, *Deerfield*
- Lake County Discovery Museum, *Wauconda*
- Greenbelt Cultural Center, *North Chicago*
- Independence Grove Visitors Center, *Libertyville*
- Bonner Heritage Farm, *Lindenhurst*

McHenry County

- Glacial Park Research Field Station, *Ringwood*
- Prairieview Educational Center, *Crystal Lake*
- Wiedrich Educational Center, *Ringwood*
- Living Land Farm, *Cary*

Will County

- Isle a la Cache Museum, *Romeoville*
- Plum Creek Nature Center, *Beecher*
- Environmental Learning Center, *Mokena*

Providing natural resource education is one of the central missions that each of the forest preserve and conservation districts share. Through their educational programs, districts are able to expose residents of all ages to many of the natural, scenic and historic assets located within their counties.

Cook County

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County offers a wide range of more traditional forest preserve educational programs. These programs are administered by the Educational Division located within the district's Department of Resource Management. The overwhelming majority of programs are free to the public. Only special programs, such as summer day camps, charge an admission fee, which is typically nominal (under \$5).

The division operates six nature centers highlighting the natural diversity unique to each site:

- Oak-hickory savannas at Crabtree Nature Center in Barrington
- Oak and maple forests at River Trail Nature Center in Northbrook
- Prairies and sand dunes at Sand Ridge Nature Center in South Holland
- Moraine hills at the Little Red Schoolhouse in Willow Springs
- Rock canyons at Camp Sagawau near Lemont
- Wildlife center at the Hal Tyrrell Trailside Museum in River Forest

The largest attendance of any of the district's education programs is from scheduled classroom visits to the nature centers. Approximately 28,000 people attended scheduled group visits to district nature centers in 2005.

In addition to the exhibits and displays at its nature centers, the district's top educational programs are the Mighty Acorns program and Getting-in-Touch with Nature. Getting-in-Touch with Nature is presented by district naturalists. The program features interactive classroom presentations and activities that help teachers meet Illinois State Learning Standards, especially in science. The Mighty Acorns Program is an independent educational program used by schools, youth groups, park districts, conservation districts and forest preserve districts throughout the greater Chicago region. The program teaches fourth- through sixth-grade pupils about the importance of conservation stewardship through hands-on activities during field trips to natural areas, including the forest preserves in Cook County. The Mighty Acorns curriculum is based on the Illinois State Learning Standards for science and the theory of experiential education. Almost 17,000 students annually participate in these educational outreach programs.

The district also owns but does not operate the Brookfield Zoo and the Chicago Botanic Garden, both of which provide numerous educational opportunities for visitors.

Brookfield Zoo annually hosts more than 200,000 Illinois schoolchildren free of charge and its formal educational programs are attended by hundreds of teachers and other adults. Throughout the year, the zoo offers hundreds of educational activities for individuals, students and family groups to learn about the zoo's animals, the science behind the zoo's day-to-day operations and a host of other conservation-related topics. While some of the educational programs at the zoo are free, the zoo charges admission fees for most of its programs.

The Chicago Botanic Garden serves more than 100,000 students of all levels with its educational programs. The garden's educational curriculum, within the School of the Botanic Garden, offers more than 300 education classes, 12 symposia and numerous special event programs. Additionally, the garden offers classes for college credit in a partnership with Loyola University, including an exchange of faculty and students. The Chicago Botanic Garden charges admission fees for most of its educational workshops and programs.

DuPage County

The Forest Preserve District of DuPage County has adopted a set of guiding principles that describe how the district's mission is applied to each of its operations. For educational programs, "Our resources are devoted to instilling land appreciation and recreational opportunities that lend to lifelong learning."

Many of the district's educational programs are administered at six education centers that serve a combined total of more than 365,000 people per year. The Danada Equestrian Center in Wheaton hosts educational programs on daily horse care, feeding, grooming, saddling and bridling, as well as beginner through advanced riding lessons. At the Fullersburg Woods Nature Education Center in Oak Brook, visitors can examine the reconstructed remains of a 13,000-year-old woolly mammoth. There are also exhibits on identifying animals and their tracks, exploring the habitats around Salt Creek and appreciating natural history. Kline Creek Farm in Winfield focuses on 1890s agricultural education and programs covering harvesting, canning, planting and maple sugaring. Mayslake Peabody Estate in Oak Brook offers educational "Restoration in Progress" tours of the preserve's nationally registered historic mansion along with indoor and outdoor theatrical performances. Willowbrook Wildlife Center in Glen Ellyn offers educational programs focusing on subjects such as birds of prey, mammal tracking and wildlife management. As a result of a cooperative agreement between the district and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the district also operates the James "Pate" Philip State Park Visitor Center in Bartlett. This facility contains photomurals and interactive educational displays highlighting the prairie ecosystem.

Educational programs at the nature centers are offered year round. The vast majority are offered free of charge. However, the Danada Equestrian Center charges fees in excess of \$100 for many of its horseback riding lessons.

According to the district, its top educational programs are 1) guided and self-guided group visits to each of its six education centers, 2) summer youth programs at its education centers, and 3) school outreach programs such as the Raptor Education Programs offered by the Willowbrook Wildlife Center and the Bass in the Class Program administered by district staff from Fullersburg Woods.

During personal interviews, district staff explained the benefits of having educational programs in its preserves. One staff member noted, "Natural resource-based programs provide children with a contextual understanding of their role in the natural world. These learning opportunities have a direct influence on the participants and indirect impacts on family and friends. Our county residents like living in a community where these kinds of opportunities are available."

Kane County

The Forest Preserve District of Kane County has developed a specific mission statement for its educational programs: "To foster an understanding of ecological concepts and natural systems; to promote recognition of how each of us interrelates with those systems and to develop an awareness of our personal responsibility to respect and preserve the health of the Earth." This mission statement is incorporated into all of the district's educational programs. As a result, the district only offers ecology-based educational programs.

According to the district, the central theme of its educational programs is to increase people's appreciation of the ecology of Kane County while at the same time imparting a general understanding of environmental stewardship. In addition, the district makes a concerted effort to balance the content of its programs to attract a wide audience. The district's programs target age groups ranging from preschool children to senior citizens.

The district conducts the majority of its education programs outside and on its trail system. Other programs are offered at the Tekakwitha Woods Nature Center in St. Charles which has exhibits, a library, a discovery center for children and a wildlife viewing room. The district also operates the Pioneer Sholes School in St. Charles Township, a circa-1900, one-room country school used as a living museum for students and their teachers. A full field trip curriculum re-enacts a school day as it was 100 years ago. A collection of 19th and early 20th century school texts, early official Kane County education records and historical accounts of one-room schools are among the site's features. The district also participates in the Mighty Acorns program with local schools throughout the county.

Many of the programs offered by the district are free to the public. However, the district does charge a nominal fee (usually \$2) for some of its programs. This enables the district to recover some of its costs, lends importance to the program and helps ensure attendance.

Kendall County

The Forest Preserve District of Kendall County operates the Laws of Nature educational center on the main floor of the Kendall County Historic Courthouse in downtown Yorkville. The center focuses on natural history and on the different plants and animals found in Kendall County. The center also has a collection of Native American artifacts. The district employs an educator/administrator to oversee the development and operation of the center.

The district offers recurring monthly educational programs taught by district naturalists for seniors, preschoolers and grade school children. The district also offers summer camps for youth ages 4-15, an annual Fox River Getaway Canoe Trip and various other family programs throughout the year. Almost all of the programs are free of charge but some seasonal arts and craft programs have a \$12-\$15 admission fee. The district annually hosts Native American Heritage Days in October where visitors learn how Native Americans made and used tools and lived in Kendall County.

According to the district, the educational programs "educate people of all ages on the importance of preserving natural areas" and serve as "good public relations for the district."

Lake County

Approximately 155,000 visitors each year participate in the Lake County Forest Preserve District's educational programs. Schoolchildren and youth groups make up over 37,000 of the participants in the programs. Educational programs are administered at five education centers and focus on natural and cultural awareness.

The Ryerson Woods Nature Center in Deerfield, the district's primary environmental education center, offers a nature library, exhibits and meeting rooms. The Lake County Discovery Museum in Wauconda is one of the 10 most popular destinations in all of Lake County. It includes

museum galleries, educational exhibits and classrooms. The Greenbelt Cultural Center in North Chicago offers programs at which visitors can learn about the arts and the environment. The Independence Grove Visitors Center in Libertyville has an interior classroom and interactive exhibits for students and adults. The Bonner Heritage Farm is located in Lindenhurst and includes a windmill, a weather station and displays on the history of farming in Lake County.

The district charges fees for almost all of its educational programs. The admission fees vary from as little as \$1 to several hundred dollars, depending on the program. The content varies widely and includes a mix of ecology-based programs (courses on the plants and animals that live in the preserves), recreational programs (instruction on fishing, kayaking and canoeing) as well as courses on history and culture.

The district uses the preserve's picnic shelters as programming sites for its educational programs when possible. An outdoor location costs less and emphasizes the natural themes of its programs. The district also offers summer day camps for youth. These programs have a variety of nature and history themes, as well as outdoor recreation activities. The district also participates in the Mighty Acorns program to educate local schoolchildren and it runs Preservation Partners for middle and high school students. Additionally, the district hosts an annual Civil War Re-enactment attended by 3000-5000 people at the Lakewood preserve site. With over 750 re-enactors, the event is the largest of its kind in the State of Illinois and one of the largest in the Midwest.

According to district staff, the top educational programs are the school field trips to the preserves that focus on nature and history topics. The district encourages school groups to come out to the preserves whenever possible. The district also offers in-school educational programs. District staff noted that one of the benefits of its educational programs was the increased awareness that results when people have firsthand experiences in the preserves. This, in turn, makes the public more likely to understand and support the district's mission.

McHenry County

The McHenry County Conservation District's four educational facilities in the county are Glacial Park Research Field Station in Ringwood, the Prarieview Educational Center in Crystal Lake, the Wiedrich Educational Center in Ringwood and the Living Land Farm in Cary. In 2004, nearly 43,000 people attended the district's 694 educational programs (including the Trail of History Program).

The district's educational programs are administered by its Education Department. Programs include opportunities for school field trips, summer day camps and public program events for children and adults. Most of the district's programs have ecology themes that focus on plants and wildlife. The majority of the district's programs are free but the district does charge an admission fee for some special programs such as festivals and arts/crafts programs. The district's Education Department also partners with McHenry County schools to administer the Mighty Acorns program.

The district hosts an annual spring event, the Festival of the Sugar Maples, which teaches visitors of all ages about the history and the science of maple sugaring. This event is attended by more than 3,000 visitors each year.

The annual fall event, Trail of History, is the district's most popular educational program. This event consistently draws large crowds – up to 17,000 people in a single weekend. The Trail of History brings historical interpreters from across the country to portray and demonstrate life as it was from 1670 to 1850 in Illinois. Costumes and settlements are strictly period appropriate. The event includes a traveling medicine show, storytellers, a demonstration of military tactics used during the French and Indian War, musicians, dancers and old-fashioned games. The event showcases the relationships among nature, humans and cultural development.

District staff see the benefits of having educational programs and one staff member commented that these events, “Help educate the people who participate ... raise the awareness and profile of the district in the community—people read about our events in the newspapers and want to participate.”

Will County

The Forest Preserve District of Will County presents educational programs that focus on natural history, cultural history and the environment. Its programs are offered at three environmental education centers: the Isle a la Cache Museum in Romeoville, the Plum Creek Nature Center in Beecher and the Environmental Learning Center in Mokena.

The Isle a la Cache Museum offers educational programs that focus on the dynamics and the historical events that took place during the 1750s in the Des Plaines River Valley. School programs at the Plum Creek Nature Center focus on exploratory, nature-based learning through which students are motivated to inquire about and appreciate nature. The Environmental Learning Center takes a science-based approach, directing students to record and analyze scientific data. In addition, the district offers an outdoor “Adventure Kids Kamp” for children during the summer at the Monee Reservoir.

The majority of the district's programs are free. The district, however, does charge admission fees for certain programs, such as summer youth camps and courses that are offered for college credit through a partnership with Governors State University.

District staff also visit schools during the winter. This series of educational programs serves approximately 14,000 students annually, primarily from kindergarten to sixth grade, and makes more than 30 different program selections available to teachers.

The district hosts an annual Fall Festival special event that is open to the public and draws a large family crowd of about 5,000 visitors. The event is primarily an entertainment festival, but also emphasizes nature appreciation and stewardship. Visitors are reminded of their connections to nature in many of the festival's demonstrations.

A district staff member stated, “Through these programs, we want our citizens to see and feel the value of protecting, preserving and restoring our natural and scenic beauties of Will County ... and [an] often overlooked benefit of running our programs is the opportunity it provides our staff to speak and teach about things they value and provide them with the opportunity to help people explore their own values and relationship with nature.”

Issues

All of the districts are committed to providing educational programs for their visitors. In interviews, district staffers consistently noted that educational programs can be an important vehicle for raising public awareness. Nevertheless, given their limited resources, each district must decide how to balance the level of staffing/funding devoted to its educational programs with other pressing issues such as land acquisition and habitat restoration.

Determining the content of its educational programs is also an important issue that the districts must consider. Ecology educational programs are more reflective of the districts' overall missions, rather than recreational, historical or cultural programs. However, offering a broad range of educational programs for a variety of different age groups exposes a larger number of residents to district facilities.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

With the exception of Kendall County, all of the forest preserve and conservation districts in northeastern Illinois have a law enforcement department. Officers are authorized to uphold and enforce all state, county and district laws and ordinances. Providing a safe environment for visitors and protecting the districts' natural resources are the primary objectives shared by each of the law enforcement departments. The districts differ, however, in their level of law enforcement staffing, equipment and volunteer safety programs.

Cook County

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County's Law Enforcement Department was established in 1918. In 2006, it consists of 112 full-time employees including 79 police officers, 14 sergeant, four lieutenants, two commanders, two deputy chiefs, a police chief and 10 administrative personnel.

Forest preserve police protect district lands through crime prevention, apprehension of criminals and enforcement of criminal and motor vehicle laws of the state and enforcement of forest preserve district rules and regulations. Arrests fall under the following categories: ordinance violations, traffic tickets, criminal arrests (both misdemeanor and felony) and parking citations. More than 10 percent of the ordinance violations each year are for conservation offenses.

The officers are responsible for patrolling the district's lands, including neighborhood groves, community centers, aquatic facilities, historic sites and miles of trails. District officers use patrol vehicles, motorized scooters, four-wheel drive vehicles, bicycles, snowmobiles, watercraft and all-terrain vehicles to patrol the preserves. They also patrol on foot. All of the district police officers are required to carry equipment in their patrol cars to be able to assist in fighting fires in the preserves, if necessary.

According to the district's 2005 Executive Budget Recommendation, the Law Enforcement Department's major accomplishments in recent years were the following:

- The department's police beat structure was altered in an effort to enhance and improve patrolling of the district;
- In-service training was increased in various facets of forest preserve police work to include a minimum of 40 hours of training for each officer;
- Police officers were trained in resource management enforcement to include protection of land and endangered species living in forests, thereby enhancing knowledge of district resources; and
- Additional community policing strategies were introduced to all district officers to further protect district resources.

All of the district's officers receive law enforcement training and are state-certified police officers. Officers are also trained and certified to administer emergency medical assistance. Occasionally, officers receive conservation law training from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and in-service conservation education at the Botanical Gardens and the Brookfield

Zoo.⁶⁸ In addition, district officers have attended the Midwest Park Rangers Institute where they study topics including habitat restoration and wildlife and wildflower identification. The department does not presently have a volunteer safety watch program.

Several years ago, some commissioners expressed interest in eliminating the forest preserve district law enforcement department and contracting with the county sheriff's office or municipalities to provide police protection in order to reduce costs. During the FY 2004 budget hearings, testimony of police chiefs of communities located adjacent to the preserves indicated that they did not want the additional responsibility of policing district land without compensation. Similarly, the Cook County Sheriff expressed a lack of interest in patrolling district land without the Sheriff's office receiving related compensation.

DuPage County

The Forest Preserve District of DuPage County established its Office of Law Enforcement in 1974. The department is composed of 25 sworn police officers, three dispatchers and a staff assistant, who together work to safeguard the district's forest preserves.

Officers patrol the preserves by car, foot, bicycle, all-terrain vehicle, snowmobile, boat and other alternative means. The district encourages its officers to use a variety of patrol methods to make the officers more accessible to visitors and to allow officers increased access to ecologically significant natural areas. In addition to patrolling the preserves, officers investigate crimes, provide first aid, locate lost or missing people and enforce fishing/boating ordinances. Officers also teach bicyclists about safety issues and inform visitors about preserve history.

Crimes that occur in the district in a typical year include illegal drug or alcohol use, public indecency, vehicle break-ins, fights among dog owners and traffic enforcement. In 2004, district officers made 19 felony arrests and issued 53 misdemeanors charges and issued 1,050 citations for various ordinance violations.

The department has the distinction of being the first park or preserve law enforcement agency in Illinois certified by the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA). Since 1979, only 507 of 17,000 law enforcement agencies in the country have received this award. Accreditation by CALEA follows an extensive three-year effort. To receive certification, more than 340 standards must be met by every officer within the department in the areas of policy and procedure, administration, operations and support services. According to the Deputy Chief of the district, "Pursuing accreditation is challenging; the feeling of accomplishment and knowledge that the district's law enforcement department is at the top of the class is worth the effort."

The district has an extensive volunteer safety program that was established in 2001 and is composed of about 40 volunteers. Volunteers are trained during an annual orientation meeting and during monthly meetings held April through October. The volunteers go out in groups of two or three to walk or ride trails on their bicycles. The volunteer safety program is designed to be non-confrontational. When volunteers encounter preserve visitors, they chat with them, hand out brochures and answer questions. If a volunteer comes across a situation that needs the assistance of law enforcement officers, two-way radios directly connect to district police officers.

⁶⁸ Seventeen district officers attended the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Illinois Conservation Police Academy in Springfield in January 2006.

The volunteers do not offer first aid, but they do carry first-aid kits that can be given to an injured person if needed.

The total budget for the volunteer safety program is approximately \$2,500. Most of the costs for the program are the volunteers' two-way radios and uniforms that the volunteers wear while on duty. The district believes that its volunteer safety program helps people feel safer when they visit the preserves.

Kane County

The Forest Preserve District of Kane County Law Enforcement Department was established in the early 1970s. In 2006, the department has four full-time and 23 part-time officers.

The department depends on a large number of part-time officers to save costs. The part-time officers are not provided with any benefits. Most officers either work for another jurisdiction or are retired. Municipal police officers and the Kane County Sheriff's Office supplement the Department's efforts to patrol the district's holdings.

The department's officers primarily monitor district lands using patrol cars, but six officers are on bicycle patrol: three protect the preserves and three patrol Elfstrom Stadium. The department rarely dispatches officers on foot patrol. The typical violations in the district are alcohol-related or involve all-terrain vehicle problems near its trails. Over the years, the district has experienced some more serious crimes, such as sexual assaults and robberies.

All officers are trained at the Illinois State Police Training Institute. The department does not have any in-house conservation training programs, although officers are occasionally sent to conservation law seminars sponsored by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. Further, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, which has several officers in Kane County, routinely assists the district on conservation issues at the preserves.

For more than 20 years, the department has received assistance from the Kane County Mounted Rangers, a volunteer equestrian organization affiliated with the district. The group's primary function is to patrol the district on horseback, enhance public safety and deter crime. The Mounted Rangers have designated patrols and notify the Kane County Sheriff's Department and the Law Enforcement Department if they encounter suspicious activities in the district. Rangers use their own cell phones, provide their own horses and arrange for their own transportation to the preserves. Rangers also assist forest preserve district personnel with parking and crowd control during special events such as cross-country track meets, parades and festivals.

Kendall County

The Forest Preserve District of Kendall County has never had its own Law Enforcement Department and has not experienced much criminal activity on its 1,050 acres of preserve land. Most of the violations that do occur in the district are dog-off-leash problems, ATV or bicyclists traveling outside designated trails, people visiting district lands after hours or alcohol-related problems.

If a crime occurs in the district, the Kendall County Sheriff investigates. These services are provided free to the district free. The district and the sheriff's office are collaborating to develop

an inter-governmental agreement to clarify the role of the sheriff's office in the district's preserves. If a conservation violation occurs, the district calls the local branch office of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to investigate the situation.

The district does not currently have a volunteer safety program.

Lake County

Law enforcement is a division of the Lake County Forest Preserve District's Operations and Public Safety Department. This department was established shortly after the district was founded in 1958. Originally, its employees' responsibilities were to open and close district facilities and sell permits. The department has added officers during the last 30 years. Today, the department has 16 full-time Ranger Police Officers, 2 full-time Community Service Officers, 31 part-time officers and a Chief of Ranger Police.

The officers' daily activities include responding to constituent requests, activity complaints, emergency situations and traffic/conservation violations. The department also administers permits and provides information on conservation, safety and first-aid services. The officers patrol by cars, mountain bikes, all-terrain vehicles, snowmobiles and on foot. Additionally, the department purchased a Segway to perform patrols at the Independence Grove Preserve.

All Ranger Police Officers are trained at police academies. The district supplements that with in-house training on district ordinances and conservation law. The department also participates in a mobile training unit and its officers attend various continuing education courses across the state.

The Ranger Police respond to a wide variety of calls. These include citizen assists, alarm calls, animal complaints, vehicle burglaries, intoxicated subjects, domestic disputes and public indecency. Other, more seasonal calls include illegal hunting, illegal ATV use and off-trail snowmobile use. Specific enforcement ranges from warnings to local ordinance citations to misdemeanor and felony arrests. The department is a member of the Lake County Major Crimes Task Force and the Lake County Gang Task Force.

The district has a weekend volunteer trail courtesy patrol program at many of the preserves. Volunteers monitor pedestrian, bicycle and cross-country ski trail conditions, report violations to the department and educate visitors on facilities, trails and rules. To participate in the program, volunteers must attend periodic orientation and training.

McHenry County

The McHenry County Conservation District established its Law Enforcement Department in 1986. The department has eight full-time patrol officers, two sergeants, a chief and a full-time civilian records clerk.

The department's officers patrol its holdings by foot, bicycle, snowmobile, boat and motorcycle. Officers are encouraged to go out on foot patrols to monitor trails and check the district's borders for encroachments.

The department is a member of the local and national chapters of the Park Law Enforcement Association. The department's officers frequently attend association training and seminars. The

department also routinely conducts in-house continuing law enforcement training with an emphasis on conservation law.

The district has a volunteer program called the Prairie Trail Safety Watch that has about 30 volunteers. Participants wear T-shirts designating them as Prairie Trail Safety Watch volunteers. The volunteers attend meetings during the summer, at which they learn about safety issues, CPR, bicycle repair and conservation. The district provides bicycles, uniforms and two-way radios for the volunteers while they are on-duty. The annual budget for the program is about \$3,000.

Will County

The Forest Preserve District of Will County's Law Enforcement Department was formed in 1980. The police force is composed of 12 full-time and 17 part-time law enforcement officers.

Depending on the situation and venue, the officers patrol the district's holdings by various means including on foot, bicycle, all-terrain vehicle and patrol car. Every officer is trained in conservation law and receives a minimum of 40 hours per year of continuing law enforcement education. All officers are certified by the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board.

There were 870 recorded incidents investigated in 2004. The violations included illegal weapons or hunting incidents, vandalism, theft, unauthorized motor vehicle use, unleashed animals, watercraft permit incidents and fireworks violations.

In 1999, the district began the Trail Sentinels volunteer program, which has 35 participants. The volunteers patrol district trails, report safety conditions and distribute informational brochures. Volunteers are trained on the procedures for reporting incidents if ordinance violations occur. The district spends about \$4,400 to administer the program.

Issues

Preserving the peace in forest preserve and conservation districts differs from normal urban or suburban law enforcement. Not only must district officers protect the public from traditional criminal activities, they also are responsible for preventing conservation law violations such as poaching or disturbing endangered species. In general, the number of crimes increases as the population increases in size. As a result the Forest Preserve District of Cook County requires more law enforcement officers than the Kendall County Forest Preserve District. While no district is crime-free, the preserves appear to be safe and visits to district lands continue to increase.

Over the years, some forest preserve district board members and advocacy groups have argued for the elimination of district law enforcement departments. They suggest that the functions could be assumed by the County Sheriff or local municipalities and that the districts would save money and still be served by law enforcement entities. This position, however, does not reflect the view shared by the majority of district personnel. In numerous interviews conducted during this study, district staffers consistently stated the value of having their own law enforcement officers who are familiar with conservation law and other unique aspects of the preserves.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Each district is established as a separate taxing agency and legal entity. Districts rely on a mix of income sources including property tax, grants, fees and other revenue-producing activities or enterprise funds. All districts receive a significant part of their operating revenue from a property tax levy. The tax is levied each calendar year on all taxable real property in each county. In addition, districts conduct referenda to issue bonds, primarily for land acquisition. The total budget includes money for operations, land acquisition and debt service for bonds. Operating budget numbers reflect the income and expense items such as staff salaries and benefits, facilities maintenance, law enforcement and educational programming

Many districts also operate revenue-producing activities or venues such as golf courses and events centers that generate separate income and expenses. In general, the finances for these operations are accounted for under the category of enterprise funds.

Cook County

For years, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County ran multimillion-dollar deficits as actual revenues fell short of budgeted revenues. The district lost millions on the operation of its golf courses and driving ranges during the 1990s. The district routinely hired political loyalists and former elected officials who had no prior experience in natural resource management, often at salaries among the highest on the district's payroll.⁶⁹ The district departments were top heavy with management positions. Newspapers documented district payroll inconsistencies and published accounts of forest preserve employees appropriating expensive district equipment for personal use.⁷⁰ The district ran structural deficits 13 out of 14 years from 1989 to 2002, accumulating a \$20 million deficit during the 1990s. The district raided its land acquisition fund to cover expenses in other operating areas.

The district's budget problems began to turn around in fiscal 2001 and 2002, when Cook County provided \$13.3 million in grants as a financial bailout. The district then enacted reform measures by substantially reducing its payroll, privatizing the operation of its golf courses and hiring a new general superintendent. Separation agreements with labor unions and the procurement of professional services to operate some of the recreational activities have also helped to alleviate the deficit. These changes created positive results. In 2004, an independent audit disclosed that the district had eliminated its deficit and established a positive corporate fund balance for the first time since 1991. Additionally, the district received general obligation bond rating upgrades from all the major bond rating agencies.

In 2005, the district's budget totaled \$197.5 million. This amount represented an increase of \$56.6 million, or 40 percent, from the previous year. The significant increase was due to the sale of \$100 million in general obligation bonds in October 2004. By statute, the bond issue earmarked \$50 million for capital improvement projects and \$50 million divided equally between Brookfield Zoo and the Botanic Garden. The bond revenue for capital improvements will finance structural upgrades at district facilities, such as new roofs at nature centers, improved parking facilities and new sewer systems as well as habitat restoration projects over the next few years. Aside from the capital improvement bonds, appropriations for the district's

⁶⁹ See "Forest Preserve Clout; Payroll Fat with 'hacks' while woods left a mess," *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 7, 2003.

⁷⁰ See "Forest Preserve gear used for family's fun," *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 22, 2003.

general operations in 2005 were about \$145 million and have remained relatively consistent over the last five years.

Like other forest preserve districts and conservation districts, most of the district's funding comes from a property tax levy. However, real property in Cook County is separated into nine different classifications for tax assessment purposes. After the County Assessor establishes the fair market value of a parcel of property, that value is multiplied by the appropriate classification percentage to arrive at the equalized assessed value for the parcel. The classification percentages in Cook County range from 16 percent for certain residential, commercial and industrial property to 36 percent and 38 percent, respectively, for other industrial and commercial property.

In 2005, revenue from property taxes brought in \$75 million for the district. This amount represents a 23 percent increase in tax revenue since 2001. Once property taxes are collected and remitted to the district, they are distributed among six funds. In 2005, property tax revenue was divided as follows: The Corporate Fund received \$34.25 million; Construction and Development, \$4.83 million; Bond and Interest, \$10.14 million; Annuity and Benefit, \$2.63 million; Brookfield Zoo, \$14.16 million; and Botanic Garden, \$8.9 million. Other significant forest preserve revenue sources in 2005 included nearly \$1 million from golf course operator Billy Casper Golf, \$1.2 million in fines, \$2.3 million in corporate service fees and \$150,000 in concession sales.

In 2005, most district expenditures, aside from capital improvement projects, were for the operation of Brookfield Zoo (\$53 million) and for general operations such as recreational programs, law enforcement and maintenance (Corporate Fund, \$38 million). In 2005, expenditures for forest preserve employee salary and benefits (not including Brookfield Zoo and Botanic Garden employees) totaled more than \$28 million.

The district has made efforts in recent years to provide more budget information to the public. This has included a more detailed executive summary that discusses key changes in district programs. The budget document also includes a historical review of revenue and expenditures for the district's main funds and the property tax levy for the last six years.

The annual budget must be approved by a majority vote of commissioners. In recent years, the general superintendent has met with interest groups to discuss key forest preserve issues early in the process. Once district staff develops a draft but before releasing details to the public, the general superintendent has conducted a stakeholder meeting to explain the highlights of the budget. A draft budget with the board president's executive recommendations is then formally released for public review.

The district schedules public hearings that are attended by many commissioners at various locations in the county, with the largest public hearing at the County Building. Previously, the forest preserve district budget hearings were on the same day as the county budget hearings. Now the hearings are on separate days. The hearings are all open to the public and individuals may submit written comments or present verbal testimony. A few weeks after the hearings, the board formally votes on whether to approve and/or amend the budget.

DuPage County

The Forest Preserve District of DuPage County has established a set of budget guidelines to continue to expand land holdings, programs and capital development under the restrictions of a legislative tax cap. The district follows a balanced budget approach, matching operating expenses with revenues. The district has a policy on fund balance and maintains the fund balances of the various funds at an amount not less than that set by policy.

Tax supported funds are: General, Liability Insurance, Illinois Municipal Retirement, Social Security Tax, Audit, Zoological and Construction and Development. The district has landfill funds to account for revenues and costs associated with the landfill sites it owns. The district also has enterprise funds for the revenue and expenses of the three golf courses. Other funds include Land Acquisition, Debt Service and Trust and Agency.

The district's total FY 2005-2006 operating budget includes \$45.1 million in revenue. The district's main revenue source is its property tax, which is budgeted at \$19.5 million in FY 2005-2006. The tax rate for operations is 0.0604 per \$100 of assessed valuation and the total tax rate including debt service is 0.1358 per \$100 of assessed valuation. The district tax levy is 2.7 percent of all the taxes levied in the county. The district also budgeted \$6.5 million from revenue-producing activities, primarily golf courses.⁷¹

The last time a referendum question was approved by voters was in November of 1997, for \$75 million. More recently the district has supplemented its income through grants from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation, the Conservation Fund and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The FY 2005-2006 budget estimated a decrease in excess of \$21 million from the previous year in the Construction and Development Fund because of a reduction of grant funding and wetland mitigation fees.

The total expenditures for FY 2005-2006 are budgeted at \$73.6 million. The district anticipates spending \$436,100 for land purchases and \$7.3 million for various preserve and landfill improvements. Education expenses include general education and support of the six education centers. Operating expenses also include maintenance and law enforcement. The total cost for salaries and benefits is 34 percent of the operating revenue for a workforce of 339 full-time equivalent employees. Staff salaries are allocated across various funds. In addition, the district will pay \$6.7 million in debt service.

Kane County

In its appropriation for the year 2004-2005, the Forest Preserve District of Kane County anticipated a total budget, including debt service and land acquisition, of \$50.4 million. The operating budget is \$20.1 million.⁷²

The district's main revenue source is its property tax, which was budgeted at \$12.7 million in FY 2004-2005. The tax rate is 0.127 per \$100 of assessed valuation, down from a peak of 0.1985 in 2000 (the year after a \$70 million referendum was passed). Money from grants is expected to provide an additional \$800,000. The district's main expenses are debt service (\$9.3 million) and land acquisition (\$30.3 million).

⁷¹ Forest Preserve District of DuPage County FY2005-2006 Budget, passed and approved June 21, 2005.

⁷² Forest Preserve District of Kane County, 2004-2005 Appropriation Budget.

District voters approved a \$70 million dollar bond issue in 1999. The district also sold a bond issue in 2003 for \$38 million. For the audited year ended June 30, 2004, these bond issues in combination with grants from the state and county allowed the purchase of 5,740 acres of new preserves for \$115 million.

In April 2005, Kane County approved a \$75 million referendum by a voting majority of 64 percent and the district is aggressively purchasing land with that money. In addition, the district has received grants from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources for land acquisition and improvements for more than \$2.5 million and from Kane County for \$1 million in wetland acquisitions.

The district also engages in revenue-producing activities through the operation of the Kane County Events Center and Elfstrom Stadium, home of the minor league baseball team the Kane County Cougars. The district receives revenue according to a contract that calls for the district to receive 8 percent of the gross revenue from baseball operations and \$100,000 from parking lot operations. In the past few years the revenue from the Cougars was about \$700,000. The golf course license agreements also bring in annual rental revenue of about \$385,000. In addition, the district acts as a trustee (holds, manages and invests contributions) for the Fox River Trust. As part of the agreement, the district receives annual contributions of \$500,000 through FY 2008.⁷³

Kendall County

The Kendall County Forest Preserve District's operating budget for FY 2005 is \$780,000, split evenly between debt service and operating expenses. The district's levy is 0.0403 per \$100 of assessed valuation, which is, not surprisingly, much lower than the other northeastern Illinois districts. The district budgeted income from property taxes of \$281,400.

The district spends \$225,000 on staff salaries and benefits. Other operating expenses include \$9,300 for educational programs and \$28,000 for maintenance costs. Since the district does not have its own law enforcement department, there are no associated expenses.

A successful \$5 million referendum in November 2002 allowed the district to increase its holdings. The district has successfully sought other funding sources as well. Recent grants include:

- \$4.9 million from the National Park Service (a one-time grant for the Hoover Camp)
- \$1.18 million from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation
- \$497,000 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (to preserve a Native American artifact collection)
- \$91,000 Open Space Land Acquisition and Development (OSLAD) grant for improvements at the Maramech Forest Preserve
- \$5,000 from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for invasive species control and wetland restoration
- \$750,000 OSLAD grant to acquire 120 acres that is to become the Jay Woods Forest Preserve.

In addition, new residential developments in unincorporated areas are required to set aside open space either by dedicating land to the district or by paying the district cash in lieu of land.

⁷³ Forest Preserve District of Kane County Illinois, Annual Financial Report for the Year Ended June 30, 2004.

Lake County

The Lake County Forest Preserve District had a total budget, including debt service and land acquisition, of over \$97 million for the FY 2004-2005.

The capital expenditures cover costs for land acquisition, development projects, vehicles and equipment and technology. In FY 2004-2005 the budget contained \$23.1 million in capital expenditures including \$2.8 million in grant money for trails and habitat restoration projects.

The district property tax levy is about 3 percent of the total tax levy for taxpayers in the county. The property tax rate is 0.051 per \$100 of equalized assessed valuation for operations and 0.214 per \$100 of equalized assessed valuation for the total tax rate including debt service. The property tax levy covers 69 percent of the total revenue budgeted. The property tax funds of the district include General Corporate (the primary operating fund), Land Development Levy (pays for construction of new trails, implementing master plans, improving public access and restoration and maintenance of the natural areas and habitats), Illinois Municipal Retirement (pensions), Liability Insurance (overall risk management, loss prevention and safety programs) and Audit Tax.⁷⁴

The general corporate fund accounts for all general operations not covered by other funds. Salaries and benefits make up 67 percent of the fund. However, some staff positions fall under other funds. The total number of staff positions for FY 2005 is 287.13 full time equivalent.

Grants and donations from state and federal sources as well as other donations account for 8 percent of total revenue. The FY 2004-2005 budget shows \$3.4 million in revenue from grants and similar sources, a decrease from the previous year. The fund includes grants for the Youth Conservation Corps, environmental education and public affairs, cultural resources and natural resources projects.

The district charges for some services and also receives income from sales which account for 9 percent of the budget. This income comes from admission fees for educational programs and from the golf operations. The enterprise fund includes the operations of the five golf courses and support facilities owned by the district. The golf courses have operated in the black and generated cash in the past three to four years. The Fox River Preserve's activities are also accounted for in the enterprise fund. The operations include a marina, boat launch, boat storage, merchandise sales and service. The FY 2004-2005 budget anticipated revenue exceeding expenses for this operation.

Lake County has been particularly aggressive about seeking funding, both in the form of countywide referenda and through state grants such as OSLAD and the Open Lands Trust Fund. Referenda have provided the district with \$170 million in acquisition and development money to purchase more than 6,500 acres in the past 15 years. Referenda passed during this time had an average voter approval rate of about 66 percent. In 1993, voters approved a \$30 million proposal, followed by \$55 million in 1999 and \$85 million in 2000. Each referendum effort was thoroughly prepared, with consultants hired to conduct user surveys and gauge public opinion beforehand.

⁷⁴ Lake County Forest Preserves Annual Budget Fiscal Year 2004-2005.

In late 2005, the board approved accessing the debt service extension tax base from some older non-referendum bonds by issuing up to \$85 million of limited bonds for land acquisition and improvement projects. The district will issue \$45 million of the limited bonds in 2006 and the remainder in 2008. This funding plan provided needed funds at a critical time for the district without raising taxes on Lake County residents or requiring a voter referendum.

The District has an AAA bond rating and approved long-range business and financial plans. In addition, the Government Finance Officers Association of the United States and Canada presented the district a distinguished budget presentation award for the fiscal year beginning July 1, 2003. The award is designed to encourage governments to prepare budget documents of the highest quality to meet the needs of decision-makers and citizens.

McHenry County

The McHenry County Conservation District's total budget for FY 2004-2005 increased to \$43.1 million, which includes \$25.4 million for land acquisition and capital improvements. Excluding those items, the district appropriated \$17.7 million for its operations and debt service and estimated \$18.5 million in revenue.⁷⁵ The general fund budget has varied from \$8.3 million in FY 2003-2004 to \$6.2 million in the FY 2005-2006 budget.⁷⁶ More than 60 percent (\$11.7 million) of the district's funding comes from its property tax levy, which is 0.1663 per \$100 of assessed valuation. Operating expenses include salaries, educational programming, management, restoration and maintenance of district lands and facilities and the police force.

Grant funding from various federal, state and local agencies in 2004-2005 supported projects in natural resource management for \$156,145 and land acquisition and development for more than \$1.3 million.⁷⁷ The district also gains revenue from renting some of its lands to farmers for agricultural production and the use and lease of district-owned properties.

The district pursued a successful referendum for land acquisition funding in April of 2001 for \$68.5 million.

In addition to approval by its own board, the district must submit its budget and appropriation ordinance to the county board for approval. While in recent years the board has not amended or changed the budget, it has financial oversight of the district through this mechanism.

Will County

The Forest Preserve District of Will County is organized financially into two operating funds. The Construction and Development Fund covers the costs for new site development, maintenance and improvements, along with associated staff costs. The Corporate Fund supports the general operating costs of the various divisions, which are planning and operations, administration and finance and law enforcement.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Interview with Andy Dylak, financial manager, McHenry County Conservation District, November 4, 2004.

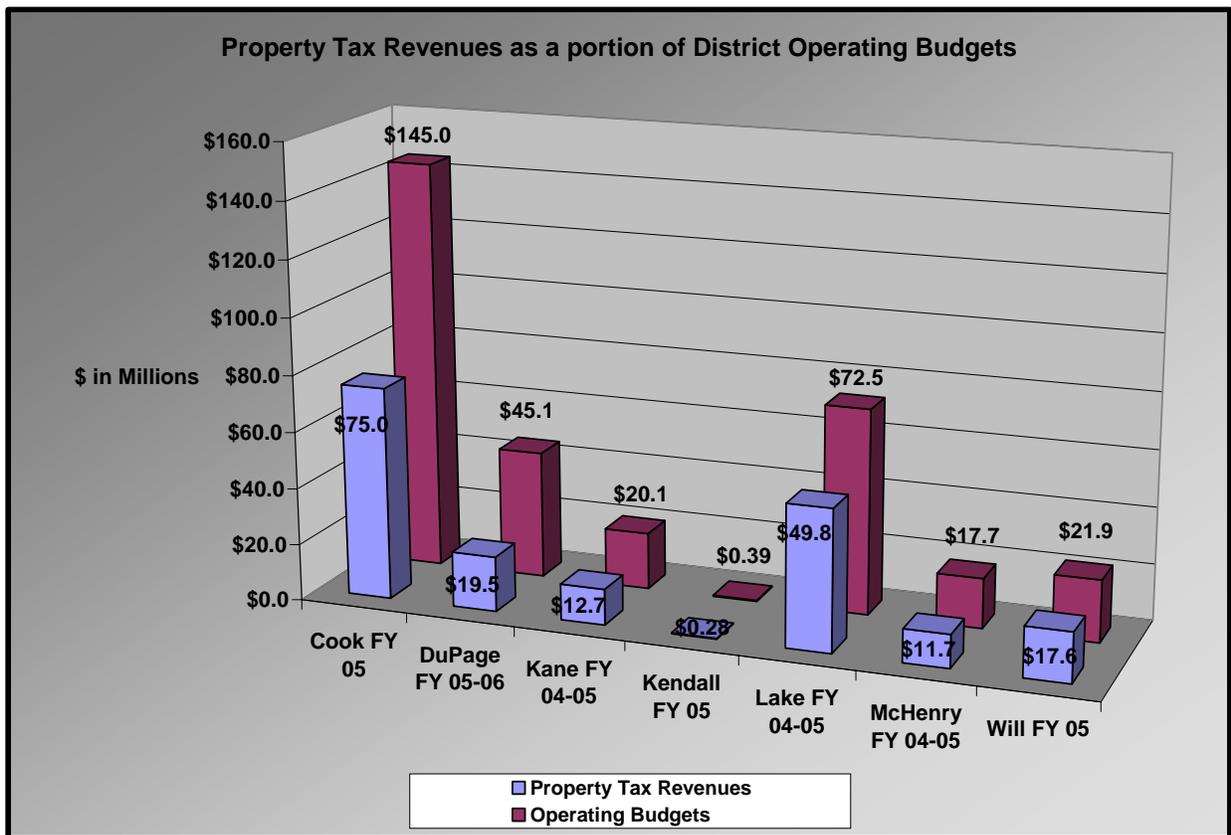
⁷⁶ McHenry County Conservation District, Ordinance No 05-554 Annual Budget April 1, 2005- March 31, 2006

⁷⁷ Annual Report April 1, 2004- March 31, 2005, McHenry County Conservation District.

⁷⁸ Forest Preserve District of Will County, Progress Report 2005 p. 15.

Voters have supported the district with two referenda for land acquisition and preserve improvements. The 1999 referendum was for \$70 million and the 2005 referenda for \$95 million. Debt service is scheduled to be paid over a 20-year period.

The district's FY 2005 operating budget was about \$21.9 million. Approximately \$17.6 million of this was from property taxes, set at a rate of 0.1315 per \$100 of assessed valuation. This was the lowest rate since 1998, when the rate dipped to 0.128. The highest rate during that time was 0.140. More than \$900,000 in state and organizational grants were awarded to the district in FY 2005. The vast majority of this funding was through the Illinois Department of Natural Resources: OSLAD (\$400,000), Illinois Public Museum Capital Grant (\$120,000) and a Bikeway Grant (\$200,000). The district also received grants from Chicago Wilderness, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency and the Illinois Community Clean Energy Foundation.



Issues

Each district faces the challenge of running a multimillion-dollar government agency with a myriad of responsibilities and priorities. To maintain fiscal solvency as well as to meet the strategic goals of land acquisition and restoration while offering the public a diverse set of opportunities and activities for education and recreation, districts must manage their resources carefully.

Many of the districts have received voter support for land acquisition and development efforts through the approval of referendum questions in the past 10 years. Bonding gives districts a large influx of money to purchase land. However, as the districts face rising prices for land, this

money is able to purchase fewer acres. Districts also face additional associated costs of owning more land without more money for operations.

Operational funding relies heavily on property taxes that are based on the equalized assessed valuation of commercial and residential property in the county. As development occurs in some of the counties, the overall equalized assessed value increases. This may result in providing the potential for additional funding for the district without raising the tax rate.

Districts also pursue other methods to diversify operating revenue. Operations such as golf courses, concessions, events centers and – in the case of the Kane County – baseball stadiums provide a revenue stream for the districts. These activities need to be carefully monitored to assure that they are not draining district resources without providing adequate income.

Grants also provide revenue for land acquisition, restoration work and educational programming. Many districts have been successful in supplementing tax dollars by taking advantage of these opportunities. In some cases funding for these grant programs is at risk due to cuts in state and federal budgets. By raising public awareness of the results of these grant-funded projects and discussing their benefits with area legislators and other elected officials, districts may be able to encourage their continued existence.

Districts which are at different stages in their development or which are focusing on different priorities draft their budgets accordingly. When there is little land left to purchase in a county, the district should allocate funds to educational programming and restoration efforts. Strategic planning efforts should review these priorities regularly and tie those conclusions to the budget process.

Financial Overview by District

	Cook FY 05	DuPage FY 05- 06	Kane FY 04- 05	Kendall FY05	Lake FY 04- 05	McHenry FY 04-05	Will FY 05
<i>in millions of dollars except tax levy rate per \$100 EAV</i>							
Total Budget *	\$197.5	\$143.8	\$50.4	\$0.78	\$97	\$43.1	\$141.6
Operating Budget	145	45.1	20.1	0.39	72.5	17.7	21.9
Revenue Sources							
Property Tax	75	19.5	12.7	0.28	49.8	11.7	17.6
Grants	**	0.5	0.8	0.03	5.5	1.5	0.9
Enterprise (Golf and venues)	1	6.5	1.8	***	6.9	***	0
Expenses							
Land Acquisition	8	0.4	30.3	3.7	17.7	25.4	115.3
Debt Service	10.1	6.7	9.3	0.39	28.5	6.4	8.6
Salaries and Benefits	28.8	24.3	3.15	0.22	16.5	4.2	6.2
Education	**	3.4	0.2	0.01	1.8	0.6	1.1
Maintenance	13	2.7	**	0.03	3.6	1.9	2.6
Law Enforcement	7	2.1	**	0	0.89	0.8	1
Tax Levy rate per \$100 EAV	0.059	0.1358	0.127	0.0403	0.214	0.1663	0.1315
Total EAV	\$112,500	\$30,032.8	\$10,128.7	\$1,950	\$21,925.3	**	\$14,100

* Total Budget includes debt service and land acquisition.

** unavailable

*** not applicable

Forest Preserve and Conservation Districts in Northeastern Illinois: Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century

Recommendations

As forest preserve districts and conservation districts develop plans and priorities for the 21st century, they face a number of challenges. The recommendations below recognize the unique assets, history and political environment of each district. The recommendations highlight positive policies and practices as well as opportunities for improvement. Finally, these recommendations illustrate the complex array of issues other counties seeking to form new forest preserve districts or conservation districts must evaluate and consider as they move toward that goal.

Governance Recommendations

Whether a forest preserve district or conservation district is well-governed depends on a number of factors – the relationship of the district board to the county board, the interests and abilities of the members of the district board, the transparency of the decision-making process, the amount of political patronage and the extent to which serving on the district board is viewed as merely a stepping stone to higher office.

Governance issues are complicated and vary for each district. Consequently this study does not make recommendations that apply across the board to all of the districts.

- 1. As the population served by a forest preserve district grows, the district should consider whether or not electing a separate forest preserve district board would better serve the public.** As a district grows, the issues it faces are inevitably intertwined with economic development issues. Forest Preserve District board members who also serve on the county board can sometimes feel a conflict between their responsibility to preserve land for future generations and the need to increase the tax base and provide other kinds of services for residents. Moreover, the issues facing both the county board and the forest preserve district board become increasingly complex and time-consuming. A separately elected forest preserve board may attract individuals to run for office who have a special interest in forest preserve issues, as well as some expertise on natural resources. These considerations may be offset by increased costs, a possibility of poor communication between the county and the forest preserve district resulting in the two working at cross-purposes, and a diminution of the district's power and influence.
- 2. The members of the county board of Cook County should continue to comprise the Forest Preserve District of Cook County's Board of Commissioners.** The forest preserve district's problems stem from the degree to which politics and patronage are involved, not from board structure itself. Cook County is no longer a growing county. Land acquisition and other policy issues take a back seat to management issues and financial oversight. The district board's primary responsibility is to ensure that the general superintendent is committed to achieving district goals and objectives and is effectively managing the day-to-day operations of the district.

3. **Appointment of McHenry County Conservation District trustees should continue as long as the county board president continues to appoint trustees who have demonstrated an interest in land preservation and conservation, who are willing to provide an opportunity for the public to participate in the decision-making process and who are capable of providing financial oversight.** The district board has provided real leadership to the district, protecting more than 20,020 acres of land in just 35 years.
4. **Regardless of board structure, the public should have the opportunity to speak at forest preserve district and conservation district meetings, participate on advisory committees and give input into the decision making process of the district.** Boards should not only accommodate public participation but encourage it. At meetings, the opportunity for public participation should occur at the beginning of the meeting before substantive issues are voted on.

Land Acquisition Recommendations

1. **Forest preserve districts and conservation districts should redouble their efforts to acquire land and make it their highest priority.** Opportunities to buy land are disappearing fast and the cost of land continues to rise. At the same time, urbanization and loss of open space seem to drive passage of referenda. Voters throughout the country have repeatedly supported increasing taxes for land acquisition and preservation.
2. **Forest preserve districts and conservation districts should set a specific goal for the amount of land they plan to acquire over both the short and long term.** The goal should consider the percentage of the county's land area that needs to be protected as well as the number of acres per 1,000 residents, taking into account projected population growth. The Forest Preserve District of Cook County should purchase land up to its statutory maximum (75,000 acres).
3. **Forest preserve district commissioners and conservation district trustees should work with state and federal elected officials to increase funding for land acquisition to help local tax dollars go farther.** Federal and state funding for land acquisition has decreased substantially in recent years. Forest preserve districts should work together to educate other elected officials on the important role districts play and the need to supplement local property tax revenue with state and federal dollars.
4. **Forest preserve districts and conservation districts should report annually on the number of acres purchased, price and location.** Residents should be able to track how much land has actually been acquired each year and its cost. While the Open Meetings Act allows boards to discuss the acquisition of land in closed session before the fact, the public is entitled to know transaction details once the land is purchased.
5. **Forest preserve districts and conservation districts should adopt and revise on a regular basis a land acquisition plan.** The plan should take into account the natural resource value of a particular site, consistency with other local and regional land-use plans, regional greenway linkages and protection of key natural areas.

Land Sales, Transfers and Encroachments Recommendations

- 1. Forest preserve districts and conservation districts should adopt a policy that prohibits the sale of district land.** Districts need a strong policy that will protect these lands in perpetuity and prevent other public institutions and agencies, the general public and developers from attempting to acquire district-owned land.
- 2. Forest preserve districts and conservation districts should prevent any encroachments on their property and aggressively pursue violators.** All districts should be vigilant in patrolling their boundaries and should take immediate action when other parties encroach on district lands.

Land Management and Restoration Recommendations

Key among responsibilities of land preservation districts is the ecological restoration of natural areas such as prairies, savannahs, wetlands and woodlands. Preserving natural areas involves both initial restoration and long-term management.

- 1. Forest preserve districts and conservation districts should develop land management site plans.** Goals for each site should reflect the best practices in ecological land management.
- 2. Forest preserve districts and conservation districts should provide consistent public outreach and education regarding restoration techniques and strategies.** Advance notice should be provided to adjacent land owners before restoration work begins. Education about the importance of ecologically sound restoration techniques should be provided through many different outreach venues to reach the appropriate audiences.
- 3. Volunteer restoration programs should require different levels of training and supervision for different volunteer restoration activities.** For example, districts should limit the use of power tools or herbicides by volunteers based on training and experience as well as the amount of supervision available on a particular work day. These training requirements should be clearly delineated in volunteer manuals.
- 4. The Forest Preserve District of Cook County should lift the restoration moratorium that is still in effect on some of its sites.** Scientific evidence demonstrates the importance of actively managing natural lands. Since the early 1990s, when the restoration movement first emerged, the public has become increasingly knowledgeable about and comfortable with restoration techniques. The moratorium only exacerbates the need for restoration on these sites.
- 5. Forest preserve districts and conservation districts that own or plan to acquire farmland should develop a farmland management policy.** The policy should address (1) the reasons a property is maintained in agricultural production (2) conservation farming practices such as soil erosion control, limited pesticide use, crop rotation, etc., and (3) license fees or rent collected by the district.

Recreation Recommendations

Land preservation districts provide a variety of recreational activities and facilities for the enjoyment of the public. Districts need to maintain a balance among land acquisition and preservation, restoration and recreational opportunities.

- 1. Recreational offerings should not conflict with the core mission and should not negatively impact a sensitive natural area and its ecological significance.**
Recreational opportunities should encourage an appreciation of nature.
- 2. Forest preserve districts and conservation districts should avoid duplication of recreational programs that are readily available elsewhere in the community.**
Districts should not compete with local park districts and municipalities but should work together to develop complementary programs.
- 3. Forest preserve districts and conservation districts should consider the cost of providing a particular recreational program or facility relative to other strategic goals.** Districts need to carefully assess the cost and benefits of a particular recreational activity, keeping in mind their responsibility to make their programs available to everyone.

Golf Course Recommendations

Four forest preserve districts own and operate golf courses, which for the most part are heavily used by the general public.

- 1. Forest preserve district golf course operations should be self-supporting.** If a district is contemplating buying or building a golf course, it should conduct an independent market study to determine whether it will be financially viable. If golf course operations are consistently running budget deficits, the district should consider contracting with a private golf course management firm that will guarantee revenues to the district on its golf course operations.
- 2. Forest preserve districts should strive to have their golf courses certified as signature sanctuary courses, the highest level of certification by Audubon International.** All newly built district golf courses and course upgrades should be consistent with environmental best management practices.

Education Recommendations

Education of the public is an integral part of the core mission of the districts. All of the districts have educational programs for children as well as adults and most districts participate in the Mighty Acorns program with area schools. All districts have at least one nature center that administers educational programs. Districts offer programs that are ecology-based as well as addressing historical, agricultural, recreational and/or cultural themes.

- 1. Districts should expand the amount of educational programming they offer to their residents.** Districts should consider charging a fee if financial constraints would otherwise prevent them from offering a program, particularly if the program requires

hiring special instructors or purchasing special equipment. Fees can also be used as an incentive to get people to register in advance and to improve attendance.

- 2. Districts should offer a variety of programs that will appeal to a broad spectrum of residents.** These programs may range from ecology to local history to lessons on how to fish, canoe or make maple syrup.
- 3. Districts should explore collaborative arrangements with other organizations to expand their ability to offer specialized educational programs.** Districts should consider collaborating with other districts, nonprofit organizations, schools and other government agencies.

Law Enforcement Recommendations

Six of the districts have their own law enforcement departments. The Forest Preserve District of Kendall County is the only district without one. Generally, district lands are safe for visitors. Because district law enforcement departments are responsible for preserving the peace, providing emergency medical care, enforcing conservation laws and a wide variety of other laws and ordinances, county sheriffs and municipal police forces are not able to provide adequate service and protection. Forest preserve district and conservation district officers receive specialized training and equipment.

- 1. Except in a small or newly-established district where an in-house law enforcement department may not be cost-effective, forest preserve and conservation districts should continue to have their own law enforcement departments.** In-house departments are sensitive to conservation issues, respond quickly to emergencies and can be managed as part of a team.
- 2. All officers should be trained in law enforcement and should receive annual training and education on conservation law from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources or from in-house training programs.** Law enforcement officers should also receive customer service training, as they may be the only district personnel that some visitors encounter.
- 3. All districts' law enforcement departments should meet the standards and receive certification from the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies.** Accreditation requires meeting more than 300 standards in the areas of policy and procedure, administration, operations and support services.
- 4. Districts should develop a multifaceted strategy for patrolling their preserves that includes using foot patrols, patrol cars and, where appropriate, bicycles, snowmobiles, horses, boats, motorized scooters, etc.** Officers need to be accessible to visitors and able to monitor ecologically sensitive natural areas.
- 5. Volunteer safety programs should be designed to provide assistance to visitors.** Volunteers should patrol in small groups and should contact law enforcement officers when they encounter ordinance violations or when someone has been injured.

Financial Management Recommendations

Districts rely on a mix of property taxes, grants, fees and, in some cases, enterprise funds, the term used to apply to activities such as golf, food concessions, special events, etc., that may produce revenue for the district. Although voters have overwhelmingly supported referenda for land acquisition and capital improvements in recent years, voters are less willing to increase their property taxes for the operating fund, even though the need for operating revenue is greater as districts acquire more land.

- 1. Districts should utilize sound fiscal management strategies.** The districts should develop and employ sound fiscal strategies and accounting methods to ensure that they receive clean opinions on regular audits. Districts should manage operations according to approved balanced budgets and respect the integrity of designated funds.
- 2. Districts should provide financial information to the public.** Regular updates on capital spending projects, recent land acquisition, restoration activities, recreational programs and maintenance of facilities should be provided. Districts should make budgets and other financial documents available to the public and they should publish annual reports to ensure transparency and accountability.
- 3. Districts should explore opportunities to diversify their revenue sources.** These opportunities should be pursued only if they do not conflict with the district's mission or commercialize the preserves and conservation areas.
- 4. To alleviate the reliance on property tax revenue, districts should pursue grant opportunities.** Grants can leverage local tax dollars for land acquisition, trail development, environmental education and restoration. Districts should also advocate for the continuation of state and federal programs that support these goals.
- 5. Districts should explore a bond referendum when they have exhausted their land acquisition and development funds.** They should also explore alternative financing mechanisms such as bond extensions, which may provide funding at a lower cost and be a more reliable source of revenue.

CONCLUSION

The forest preserve districts and conservation district in northeastern Illinois play a unique role in shaping the region's growth patterns, improving the natural environment and enhancing the quality of life for millions of residents. The districts have their own history, culture and management style which has facilitated different approaches in acquiring and managing their lands and providing various recreational opportunities and educational programs.

This study illustrates how the districts face similar challenges. Issues such as the rising price of land in growing counties, limited funds for restoration and educational/recreational programming and political pressures exist in every county. Nevertheless, all of the districts are incredibly successful in many areas. All together, the districts have acquired and protected over 170,000 acres of land in the region. Restoration efforts have remarkably revitalized wildlife habitat, established greenway corridors and protected streams and rivers. Miles of trails provide connections between preserves, along rivers and through communities.

As the districts examine new ways to meet additional challenges in the 21st century, tremendous opportunities exist for sharing solutions. This comparative study can help districts understand how neighboring districts operate. The recommendations guide future decisions on policies and practices which affect land preservation throughout the region. Through increased dialog, information sharing and collaborative planning with each other, the districts can enhance the overall quality of the region's preserves for the benefit of present and future generations.

Appendix 1

List of Interviews

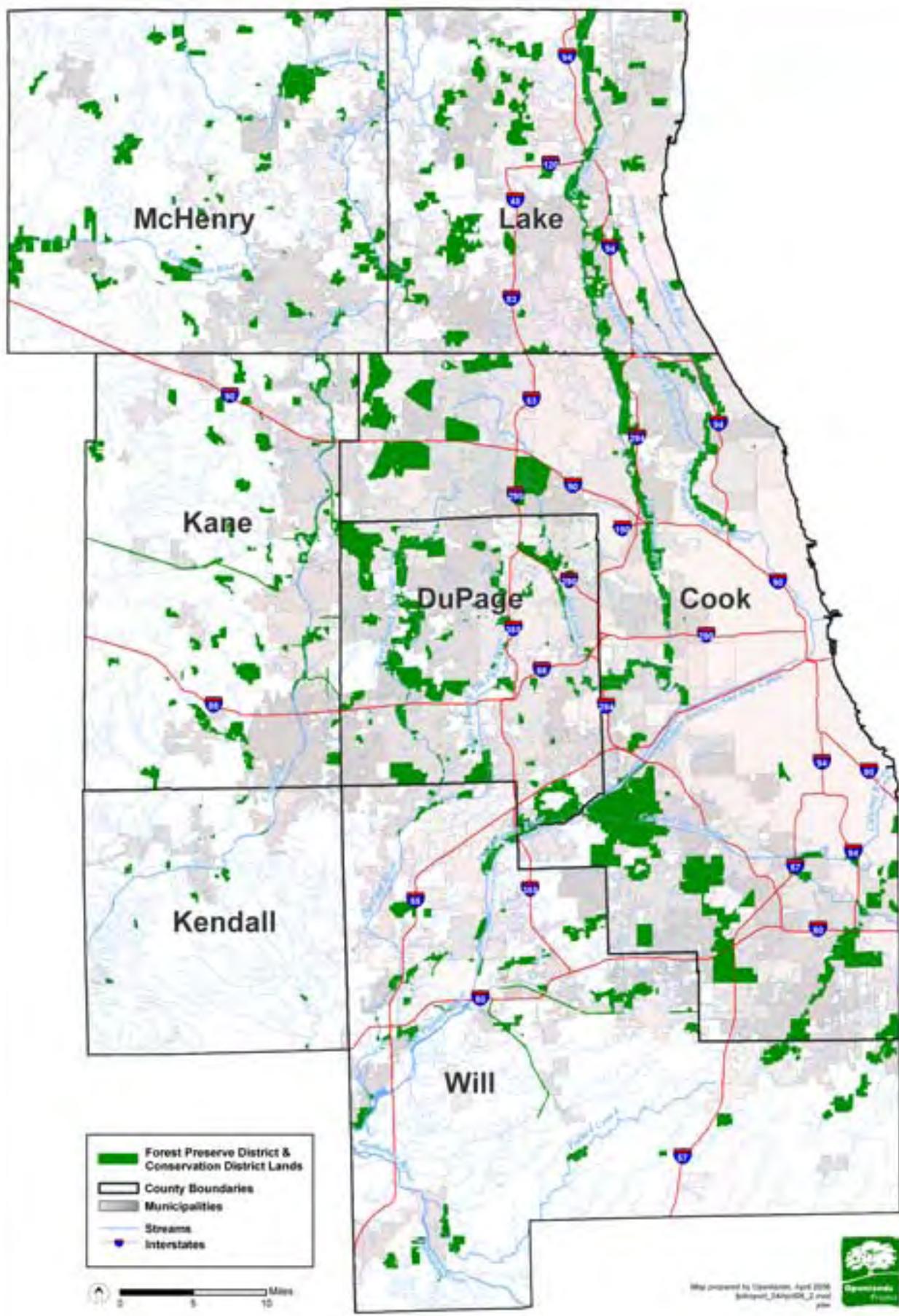
- Meeting with McHenry County Conservation District Executive Director Craig Hubert at MCCD Headquarters, September 7, 2004;
- Meeting with Kendall County Forest Preserve District Director Jason Pettit at Kendall County FPD Headquarters, September 8, 2004;
- Telephone interview with Boone County Conservation District Executive Director Dan Kane, September 15, 2004.
- Meeting with Forest Preserve District of Will County Executive Director at FPDWC Headquarters, September 15, 2004;
- Meeting with Lake County Forest Preserve District Executive Director Tom Hahn at FPDLC Headquarters, September 17, 2004;
- Meeting with Forest Preserve District of Cook County General Superintendent Steve Bylina, Jr. Executive Assistant to the General Superintendent P.J. Cullerton at FPDCC Headquarters, September 23, 2004;
- Meeting with Forest Preserve District of DuPage County Executive Director Brent Manning at FPDDC Headquarters, September 23, 2004;
- Meeting with Forest Preserve District of Kane County Executive Director Monica Meyers at Kane County Forest Preserve District Headquarters, October 13, 2004;
- Meeting with McHenry County Conservation District, Director of Operations, John Kremer at MCCD Headquarters, August, 2005

Appendix 2

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Forest Preserves & Conservation Areas



Map of Forest Preserves and Conservation Areas in Northeastern Illinois

Open this flap to view a map of the study region. The map includes the preserves and conservation areas in the six forest preserve districts and one conservation district. It shows lands that are protected by each district, county boundaries, municipalities and streams. The interstates are provided to assist in orientation. While recent land acquisitions may not appear on the map because of the unavailability of digitized data sets, the map gives a regional overview.

Key issues illustrated in the regional map:

1. The number and size of the preserves and conservation areas owned by the districts vary relative to each county's size and acquisition strategy.
2. The background layer of municipal boundaries (from 2000 census data) shows that the counties of McHenry, Kane, Kendall and Will are facing increasing pressure from urbanization.
3. Some greenway corridors along streams are protected but gaps also exist.
4. Districts can collaborate to create protected areas and corridors across county lines.

Data sources:

Forest Preserves

- Forest Preserve District of Cook County
- Forest Preserve District of DuPage County
- Forest Preserve District of Kane County
- Kendall County Forest Preserve
- Lake County Forest Preserve District
- Forest Preserve District of Will County

Conservation Areas

- McHenry County Conservation District

Streams

- USGS National Hydrography Dataset High Resolution Streams

County Boundaries, Interstates and Municipalities

- ESRI's 2003 Data and Maps CDs
- Municipalities are based on 2000 census data





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