

POLITICS

Cook County Forest Preserves \$189 million budget marks 'new era' with referendum cash

By A.D. Quig

Chicago Tribune • Published: Oct 17, 2023 at 4:09 pm



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Flush with money after voters authorized a fresh property tax hike, Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle pitched next year's Forest Preserves budget Tuesday as the start of "a new era."

"For the first time in a long time, it is not the budget of an agency in a holding pattern, keeping long-term, pressing needs at bay," Preckwinkle said Tuesday.

"For fiscal year 2024, we are moving forward, and there is only more on the horizon for the residents and visitors of Cook County."

Three years ago, Preckwinkle [pitched a pandemic austerity budget](#) that tapped into the forest preserves' rainy day fund. Then-Commissioner Larry Suffredin highlighted the district's "precarious" financial state and warned officials may have to sell off land owned by the forest preserve district to stay afloat.

In the [summer of 2021](#), Preckwinkle and the district board — whose members are the same as the Cook County Board — paved the way for county voters to say "yes" or "no" to a property tax hike that would raise money to help maintain the 70,000 acres of green lands, trails and water.

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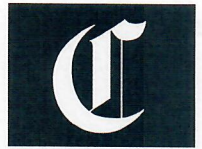
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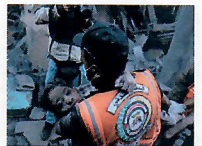
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Last November, [after a concerted campaign by preserves boosters](#), voters [overwhelmingly authorized](#) a 0.025% increase in the preserves' property tax levy, raising an additional \$40 million that officials said they would be spent on maintenance at facilities such as the Chicago Botanic Garden and Brookfield Zoo, land restoration and pension payments.

The 2024 budget is the second year with extra funding in place. This year's budget was amended after voters approved the referendum. On Tuesday, Preckwinkle proposed an \$188.7 million budget for the district in 2024, an increase of 34% from this year's pre-referendum proposal.

Her proposal also brings the total head count up to 721 from 633 two years ago, according to budget documents. New hires will include a "restoration hydrologist, ecology field supervisor, heavy equipment technician, employee recruitment manager and more," Preckwinkle said.

Voters' approval of the referendum "has made all the difference" already, she continued, allowing the county to start new ecological restoration work at Sauk Trail and Jurgensen Woods. More restoration efforts will come in 2024 at Orland Grassland, Deer Grove, Country Lane Woods and other preserves, she said. The preserves also used referendum funds to upgrade equipment such as pickup trucks, wood chippers and mowers; expand its day camp offerings, and start repairs on paved and unpaved trails.

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“We have begun similar multiyear repair initiatives for more than 30 picnic shelters and major restroom renovations at as many as 60 buildings,” Preckwinkle said Tuesday.

Over the last year, the preserves bought nearly 300 acres, according to budget documents. This year’s budget sets aside more than \$10 million in the county’s real estate fund, and the preserves are “prepared if and when larger properties reach the market” to pounce on a sale, Preckwinkle said. “When opportunities arise, ecologically important lands will be preserved, thanks to this foresight.”

2024’s budget calls for restoring 400 acres of woodlands and flood plain habitat near the Tinley and Thorn Creek watersheds, expanding plant propagation, seeding production and native seed collection efforts; and boosting wages for the county’s Conservation Corps participants.

A public hearing on the budget will take place Oct. 26, and a final vote is scheduled for Nov. 16.