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The Civic Federation

177 North State Street, Suite 400, Chicago, IL 60601 • 312.201.9066 fax 312.201.9041 • civicfed.org

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For more information, contact Laurence Msall at (312) 201-9044

CIVIC FEDERATION SUPPORTS FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT BUDGET *Report applauds level of public input in planning, warns of declining pension health*

(CHICAGO) – In a report released today, the Civic Federation supports the \$187.4 million budget proposed by the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. The balanced budget holds the property tax levy relatively flat and minimizes the use of one-time resources. The Federation also commends the District for increasing the level of public input in its planning process. The full 61-page report is available at www.civicfed.org.

“This budget is very reasonable in the near-term, especially when paired with the extra information provided by the master plans recently adopted by the District,” said Laurence Msall, president of the Civic Federation. “However, these plans and the District’s future financial stability continue to be threatened by the declining health of its pension fund.”

The market value funded ratio of the District’s pension fund has fallen from 75.4% in FY2004 to 65.1% in FY2013 due in large part to statutorily required employer contributions that have been insufficient to pay down accrued unfunded liabilities. The Civic Federation urges the Forest Preserve Board of Commissioners and the Illinois General Assembly to work with the administration of Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle to pass the pension reform legislation that was introduced for Cook County and the Forest Preserve pension funds earlier this year. The Federation further recommends that the District develop and implement a long-term financial plan to ensure fiscal sustainability and to demonstrate its ability to account for the increased employer contributions that will be required of any pension reform package.

“The Civic Federation is encouraged by the Forest Preserve District’s increased dedication to public involvement in its budgeting and planning processes,” said Msall. The District has recently adopted master plans to guide its camping offerings, recreation opportunities and trail system as well as a 25-year comprehensive New Century Conservation Plan for landscape restoration, increasing public involvement in the Preserves and maximizing the economic benefits of nature conservation. Public input for each of these plans has been solicited through dedicated websites, interviews, focus groups and town hall meetings.

The full analysis also emphasizes the continued inadequacy of the Forest Preserve District’s governing structure and reiterates the Civic Federation’s support for the creation of a separate Board of Commissioners for the District. The newly appointed Conservation and Policy Council is intended to bring expert outside attention and guidance to the Board on Forest Preserve matters. However, the current structure, whereby the District and the County are governed by the same Board of Commissioners, continues to result in an unavoidable conflict of interest between the County’s mission to provide economic development and the Forest Preserve District’s mission to conserve land. The Federation first addressed this issue in a 2008 report and continues to urge the creation of a separately-elected, unpaid Forest Preserve Board to provide critical governance and oversight.

The Civic Federation is an independent, non-partisan government research organization that promotes efficient delivery of public services and sustainable tax policies in the Chicago region and State of Illinois. For more information, please visit www.civicfed.org.



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