

**STATEMENT MADE BEFORE THE LAND MANAGEMENT AND
MAINTENANCE COMMITTEE OF THE FOREST PRESERVE
DISTRICT OF COOK COUNTY ON JANUARY 15, 2003**

The Civic Federation would like to thank President Stroger, Chairman Claypool and the members of the Forest Preserve District Board of Commissioners for this opportunity to comment on the proposed resolution and ordinance regarding reforming Forest Preserve District management. We commend this Committee for addressing the urgent need for fundamental and sustainable management reforms and efficiencies in the operation of the Forest Preserve District.

President Stroger's FY2003 budget made some very significant improvements to eliminate the Forest Preserve District's recurring financial difficulties and restructure its operations and the Civic Federation was pleased to strongly support the \$141 million budget that included the elimination of 473 positions and the implementation of some significant management efficiencies.

Although the Civic Federation remains pleased by the Forest Preserve District's budget balancing efforts, additional hard work is needed to further transform the District. Last December, the Federation expressed concern in our FY2003 budget testimony that true management reform and operational improvements would fail unless this Board focused increased attention on the operations of the District. Recent management audit findings and press reports sharply underscore the pressing need for this attention. So we are pleased that this Committee is meeting to begin addressing some of these issues.

The Civic Federation is also encouraged by Commissioner Daley's efforts to have Forest Preserve District meetings held on different dates apart from those for the County Board. This scheduling change should allow the Board to devote attention to District matters alone without the distraction of County issues. The formation of this committee and the holding of these hearings should also help focus attention and raise awareness of the need for sustainable management and personnel reform in the District and should benefit both the District and its residents.

In regard to the current state of land management, the Federation defers to more direct experience of some of the other groups here today. However, in evaluating the performance of personnel and the accomplishment of the District's mission, we would like to repeat several earlier Federation recommendations made during previous budget testimonies.

1. The District and its employees should re-focus its efforts on its core mission of acquiring, preserving and maintaining the County's precious forest preserve resources. Examples of maintaining services with less resources can be seen in the Chicago Park District's efforts in recent years to improve the quality of park operations and management while reducing headcount and holding the

line on taxes. The neighboring Forest Preserve Districts of DuPage and Lake provide a good blueprint for the District to emulate regarding land acquisition efforts.

2. The District should develop and implement a formal long-term financial plan that is shared with and/or reviewed by key policymakers and stakeholders. By effectively linking policy and program priorities to the financial resources available currently and in the near future, long-term financial planning can help government prepare for future contingencies before they become crises.
3. In planning for future budgets and evaluation of staff, the District should develop and utilize objective performance measures for its services and programs and as a means of monitoring, measuring and evaluating program performance.
4. The Forest Preserve District's budget format should be dramatically overhauled to increase its transparency and make it more user friendly to citizens. The District should seek to emulate other local government budgets, including the Cook County budget and the budget of the Forest Preserve District of Lake County as potential models for improving its budget format.

The Civic Federation also believes that the Forest Preserve District could be better served by legally separating the governments of the County and the District. DuPage County successfully embarked on such a separation this year with the support of County residents and lawmakers and we will be monitoring their progress in the coming years. In comparison to our neighboring Forest Preserve Districts in Lake, Will, and Kane counties, we believe that the Cook County Forest Preserve District has considerable room to improve on its core mission of acquiring additional land for preservation and maintaining the quality of existing forest preserves. In recent years, almost 5,000 new acres of new land have been acquired by our neighboring metropolitan area forest preserves, but only 137 acres have been added in Cook County.

We strongly urge the Committee to follow up on this hearing by spending more time exercising its legislative prerogatives to encourage the Forest Preserve District staff to measure and to meet its important mission in the most efficient manner. The employees, taxpayers and all residents of Cook County who use and enjoy the forest preserves will clearly benefit from such a focus and commitment.