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CIVIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS UNITE TO SAVE FOREST PRESERVES
New Report Documents Questionable Practices, Calls for Separate Governing Board

Two leading watchdog organizations began a campaign to remove the beleaguered Cook County Forest Preserves from the control of the Cook County Board of Commissioners today. The new report by the Civic Federation and Friends of the Forest Preserves is an indictment of the County's dual board structure, which creates an inherent conflict of interest and inhibits proper oversight of the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

The Federation and Friends of the Forest Preserves are calling for a new, separate forest preserve board with members that are **elected County-wide** via a **non-partisan election** with a **board president elected among and by the members** of the forest preserve board. A separate board will allow voters to elect Commissioners on the basis of candidates' positions, credentials, experience and interest in the forest preserves.

Currently the Forest Preserve District of Cook County is organized as a separate local government with independent property tax authority, but it shares a board of commissioners with Cook County government. This structure has created an **inherent conflict of interest** for the Commissioners, who have not effectively separated the interests of Cook County and the Forest Preserve District. Many of the current Commissioners have shown a keen interest in promoting economic development and other uses of District property that conflict with the District's core mission to preserve natural land. The Commissioners have frequently placed themselves in the irreconcilable position of choosing Cook County's mission over the forest preserves' needs. The Civic Federation and Friends of the Forest Preserves' report documents many such instances where the County's needs trumped the interests of the forest preserves. The most recent and egregious example was the transfer of \$13.3 million in District capital funds to the County in 2007 to help alleviate the County's budget deficit.

The report found that the County and District's "double-duty" Commissioners spend the vast majority of their time dealing with County issues. These weighty concerns leave little time for the Commissioners to focus on the forest preserves. Commissioners meet far less frequently to discuss Forest Preserve District matters than they do to discuss County matters and provide **less comprehensive oversight**. A separate board of commissioners would be able to focus their attention fully on the forest preserves. At the same time, the County would benefit from having the undivided attention of its Commissioners on pressing financial, health and public safety issues.

The report's findings have led the Civic Federation and the Friends of the Forest Preserves to the unanimous conclusion that **the District has suffered from financial and land management problems because of the conflicts of interest and lack of oversight created by the dual board structure**. "The Civic Federation has long deplored the Forest Preserve District's lack of adequate financial transparency and history of questionable fiscal practices," said Laurence Msall, President of the Civic Federation. "County taxpayers deserve a separate and financially accountable government for their forests." Friends of the Forest Preserves Executive Director Benjamin Cox said, "Despite the hard work of many dedicated employees and volunteers, the forest preserves suffer from serious neglect. The dual board structure results in degrading facilities and ecosystems, especially when compared to neighboring counties. They need the full-time attention of Commissioners who are committed to conservation to nurse them back to health."

The Civic Federation is an independent, non-partisan government research organization founded in 1894. The Federation's membership includes business and professional leaders from a wide range of Chicago area corporations, professional service firms and institutions.

Friends of the Forest Preserves is a non-profit environmental organization located in Cook County Illinois. Friends works to preserve, protect, and restore the Forest Preserves of Cook County for the benefit of people and nature.