

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



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### CIVIC FEDERATION SUPPORTS FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT BUDGET, ENCOURAGED BY FIRST EVER CAPITAL PLAN

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(CHICAGO) – Citing the creation of its first capital improvement plan (CIP) and other notable strides toward more professional operations and financial management, the Civic Federation announced its **support** of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County's \$167 million FY2007 budget. The Federation's complete Forest Preserve District budget analysis, including detailed findings and recommendations, is available today on our website at [www.civicfed.org](http://www.civicfed.org).

For years the Civic Federation has recommended that the district produce a capital improvement plan, especially after it issued \$100 million in general obligation bonds in 2004. The Federation warned that issuing the bonds without a CIP denied the public full and accurate information on how millions of their tax dollars would be spent. "A Capital Improvement Plan that allows public access to information and the opportunity to comment on the district's planned improvements is a significant step toward greater transparency," said Laurence Msall, President of the Civic Federation. We commend President Steele, Superintendent Bylina, and the district financial team for taking that step. The Civic Federation urges them, however, to hold formal public hearings and schedule committee meetings of the Board of Commissioners to discuss the plan.

The Federation's report includes six recommendations to improve the preliminary CIP and prioritization process. The recommendations are based upon nationally-recognized best practices to ensure maximum public transparency. They include: 1) more specific information about the CIP process; 2) a discussion of the history, status, and necessity of each project; 3) specific information about the needs assessment process; 4) specific information about the prioritization process; 5) a formalized process for soliciting input from citizens and Commissioners; and 6) formal Board approval of the CIP. "A Capital Improvement Plan incorporating all of these points would further enhance the commissioners' and public's understanding of how tax dollars are being spent," said Msall. "The Civic Federation is pleased the public will finally learn how \$250 million of their tax dollars will be spent to improve their forest preserve district, which has long been neglected."

Although supportive of the proposed budget, the Federation expressed concern about some areas of the district's budget that still need improvement. Foremost, the Civic Federation is **disappointed** the district allowed only five working days between the release of its budget and the one day of scheduled public testimony. This is an unreasonably short amount of time for public review and comment. The Civic Federation recommends that the district provide no fewer than ten business days between the release date and public hearings. The Civic Federation is also concerned that some aspects of the budget document lack clarity. The Federation's analysis provides recommendations to strengthen the readability of the budget document by better defining vague budget categories and providing explanations of fund balances.

The Civic Federation's analysis concludes with a set of our long-standing, common sense recommendations to improve the district's operations and budget, such as severing the relationship between the Forest Preserve District and the Cook County Board of Commissioners. "Separate boards would substantially improve the oversight and accountability of both governments and allow the new Forest Preserve District commissioners to focus on more thorough review of finances and operations," said Msall.

*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.*

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