



For immediate release  
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***COOK COUNTY FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT  
TURNS 'DEAF EAR' TO PUBLIC, PASSES FY2005 BUDGET;  
Civic Federation urges increased public input, accountability***

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(CHICAGO) – In passing its FY2005 budget today, the Cook County Forest Preserve District's Board of Commissioners increases its property tax levy by nearly 14% without offering taxpayers the accountability they deserve.

The Forest Preserve District increased its annual budget by \$56.6 million over FY2004, largely to cover costs of planned capital improvements.

“There's no question that Brookfield Zoo, Chicago Botanic Garden and the Forest Preserves themselves are in dire need of updates,” says Laurence Msall, president of The Civic Federation. “However, a capital improvement program should reflect the priorities of the people the District serves. Instead, the District chose to pass a \$100 million bond issue last October without meaningful hearings or other public input. With this budget, the District continues to turn a deaf ear to the public's concerns.”

Although details of the District's capital spending plan are sketchy, the FY2005 budget calls for \$8.6 million of the bond funds to be spent on parking lots, headquarters buildings and the central maintenance facility. “Those upgrades for parking lots and administrative buildings add up to roughly 17% of the total bond-funded capital improvements within the Forest Preserves,” Msall notes. “Does anyone really believe those are the top priorities of the people who use the Forest Preserves?”

Throughout the District's budget process, the Civic Federation has publicly expressed deep reservations about its apparent lack of concern over public accountability. The District's four-week delay in announcing public hearings after the budget's release may have violated state laws, including the Truth in Taxation Act. Violations of those laws could jeopardize the validity of the Forest Preserve District's property tax levy.

The Civic Federation calls on the Forest Preserve Commissioners to provide more public transparency related to the District's capital needs. At a minimum, the District should develop and implement a formal Capital Improvement Program allowing ample opportunities for public input and review. “If the people of Cook County are going to pay for these improvements, they should be given a voice in deciding how their money will be spent,” Msall says.

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.

For a copy of the Civic Federation's complete analysis of the Cook County Forest Preserve District's proposed budget, please visit [www.civiefed.org](http://www.civiefed.org).