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CIVIC FEDERATION SUPPORTS FY2008 COOK COUNTY FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT SPENDING PLAN *Advocates Separate Board for Forest Preserves to End Conflicts of Interest*

Citing the Cook County Forest Preserve District's development of a publicly available Capital Improvement Plan (CIP), the Civic Federation gave its support to the proposed FY2008 district budget today. However, the Federation reaffirmed its stance that **the forest preserves deserve a separately elected board** that will focus solely on the district and promote its mission.

The Civic Federation was encouraged by the release of the district's second CIP this year and that the plan is available for the first time on the district's website. The website also urges the public to submit comments on the CIP. Several of the recommendations the Federation made for the improvement of last year's capital plan were incorporated into the new provisional plan and have made it more transparent and accessible to the public. The Federation has long criticized the district for its failure to provide a capital plan when it issued \$100 million in bonds in 2004. A capital improvement plan is critical to ensure taxpayers remain informed and involved in how millions of their dollars will be used improve and repair their forest preserves.

The Federation's 33-page analysis included several more recommendations as to how the district can further improve its CIP to ensure maximum transparency and incorporate best practices for government planning. It is especially important that the district hold public hearings on the CIP and include input from both the public and commissioners as to the priorities for spending.

The Federation's analysis found that the proposed budget of \$175.2 million represents an increase of 4.6% over last year and is funded by an increase in the district's property tax levy of 2.8%. While this is an acceptable level of tax increase, it may not have even been necessary had the double-duty Board of Commissioners not voted to transfer \$13.3 million in Forest Preserve District funds to plug Cook County's budget deficit earlier this year. The history of the Cook County Forest Preserves contains too many examples of conflicts of interest between the two sister governments. "The Forest Preserves and the taxpayers that fund it deserve a board that will act to protect and extend natural lands, not imitate an absentee landlord, neglecting the district and squeezing it for every penny," said Laurence Msall, president of the Civic Federation. Legal separation of the two governments would allow the taxpayers of Cook County to elect individuals who would run as Forest Preserve Commissioners, on platforms related to the forest preserves, rather than electing county commissioners who then give scant attention to the district and often ignore its mission.

The Civic Federation's full report, including detailed financial analysis and recommendations is available today on the Federation's website, www.civicfed.org.

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.