



The Civic Federation

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CIVIC FEDERATION COMMENDS FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT FOR REDUCING PROPERTY TAX LEVY

Warns of Future Fiscal Pressures

(CHICAGO) The Federation supports the Forest Preserve District of Cook County proposed FY2010 budget of \$198.2 million. The District plans to reduce its property tax levy and the burden it imposes on property taxpayers by \$1.1 million. The full budget analysis will be made available to the public today at www.civicfed.org.

The District will draw down \$9.4 million from the budgetary reserves it prudently built up during better economic times to close its deficit and balance the budget. The Civic Federation praises the Forest Preserve District for maintaining a fund balance policy that requires it to reserve an amount equal to 17.8% of its corporate fund for contingencies. Such reserves allow governments to weather difficult economic times without resorting tax increases or service cuts.

In prior years, the District released its budget less than two weeks before its one day of scheduled testimony. The Civic Federation has long recommended that the District allow a minimum of ten working days for the public to review the budget before the public hearing. The Federation commends the District for adopting our recommendation by allowing 24 business days this year, which is enough time for County residents to be able to meaningfully review District budget documents before they testify on the spending plan.

In its budget analysis, the Civic Federation warns, however, that the Forest Preserve District faces fiscal pressures due to rising personnel costs. The number of full-time equivalent positions at the District has increased 7.6% between FY2006 and FY2010. The best way for the District to control its personnel expenditures is to increase the efficiency of its staffing by targeting its staff resources toward core functions. The Civic Federation therefore recommends that the District transfer swimming pools to local park districts and law enforcement duties to the Cook County Sheriff.

“The Civic Federation sees no compelling reason why the Forest Preserve District must maintain a law enforcement department separate from the Cook County Sheriff,” said Laurence Msall, president of the Civic Federation. Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart has noted on numerous occasions that his department can patrol the forest preserves without additional resources and has asked that law enforcement duties for the District be transferred to his office. “The Civic Federation sees this issue as a ‘no brainer’ for the District, an initiative that will save money and ensure the safety of visitors to our preserves.”

Last year the Civic Federation and Friends of the Forest Preserves released a report advocating for the creation of a separate Board of Commissioners to govern the Forest Preserve District. The report documented the irreconcilable conflict of interest the dual board structure imposes on the Commissioners who govern both Cook County and the District. The most recent example of the conflict is the District’s continuing discussions with the Village of Hinsdale for a long-term lease of District land to expand a recreational park, which could potentially violate the District’s land use policy. “The Civic Federation urges District staff and the Forest Preserve Commissioners to support the initiative to create a separate elected Board of Commissioners for the District,” 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. For more information, please visit the Federation's website at www.civicfed.org.

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