

# Friends NEWS

Benjamin Cox, editor • benjamin@fotfp.org | Volume 23, Issue 2 • Cook County, Illinois • Summer 2023



## Celebrating 25 years with look back at early years

By Barbara Hill, founding Board member

It was a dark and stormy night... No, it was a lovely evening in Oak Park in late 1996. A dozen worried people sat in the living room of Barbara and George Birmingham, wondering what to do next. They had been volunteering in forest preserves across Cook County, working to restore health to the prairies, woodlands, and wetlands. But a handful of well-connected people had told John Stroger, president of the county board and of the forest preserves, that the volunteers were destroying the preserves. And Stroger had banned all their work until the volunteers could be brought under control. Public hearings had been held, with overwhelming support for resuming ecological restoration. To no avail; the moratorium stood.

“We need an advocacy organization,” said Steve Packard.

And so the group had assembled, naming itself Friends of the Forest Preserves and selecting John Sheerin as its president. A year and a half later, in 1998, the group would register with the state of Illinois as a non-profit organization.

The first task was to talk with individual commissioners, explaining why the preserves need ecological restoration and countering fears about brush removal (pointing out that it is not “clear-cutting”), herbicide use, and prescribed burns. This was slow going.

First the volunteers got permission to pick up litter. And then to collect seeds. And later to sow those seeds. And later to cut brush in some preserves, provided that the work was part of an approved land-management plan and that a staff member from the forest preserves was present. Friends slowly, slowly whittled away at restrictions that were hindering or preventing needed work. It took until

*Continued on page 2...*

## Referendum dollars already helping nature

Thanks to the overwhelming support of 69 percent of the voters in November, the Forest Preserves of Cook County has already started investing funds generated by the Vote Yes for Clean Air, Clean Water, and Wildlife referendum. The vast majority of new and improved programs, initiatives and amenities are still to come. But improvements that would not be happening without these extra resources are already having an impact—here are highlights so far for 2023.

### Ecological restoration

More than \$300,000 of additional ecological restoration work has been completed at priority sites like Sauk Trail Woods, Jurgensen Woods, and Busse Woods. Another \$600,000 is committed and planned in the upcoming months for brush clearing and prescribed fire on more than 2,800 acres at Orland Grassland, Deer Grove, Country Lane Woods, and other preserves.

The Forest Preserves have expanded staff by adding 10 resource management crew aides—seven of which are graduates of Conservation Corps programs, including Friends of the Forest Preserves alumni—as well as a wildlife field laboratory technician and assistant resource project manager. These new staff will help the Forest Preserves address storm damage and invasive pests, increase capacity for trail management, and expand Conservation Corps programs. More than \$1 million to date has been invested in new resource management equipment, as well, including trailers, chippers, skid steers, utility vehicles, and track loaders.

More native plants are growing in the preserves thanks to the referendum funding. The Forest Preserves have planted 130 trees this spring, primarily in the North Branch region, with another round scheduled for the fall. A seed bank and

*Continued on page 3...*

## Celebrating 25 years... *Continued from page 1*

2006 for the moratorium to be officially lifted, under the interim presidency of Bobbie Steele, John Stroger's successor.

Meanwhile, in 1997, another threat emerged. Rosemont Mayor Donald Stevens wanted to buy 2.4 acres of Chevalier Woods to expand the Rosemont Convention Center. The Forest Preserves of Cook County has a process for designating land as "surplus," enabling it to sell that land. This process can be used for small, isolated parcels without environmental significance.

These 2.4 acres were most definitely not "surplus," and no one contended that they were.

Friends of the Forest Preserves enlisted Openlands, the Des Plaines River Watershed Alliance, and others to object. The groups held rallies, wrote letters to the editor, and lobbied commissioners. But, despite widespread criticism from the public and the press, the forest preserve board approved the deal in 1999 on a split vote. This was the first time that non-surplus forest preserve land had ever been sold.

Dave Lloyd assembled a small group of Friends members, again in the Birmingham's living room, to organize a response. Shortly thereafter, hundreds of signs along roadsides in the preserves greeted motorists on their morning drive: "For Sale. Stroger Realty, (312) 603-6400." President Stroger noticed. He made removal of the signs the highest priority for all staff that morning. And the sale proceeded.

Friends soldiered on.

In 2000 the organization got a new opportunity. Friends of the Parks, a well-established organization advocating for Chicago parks, turned its gaze toward the Cook County forest preserves. They were undertaking a study of the preserves and their

governance. As Friends of the Forest Preserves board member Debra Shore pointed out, a joint project would make sense for both organizations. Friends of the Parks had funding and influence. Friends of the Forest Preserves had expertise about the preserves, motivated volunteers, and a name that obviously tied it to the topic. In 2002 the two groups published their joint report, written by Steve Christy of Lake Forest Open Lands.

The report's central thesis was that the Forest Preserve District of Cook County had lost sight of its mission, as codified in state law, "to acquire and hold lands in their natural state and condition, as near as may be." The central piece of evidence was the condition of those lands. Wayne Lampa and Linda Masters had designed a study of the floristic quality of the preserves. I recruited 89 monitors, both botanic professionals and highly knowledgeable amateurs, to record the plant species found in 1,738 randomly chosen quadrats throughout the preserves.

The results: 68% of the district's "natural" (undeveloped) lands were of poor quality, 14% fair, 8% good, 7% high, and 3% very high. (A staff ecologist for the preserves later confirmed these results.) The budget revealed at least part of the reason. The largest share of the corporate fund, 40%, went to maintenance: mowing grass, collecting garbage, repairing pavement and buildings, and so on. The next largest shares were 16% for law enforcement and 15% for recreation (primarily golf courses and swimming pools). Forestry (now the Department of Resource Management) got 6% and conservation (the nature centers) got 7%. Land acquisition was at an all-time low.

This year, Resource Management is at 10% of the budget, which is much larger thanks to the successful passage of the referendum last year.

The Friends' study received a lot of attention. The commissioners and the preserve staff became eager to show that they were changing course. For the first time in memory, they frequently mentioned the mission of acquiring and holding natural lands. The commissioners began to learn that there are ecological differences between a buckthorn and an oak. Attempts to remove patronage from the hiring process began. A major turning point for the preserves came 10 years later, in 2012, when Toni Preckwinkle assumed the presidency of the board. She quickly learned to treasure the preserves and hired someone who shared her vision, Arnold Randall, as general superintendent.

During those early years Friends of the Forest Preserves spent almost all its energy fighting the moratorium, the land sale, the devastation wrought by unconstrained mountain bikes, the patronage hiring, the lack of any land acquisition, and the general inattention to the mission of the forest preserves. Today Friends is more often a trusted advisor to the board and the staff than it is an adversary. The organization has grown from those dozen worried volunteers to a nonprofit organization with more than 30 full-time staff members and an annual budget of \$3.5 million. Today Friends continues its advocacy work, but has the luxury of focusing primarily on its on-the-ground programs of ecological restoration and community outreach. That's a good sign for everyone in Cook County.

## Referendum dollars... *Continued from page 1*

propagation partnership has been expanded with the Chicago Botanic Garden and an in-house seed nursery for native plants has been created. Plug planting has already begun to increase biodiversity in Spears Woods.

### Public Engagement

Four laborers have been hired at Nature Centers, opening up the schedules of the naturalist staff to concentrate on engagement activities. This summer, that has included hosting Hyde Park Neighborhood Club summer camp field trips at nature centers; kayaking, fishing, archery, and environmental education for a camp focused on health and wellness hosted by the Calumet City Park District; and an expanded partnership with the Summit School District for teacher training and cultural programming.

A new full-time administrator has created similar opportunities for programming teams that run events in preserves across the county. They are now partnering with local groups to add programs in yoga, paddling, African and Irish dance performances, accessible activities for people with disabilities, forest bathing, and more.

Canoe and kayak equipment has been purchased for paddlers and helmets for biking events, and the Nature Express Bus Program funding has been increased, which provides free transportation to Forest Preserves events for community groups.

Funding for advertising has doubled for summer and fall outreach to encourage people to visit and enjoy the preserves. Approximately a third of this marketing is dedicated to media that primarily reaches BIPOC audiences, with another third geographically targeted to economically disadvantaged areas.

A pilot program run by Friends of the Forest Preserves, the Beaubien Woods Youth Outdoor Ambassador Program, now has funding to be ongoing. Ten youth from communities on the South Side of Chicago work at the local preserve in a paid internship with a focus on restoration, trail work and sharing the story of the African American Water Trail, which starts at the Beaubien Boat Launch.

### Public Amenities

More than \$3.5 million in contracts are in place for repairs on the Salt Creek and North Branch paved trails, beginning this summer, and on five unpaved trail systems launching this fall. Picnic shelter repairs for more than 30 shelters—from fresh paint to roof and other structural repairs—will also begin in the fall. This winter, a three-year initiative for major renovations of restrooms at as many as 60 of our buildings starts at Busse Woods and Dan Ryan Woods. And feasibility studies for accessibility upgrades at nine canoe and kayak launches have begun.

The Forest Preserves is replacing and updating tools and equipment to improve landscape maintenance. New stand-on blowers and hot water pressure washers have been purchased, and wide-area mowers to replace some that are more than 30 years old are in the process of being purchased, as well as electric weed whackers and leaf blowers.

A waste removal modernization plan has started, replacing the old metal garbage cans with new larger carts that won't rust, have a lid to keep animals out and garbage in, and can be emptied more efficiently—something Friends pushed for to help keep our preserves cleaner. Most locations will have additional recycling containers, as well. A dozen or so of the new carts are in the field now as a pilot and two of the four trucks have been purchased to handle these containers. By this fall six to seven hundred carts will be out in the Central Region, with further roll-out coming across the preserves.

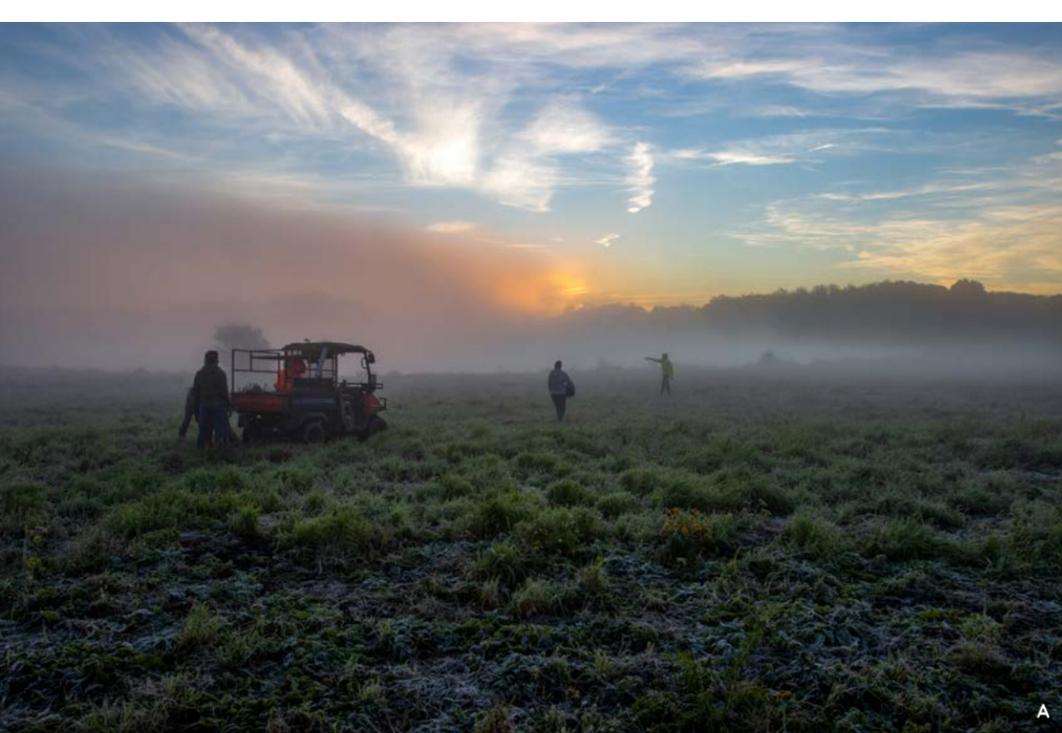
And, we can all breathe easier knowing that the Forest Preserves of Cook County is a separate government and these funds can only go to support the forest preserves in Cook County for us and future generations to enjoy.

We can all breathe easier knowing that the Forest Preserves of Cook County is a separate government and these funds can only go to support the forest preserves in Cook County for us and future generations to enjoy.

*Friends only remaining founding Board member, Barbara Hill (right) continues to work closely with Friends staff to ensure a bright future for the forest preserves.*



*Funding has been used to create partnerships with local groups to add programs in yoga, paddling, African and Irish dance performances, accessible activities for people with disabilities, forest bathing, and more.*

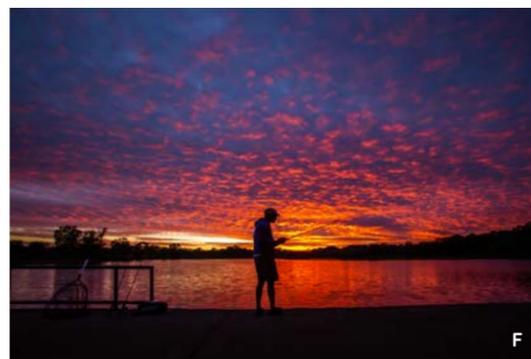
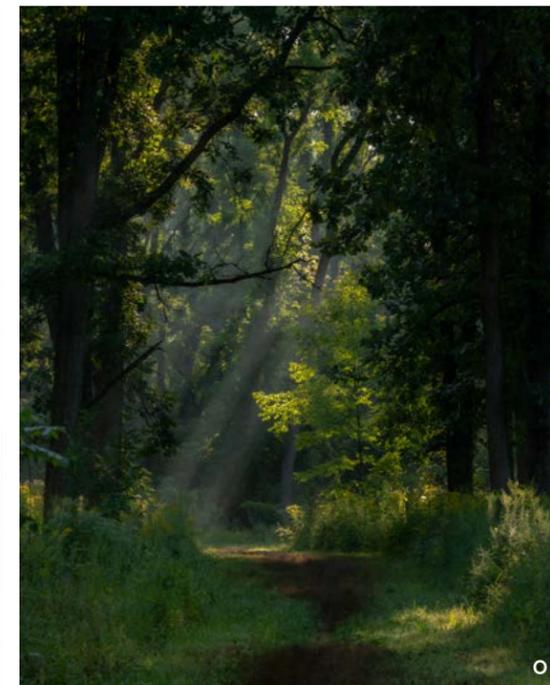
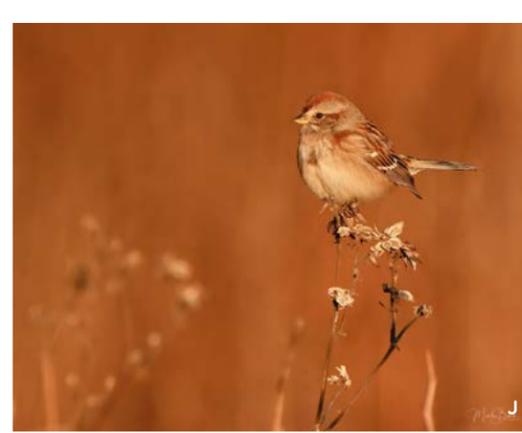


# 2022 Photo Contest Winners

We are extremely lucky to have so many talented photographers in the Friends community. This year's photo contest was extremely hard to judge because there were so many remarkable photos. In the end, the winning photos represent the breadth of experiences found in our forest preserves. Please visit [fotfp.org/prhoto-contest](http://fotfp.org/prhoto-contest) for more information.



- A 1st Place:** "Planting team on a foggy fall morning," Busse Woods in Elk Grove Village by Gary Aleksiak
- B 2nd Place:** "Fire after Sundown (Eastern Screech Owl)," Bemis Woods in Westchester by Matthew Zuro
- C 3rd Place:** "Lunch time (honey bee)," at Salt Creek Woods Nature Preserve in Westchester by William Santus



Thank you to everyone who submitted photos and congratulations to all the winners!

- D Best Landscape:** "Canada Geese and Fall Colors," Horsetail Lake in Palos Park by Tim Minnick
- E Best Youth Photo:** "Tuberous Grasspink," Somme Prairie Grove in Northbrook by Simon Tolzmann
- F Best People in the Preserves:** "Fishing," Busse Woods in Elk Grove Village by Maria Sacha
- G Best Flora:** "Hepatica Cluster," (Hepatica acutiloba), Sand Ridge Nature Preserve in Lansing by Michael Kobe
- H Best Bird:** "When Owl wants to give you a hug," (Great Horned Owl), Potawatomi Woods in Northbrook by Monika Bobek Lupa
- I Best Fauna (non-bird):** "Landing on Milkweed," Busse Woods in Elk Grove Village by Maria Sacha
- J Honorable mention:** "Colors of the Nature," (American Tree Sparrow), Deer Grove Forest Preserve in Palatine by Monika Bobek Lupa
- K Honorable mention:** "Coyote," Maple Lake in Lemont by Tim Minnick
- L Honorable mention:** "Sunset after a Storm," Skokie Lagoons, Glencoe by Monika Benitez
- M Honorable mention:** "Hitching a Ride," (American Toad on top of American Bullfrog), Thatcher Glen pond in River Forest by Roberta Appleby
- N Honorable Mention (youth):** "Lost in a Whimsical Land," (White-Crowned Sparrow), Chicago Botanical Gardens in Glencoe by Jordan Kreiner
- O Honorable mention:** "First light," Salt Creek Woods Nature Preserve in Westchester by William Santus
- P Honorable mention (youth):** "Mushroom from the Hollow" (Ivory Bonnet Mushroom), Hidden Pond Forest Preserve in Hickory Hills by Elm Stoeltinga
- Q Honorable mention:** "Enjoying a Fall Bath," (Dark Eyed Junco), at Schiller Woods East in Chicago by Carlos Molano



Left: The Conservation Corps crews work year-round to remove invasive species, collect and spread native seed, and assist with prescribed fire. Friends is working to double the number of crews and making improvements to the program.

Right: In 2022, the Engagement Team hosted an impressive number and variety of programs to peak the interest of newcomers and keep regular members of our community engaged. With each program also comes new introductions to potential volunteers, partner organizations, and new advocates for the preserves. One such program was an interactive nature play for children and their caregivers called "In the Grove," a partnership with Filament Theater held at Eggers Grove on the Southeast Side of Chicago. As we expand our engagement programming, we remain focused on volunteer organizing and community input.



# 2022 Annual Report

Last year might be hard to top.

The Friends community led, with an amazing group of local and national partners, a 167-organization coalition that ensured a 69 percent win for the voter referendum on the November ballot. The win brings more than \$42 million per year in perpetuity to the District to buy more land, dramatically increase ecological restoration and management, implement sorely needed capital improvements, increase engagement programming for individuals and families, and much more. The campaign was the culmination of years of work of building on the desires of a handful of people that started this organization 25 years ago.

They knew the forest preserves in Cook County were special and deserved better care. They had been working for years as volunteers and advocates to make the forest preserves better. To push for better management. And to ensure the preserves, with their "natural wonders, significant prairies, forests, wetlands, rivers, streams, and other landscapes with all of its associated wildlife, in a natural state for the education, pleasure and recreation of the public now and in the future" are here and healthy for all of us to enjoy today and for generous to come.

What began as a handful of volunteers focused on four campaigns focused around land acquisition, habitat restoration, bird conservation, and trails, evolved into an advocacy organization that shook the foundation of the governance and management of the preserves in the early 2000s. Still led by volunteers, the Friends leaders released reports in 2001 that celebrated the history of the preserves and identified all of their challenges. They contributed to a big shakeup in the leadership and approach at the District.

Then in 2004, the first Friends staff were hired, programs were created, and partnerships were strengthened.

Leadership of the District continued to improve and so did the management of the preserves and the government that cares for them grew. Friends pushed for change while bringing resources to the table for programs like conservation corps, volunteer organizing, and engagement programming. There is no doubt that great improvements have been made, especially over the last 12 years under the leadership of Forest Preserves Board President Toni Preckwinkle and General Superintendent Arnold Randall.

Without the steady and persistent work of this community, it simply would not have been possible to garner the support of 167 organizations that ensured the referendum win last November. We have much to be proud of and much more to do.

As we are celebrating our 25th anniversary, we are working to double the number of conservation corps crews that we have on the ground year round in the preserves. We are making improvements to the program to ensure that many more participants find permanent conservation careers and are life-long advocates for nature.

We are working to double the number of volunteer organizers that we have working in the field, ensuring that the land is healthy and full of a diversity of species for all of us to enjoy. And we are expanding our engagement programming to get more people from more communities, especially those that have not been as involved with the preserves, out in the woods and enjoying all that the preserves have to offer.

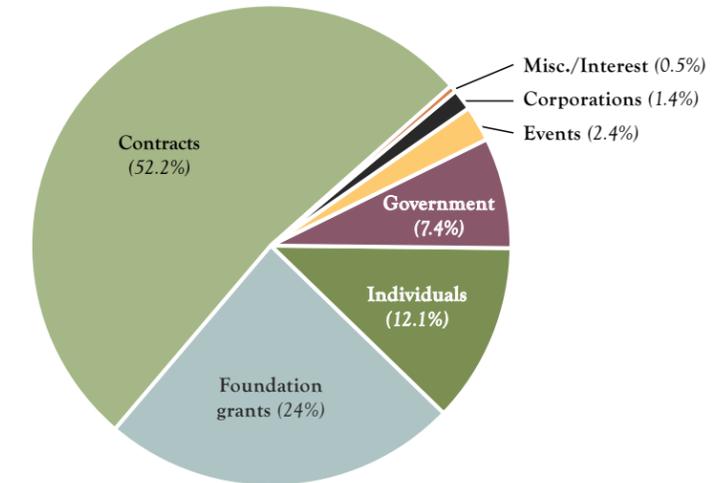
Thank you again for your strong support of Friends, the forest preserves, and this amazing community.

Revenue	2022	2021
Individuals	369,948	374,838
Foundations	735,718	799,323
Government	228,052	1,485,377
Contracts	1,602,248	1,062,190
Events	73,061	62,862
Corporations	43,391	45,290
Misc/Interest	14,263	14,413
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3,066,681</b>	<b>3,844,293</b>

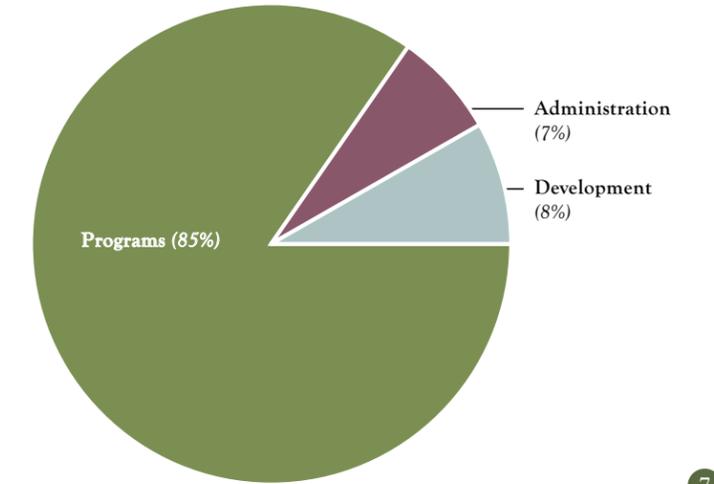
Expenses	2022	2021
Programs	2,893,150	2,714,334
Administration	241,623	197,273
Development	281,610	189,133
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3,416,383</b>	<b>3,100,740</b>

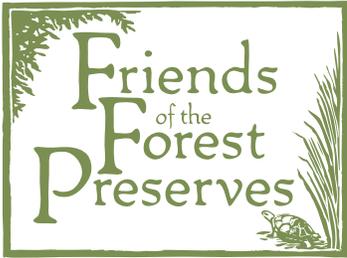
Assets	2022	2021
Net Assets (beginning of year)	1,647,071	903,518
Net Assets (end of year)	1,297,369	1,647,071
<b>Change in Net Assets</b>	<b>(349,702)</b>	<b>743,553</b>

## 2022 Revenue



## 2022 Expenses





Friends of the Forest Preserves  
411 S. Wells Street, Suite 300  
Chicago, IL 60607

Friends of the Forest Preserves is celebrating our 25th Anniversary this year thanks to the dedication, support, and of members like you. Your voice makes us stronger! If you haven't done so already, please renew your membership today to ensure that land, water, and life thrive in the forest preserves today and for years to come. Our forest preserves are better because of you - thank you! Please visit [fotfp.org](http://fotfp.org), scan the QR code at left, or mail a check to the address above.



Printed with vegetable ink on recycled paper with 10% post-consumer content manufactured using renewable biogas energy.

## Register today!

Tickets are on sale for the 7th Annual Beer in the Woods and we *will* sell out.



Please join us on Saturday, September 30 at LaBagh Woods in Chicago to celebrate beer, nature, and community. Scan the QR code or visit [fotfp.org](http://fotfp.org) to learn more.



*"Bee," Chicago Botanic Gardens, Glencoe by Edward Boe*

**What's the buzz?**  
**Connect with Friends!**

-  [fotfp.org](http://fotfp.org)
-  [@forestpreserves](https://www.facebook.com/forestpreserves)
-  [@fotfp](https://www.instagram.com/fotfp)
-  [@forestpreserves](https://twitter.com/forestpreserves)
-  [@forestpreserves](https://www.youtube.com/forestpreserves)
-  Friends of the Forest Preserves