



Friends NEWS

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Firing underlines need for board separation

Just six weeks after Doug Chien started in an important leadership position with the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, President Todd Stroger fired him, yet again illustrating the need for a separate board of commissioners. Reports suggest that Chien's termination, as well as three other firings shortly before the primary election, were connected to perceived political associations.

No leader held accountable only to the mission of the District would have hired Doug Chien for such a key job and fired him six weeks later, if that leader thought the electorate would know.

Conservation leaders had urged the President to hire a person able to end the massive loss of conservation funds. The District desperately needs resources, and funding for this important work is available. With the current board structure, voters, the media, and politicians themselves focus almost exclusively on county issues when there is an election of Cook County's President and Board

of Commissioners. The District is often not discussed.

Naively perhaps, the conservation world was thrilled when President Stroger hired a highly-respected 10-year veteran of the Sierra Club Illinois Chapter to fill the long-vacant grant administrator position. The position is one of 39 Shakman Exempt Positions at the District, which the President is allowed by law to fill with whomever he sees fit.

In December of 2008, Friends of the Forest Preserves had led a coalition of conservation groups to discuss with President Stroger seven important forest preserve issues – including the vacant grant administrator position. The group included representatives from Friends of the Forest Preserves, Friends of the Parks, Sierra Club Illinois Chapter, Audubon-Chicago Region, Open

lands, and The Nature Conservancy.

The coalition believed that this important position would help the District leverage its funding by capitalizing on the improved management of the preserves under General Superintendent Stephen Bylina. President Stroger asked group leaders to forward resumés for the position. In recommending Doug Chien, conservation leaders had contacted 15 promising candidates



Photo credit: Atort Photography

President Todd Stroger hired Doug Chien (shown here with his daughter) on the recommendation of conservation organizations to fill the long-vacant grants administrator position to help garner millions to improve the preserves. Six weeks later President Stroger fired him because of perceived political associations.

and interviewed six, to ascertain the best fit based on expectations of collaboration and knowledge of the District's culture. Chien possessed a superior mix of skills, experience, and temperament.

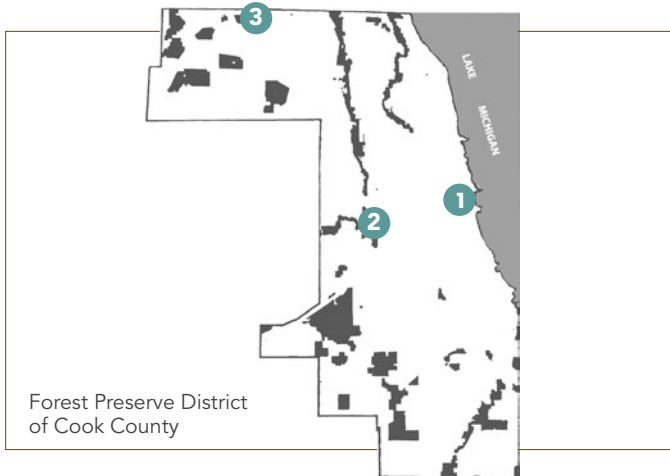
In the short time Chien was on the job, all reports (internal and external) were overwhelmingly positive, a sign of improved cooperation between the District and the conservation community.

"There can be controversy when it comes to hiring for these positions," said Benjamin Cox, Friends Executive Director. "But we can say with confidence that Doug was an excellent addition to the District staff and

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INSIDE

News from around the District



1 Election brings change

Chicago Alderman Toni Preckwinkle won the Democratic nomination for President of the Cook County Board and will face Republican Roger Keats and Green Party Candidate Thomas Tresser in the November election.

Not facing challengers in November are Commissioners Jerry Butler (D-3rd), Bridget Gainer (D-10th), and State Representative John Fritchey (D-11th), who won the seat to be vacated by Commissioner Forrest Claypool (D-12th). Representative Fritchey co-sponsored House Bill 5128 (see page 1). All other incumbent Commissioners won their elections but face challengers in November.

The only Commissioner to lose the primary election was Joseph Mario Moreno (D-7th) to Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, who will face Green Party Candidate Paloma Andrade in November. Garcia has formerly served as an Alderman and a State Senator.

2 AT&T denied land for cable

Commissioners narrowly denied AT&T’s request to use 60 square feet of forest preserve land for cable service equipment. Commissioner Larry Suffredin (D-13th) led the charge against the request because the District Land Policy only allows easements for “essential utility needs.” The vote was still divided: six yes, five no, one present, and five absent.

3 Ribbons draw attention to road expansion

The Cook County Highway Department is asking for seven acres of land to expand Quentin Road through Deer Grove, the first-ever forest preserve, recently granted Illinois Nature Preserve status. Friends joined forces with Deer Grove Natural Areas Volunteers, Poplar Creek Prairie Stewards, Sierra Club, and Prairie Woods Audubon. Tying ribbons around the trees that would be cut down to expand the road, the coalition drew attention to the looming threat of road expansion at this Palatine-area preserve. At a public hearing, the coalition proposed to scale back the road from five lanes to three, lessening the impact on the preserve and residents’ properties.

District budget passes with no tax increase (and no Stroger) again

The 2010 Forest Preserve District of Cook County budget passed with no tax increase, only a minor amendment or two, overwhelming public support – and very little attention from elected officials.

There is plenty of good news in the 2010 budget – a \$2.3 million addition to the Real Estate Acquisition Fund and \$3.5 million for land management and restoration. Two new naturalist positions are being added at the expanded Camp Sagawau Nature Center near Lemont and Little Red School House Nature Center near Willow Springs. District law enforcement officers will begin using “Pocket-Cop” to enhance public safety. The 2010 budget also includes funding to redesign the District’s website.

Some 60 people took time on a Monday in late November to speak about the 2010 District budget.

The Board of Commissioners once offered greater public access to budget proceedings, with three evening hearings in the suburbs and one daytime hearing downtown. By 2009, access was only one daytime meeting downtown, making it impossible for many to testify because of job responsibilities.

Still, some 60 people, from paddlers and equestrians to non-profit representatives and stewardship

volunteers, took time on a Monday to testify on the 2010 District budget. Ninety percent of them supported it, heaping praise on the District.

Their commitment to the process contrasted with that of our elected officials. Only Commissioners Gregg Goslin (R-14th) and Larry Suffredin (D-13th) remained for the entire hearing, while the citizens that came to testify waited as long as four hours to speak. President Todd Stroger and Commissioner Mario Moreno did not attend at all. The other 13 Commissioners came and went throughout the day. Friends expects that a separate board will increase both public access and Commissioner attention to budget proceedings in the future.

55 acres added amid controversy

Adding 55 acres of land to the Forest Preserve District of Cook County is a great way to kick off 2010 – but undeserved controversy swirled around this purchase, because the land was owned by the family of Commissioner Timothy Schneider (R-15th).

The property is Rolling Knolls Golf Course near Elgin, southwest of the Poplar Creek Preserve. Poplar Creek flows through the preserve, the golf course, and another recently acquired District property known as Bluff Spring Fen.

The only ethical way for the District to purchase the property from the family of a Commissioner was to acquire it through eminent domain, which resulted in a judge setting the purchase price. Commissioner Schneider removed himself from board action and negotiations on the purchase.

The final vote on the acquisition was 10 yeas, five nays, and one present. Commissioners Anthony Peraica (R-16th) and William Beavers (D-4th) agreed in their opposition to the deal, citing ethical and political reasons.

Friends' Executive Director Benjamin Cox was interviewed by CBS-2, and Commissioners asked him to speak on the issue during the board meeting.

"Our position is that the deal is a great buy for the District," Cox said. "Rolling Knolls is a large piece of open space that can be linked to the District's existing holdings, and it's a good price."

The judge set the price at \$5.77 million, approximately \$105,000 per acre. The family plans to appeal,



The outlined area shows Rolling Knolls Golf Course, recently acquired by the District to expand protection of Poplar Creek and its surrounding habitat.

claiming that it has been offered more than twice that amount in recent years.

Rolling Knolls expands the District's holdings along Poplar Creek and its surrounding habitat. The District plans to acquire an additional 10-acre parcel to link the Poplar Creek Preserve and the golf course. Such land connections give wildlife a protected natural corridor, allowing them to reach larger areas of habitat.

Hinsdale land grab halted

The Fall 2009 Friends' News reported that the Forest Preserve Board was entertaining a proposal from the Village of Hinsdale to develop 30 acres of District land in Bemis Woods. From the beginning, District staff held the line on protecting Bemis Woods from this proposed land grab – and it looks like they have succeeded.

At the October Board meeting, Friends organized a rally of nearly 90 people to oppose the Bemis land grab. The Commissioners voted anyway to continue negotiations with Hinsdale on an intergovernmental agreement that would allow Hinsdale to expand park facilities on nearly 30 acres of for-

est at Bemis Woods.

As directed, District staff met with Hinsdale, but made it clear that their position would not change, since the Bemis deal would violate their Land Policy and mission. Instead, the District recommended that Hinsdale continue to obtain permits – just as any organization or individual in the county does – to use the existing baseball diamond and outfield for soccer.

Hinsdale agreed, and also offered to connect bike trails be-

tween DuPage and Cook Counties' existing trail systems and to work with the District to remove invasive species at Bemis, according to Commissioner Elizabeth Ann Doody Gorman (R-17th).

Friends' and our partners' opposition seriously impacted these negotiations, halting an all-out land grab and dangerous precedent to forest preserves throughout the county. In addition, the negotiation process has created a new District-municipal partnership that will ultimately benefit Bemis Woods.

"The important thing is to connect those trails, and that they're willing to partner up." – Commissioner Elizabeth Gorman

Second annual Friends' photo contest



First Place (above top left) Bob Callebert, Kloempken Prairie near Des Plaines; **Second Place (above top right)** Roger Keller, green frog, Hidden Pond near Hickory Hills; **Third Place (above)** Dick Riner, Bartel Grassland near Matteson

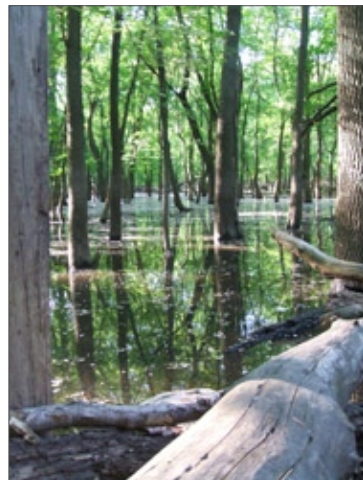
Best Flora (left) Kevin Wolz, buttonbush, Hidden Pond near Hickory Hills; **Best Fauna (below)** Brian Czarnik, raccoons, Salt Creek Trail near LaGrange Park



See the winning entries in color at www.fotfp.org.

Thank you to all who entered Friends of the Forest Preserves' photo contest this year. These photos showcase the Forest Preserves of Cook County in all their beauty and complexity – from sweeping landscapes to half-inch spiders. Enjoy the surprises that our five winners and seven runners-up captured, then visit www.fotfp.org to appreciate these photos in full color. A special congratulations to Bob Callebert, who won First Place again this year with his spectacular sunset. This one you'll want to be sure to see in color.

The winning entries will be exhibited at a reception in the spring, thanks to the generous sponsorship of Franklin Framing, a full-service picture framing salon and art gallery in Blue Island. Watch your email and our website for more information.



Runner Up Winners

Top (left to right): Cathy Bloome, orb weaver with dragonfly, Schiller Woods near Schiller Park; Steward Cherlin, Miami Woods near Niles; Dave Coulter, Thatcher Woods near River Forest; **Center:** Lisa Culp, Somme Prairie Grove near Northbrook; Sam Vergara, marbled orb weaver, Dan Ryan Woods within Chicago's south side; **Bottom:** Darlene Grossman, Harms Woods near Glenview; Dick Riner, Bartel Grassland near Matteson

Firing underlines need for board separation



State Rep. Elaine Nekritz
D-Northbrook
chief sponsor of HB 5128



State Senator Don Harmon
D-Oak Park
chief sponsor of SB 176

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that he is both qualified and eager to help preserve, protect, and restore the preserves.”

Then came the multimillion-dollar mistake. Literally.

Millions of dollars in stimulus funds are being made available on a regular basis, and Doug was in a key position to take advantage of these opportunities. Openlands, Audubon, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, and Friends have negotiated millions in funding for restoration of the District’s woodlands, wetlands, and grasslands. But vastly more could be achieved if the right person were in place to help negotiate the District’s bureaucracy. Some District employees work heroically with partner agencies to overcome the obstacles. But often the pro-

cess is slow and funders are scared away.

An important upcoming example is the hundreds of millions annually becoming available through the Environmental Protection Agency’s (stimulus-inspired) Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. The District owns some of the most important and most needy ecosystems in Illinois. It was to be Chien’s job to ease problems and clear the way so that Cook County would get its appropriate share of those funds. His skill, patience and commitment impressed all who met him, at every level in the District. That is, every level but one.

So once again Friends brings renewed energy to our work to give the District its own elected board at last. No leader held accountable only to the mission of the District would have hired Chien for such a key job and fired him six weeks later, if that leader thought the electorate would know. But the District is only a small fraction of the responsibility of the current board because it is coupled with the much larger Cook County – the 19th largest government in the United States.

As a supporter of Friends, your donations go toward funding the staff time, advocacy, and community organizing necessary to move the board separation legislation forward in Springfield. Friends is leading a coalition that is working hard to get SB 176 and HB 5128 passed during this legislative session. Call your State Representative and Senator now and ask them to support the Board Separation Legislation. Learn more and find talking points to use when discussing the bill with your legislator at www.fotfp.org.

**CALL
to
ACTION**

Contact your state senator and representative

It’s in our State Legislators’ hands. Call, write or email now to voice your support for House Bill 5128 and Senate Bill 176, which aim to create a separate governing board for the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. The bill is expected to come to the full legislature sometime in the February through May session. Please help maintain the momentum that Friends’ has built, until the job is done. They need to hear from you!

To identify your state legislators, go to

the Cook County Clerk’s website at www.cookcountyclerk.com. On the Elections tab, look for “Directory of Elected Officials.”

There, you can enter your address for a listing and contact information for all your elected officials, including your state senator and representative.

If you prefer, just call Friends at (312) 356-9990 during business hours or email us at alice@fotfp.org. We will be happy to look up your elected officials for you. **Your voice will make a difference.**

High school intern leads the way

It's nice when hope becomes reality.

Friends of the Forest Preserves' Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps Program (CLC), a partnership with the Student Conservation Association, trains high school students in conservation techniques and then sends them out to work in the forest preserves over summer break – removing invasive species, building trails and working at nature centers. Program leaders Alice Brandon and Sam Vergara hope the experience inspires participants to start environmental projects in their own school and community.

A 2009 CLC intern, Raquel Romo has translated her

“We want to plant flowers in the vacant space for students to enjoy. The school was excited and the local church is donating seeds and tools.” – Raquel Romo

conservation work into leadership at school. Raquel, age 16, lives on Chicago's south side and is a junior at Maria High School. She is an active member of Maria's Environmental Club, which has recently created a program to encourage students to recycle. Every month, the homeroom that recycles the most gets a “reward” for their efforts. Often Raquel and her clubmates bake the reward: homemade treats and cookies. The competition seems to work – student recycling has increased since it began.

Motivated by her summer work with Friends, Raquel has suggested a new project for the club. She saw an area her school owns, but noticed that it was never used – and not very attractive.



Photo credit: Alice Brandon

Raquel Romo, Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps alumna, removing purple loosestrife at Sand Ridge Nature Preserve.

“It's chock full of weeds and not a very appealing spot,” reports Raquel. “I had the idea of getting the club involved to make this vacant area a green space. We want to plant flowers there for students to enjoy. The school was excited about the idea and the local church is donating the seeds and tools.”

Students will start planting this spring, and Raquel hopes to have a school Earth Day workday to kick off the new garden. And, Raquel plans to participate in the CLC Program again this summer.

She believes that the program “has shown me what it takes to make a better tomorrow.” She's already putting that lesson to good use.

If you or a teen you know would be interested in the Conservation Leadership Corps intern program, please contact Alice Brandon at alice@fotfp.org, (312) 356-9990. The application deadline is April 7, 2010.

Spring members' tours in the forest preserves

Take a guided tour with volunteer naturalist Bruce Davidson to see how geology, climate, fire, settlement, and recent management created what we see here today.

Sat., May 9 at Spears Woods near Willow Springs

Sat., May 16 at Somme Prairie Grove near Northbrook

Sat., May 23 at Theodore Stone near Hodgkins

Enjoy a spring walk with Cynthia Quick and learn to identify the prominent trees.

Sat., May 30 at Harms Woods in Glenview

All tours start at 1 p.m. and finish by about 3 p.m., but be prepared to be flexible on the ending time. Tours are conducted rain or shine; footwear should be able to tolerate standing water; and clothing should be suitable for the day's weather.



Friends' members enjoy a tour through a local prairie.

Join us for one or all four of these spring tours. Tours are free but registration is required. RSVP at (312) 356-9990 by 5 p.m. on the Friday prior to the tour.



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Save the Date!

Friends of the Forest Preserves
2nd Annual Golf Outing
Wednesday, June 9, 2010
George Dunne National Golf Course

Invitations will arrive in member mailboxes this spring to this relaxed event. It's not too early to start planning for sun, golf, and a beautiful spring day for the benefit of Friends of the Forest Preserves.

Join our Golf Planning Committee! Committee members not only get the opportunity to create a great event, they also have their name and company listed in all event promotion materials, including the website.



George Dunne National Golf Course, site of Friends' annual golf outing on June 9

If you would like to join the committee, get on the golf invitation list, or need more information, please contact Benjamin Cox at benjamin@fotfp.org or (312) 356-9990.