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Volume 14, Issue 2 • Cook County, Illinois • Fall 2014

Success: Salt Creek Trail expansion under construction

By Doug Hoogstra

Doug Hoogstra is Friends member and an Account Executive at Darwill. He and his wife Rachel love to take their four children biking and out in nature together.

Just months ago we were talking about hopes and dreams of a trail, and now we are starting to see a reality.

The villages of Riverside and North Riverside along with Riverside Brookfield High School decided to put their money where their mouth is – they committed \$100,000 to show the Forest Preserves of Cook County Board that they were serious about solving a long standing student safety and community connectedness problem. In response, the Board also recognized that this was an issue that was long past due to be resolved and they matched the funds.

Once the funds for the first extension of the Salt Creek Trail in Brookfield were approved, the process started. Conceptually, you know things are happening in the background – engineering and specs, bids, and vendor selection.

But, it's another thing altogether to drive down 1st Avenue and actually see a trail in place, fences moved and progress happening on a project you have worked on for so long. This is where I found myself weeks ago as I rode that stretch between 31st Street and Forest on 1st Avenue looking at the first layer of asphalt – imagining my family riding on our way to the Salt Creek Trail.

I don't want to get too far ahead of myself. If you drive by, you will notice that currently it is a path to nowhere ... it dead ends at 31st Street and 1st Avenue. However there will most likely be funds from the Illinois Department of Transportation to extend the trail north to 26th Street, where it will connect with another Salt Creek Trail spur.

One of the great ways that our government and Friends have worked together to make this a reality is by connecting the right people. In a meeting earlier this year, village representatives, school representatives, and Forest Preserve Commissioner Jeff Tobolski got together with State Senator Marty Sandoval. Senator Sandoval is a key player in deciding where IDOT dollars are spent, and making him aware of the safety



Douglas Chien

The first part of a Salt Creek Trail extension connecting North Riverside to Riverside is currently under construction. Advocates worked with Friends and elected officials to make this happen.

and connectedness issues shined a light on the problem.

As a larger community, our elected officials laid out the need for this trail and gave Senator Sandoval the information he needed to bring back to his team. In return, he was able to commit to bringing the money needed to extend the trail to 26th Street, providing a safe route for North Riverside high school students as well as all Brookfield and Riverside residents to access the amazing resource we have in the trail and forest preserves.

I am thankful to Friends for making the connections. I am thankful to the local municipalities who have worked together to make this a reality. I am thankful to the Chicago Zoological Society (Brookfield Zoo) for their flexibility in making the path more aesthetic by moving fences. I am especially thankful to Commissioner Tobolski for connecting all these groups and keeping this project on the hearts and minds of our elected officials.

Action is made in small increments by people who care enough to speak up. If you have a need – get involved! Call Friends! Reach out to your local and state officials, and let them know your concerns. I have found they are reasonable people, trying to do the best for their communities. Do your part to help them help you.

News from around the Preserves

1 Trail construction happening at Orland Grassland

A new 5.4 mile loop paved trail system is being constructed around Orland Grassland. Advocates, including Friends, objected to some of the sighting of the trail, however the plan is proceeding as originally designed. There are spur connections at each of major intersections around the site. The cost of the project is \$2.29 million.

2 Improvements underway at Oak Forest Heritage

Trail and parking lot improvements are underway at the Oak Forest Heritage Preserve. Trail construction was put on hold this fall when human remains were unintentionally unearthed, despite extensive consultation with archaeologists before work began. Experts were immediately brought in to determine how to respectfully and appropriately re-inter the remains and the trail is being rerouted. The Preserve is adjacent to the Oak Forest Health Center and has a history of human use dating back 10,000 years, including Native American heritage and large burial sites for the indigent.

3 License option made available to encroachers

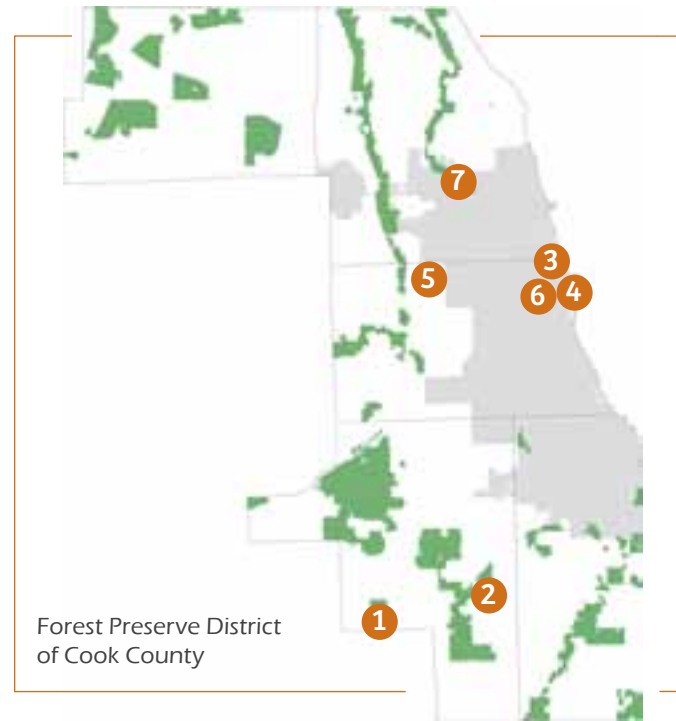
This summer, the Forest Preserve Code was amended to allow neighbors adjacent to a forest preserve to obtain a license to allow them to maintain structures on land owned by the District in certain, very limited circumstances. The extreme hardship provision of the Lands and Property section of the code now allows owners of “a significant building or structure” to apply to the District for a “limited, non-assignable, renewable license” to allow the structure to remain for up to 10 years as long as the current owner didn’t construct the structure, among other restrictions. The owner must agree to remove the structure from District land prior to the sale or transfer of the property.

4 Conservation and Policy Council established

A team of civic leaders has been appointed to provide continuous conservation leadership and expertise to the President, Board of Commissioners, and District staff. The FPCC’s Next Century Conservation Plan calls for the creation of a Conservation and Policy Council in order to improve the governance of the preserves. Friends President Benjamin Cox co-chaired the nominating committee that made recommendations for Council members to FPCC President Toni Preckwinkle.

5 Headquarters getting a facelift

An update to the Forest Preserve General Headquarters in River Forest is in process with a new main entrance and elevator addition in order to improve access at the



building for visitors and employees. Landscape improvements are underway, including updating the sidewalk through the site, improvements to the band shell/stage and updating the corner building at Harlem and Lake. Lastly, restoration of the natural area is underway and being led by staff. This past summer and fall, invasive plants were removed and a new walking path was blazed.

6 Wild Things Conference coming January 31st

Wild Things is for volunteers, professionals and anyone interested in local nature. The Sixth Biennial Conference will take place at the University of Illinois Chicago campus on January 31st. This day-long conference brings together the region’s best experts, professionals, dedicated volunteers, and all those who care about nature – newcomers or experts. Presentations and workshops will explore the latest in natural areas conservation and advocacy, wildlife protection and monitoring. It showcases Chicago area places from backyards to refuges. There is special focus on empowering citizen scientists, stewards, and advocates with information, networking, and innovation.

7 North Branch trail extending south

Next year, bikers will be able to access the North Branch Bicycle Trail from Kostner and Foster avenues in Chicago when 2.96 miles are added onto the southern end of the trail. The extension will also hook into a connection along Foster to the Lakefront Path.

Recruiting underway for next generation of stewards

Beginning this fall, Friends began spearheading an initiative with three partners called the Centennial Volunteers. A collaboration of Friends of the Forest Preserves, the Forest Preserves of Cook County, Friends of the Chicago River, and Audubon Chicago Region – it marks the 100th anniversary of the forest preserve system.

At five forest preserves, volunteers will take tours with veteran naturalists and learn basic plant identification and conservation skills. They’ll collect seeds and cut back invasives. In the process, they will forge a deeper connection with these rich swatches of wilderness by getting their hands dirty.

The Centennial Volunteers partners are, in particular, seeking young volunteers as well as ones that live within a few miles of the preserves. One of the biggest challenges is simply getting people beyond the preserves’ parking lots, sometimes for the first time.

“Outside certain circles, the concept of habitat restoration isn’t well understood,” says Friends President Benjamin Cox. “We want to carry the concept to new communities and new people.”

To spark recruitment efforts, Friends hired two field organizers in August. Along the north branch of the Chicago River, Josh Coles is building support at three preserves: LaBagh/Hernandez Woods, Blue Star Memorial Woods, and Somme Woods. In the south suburbs, Chris Weber is organizing at Kickapoo Woods and Whistler Woods. Friends board member Stephen Packard is

Field Organizers working to grow volunteer efforts

Josh Coles is working on the North Branch of the Chicago River. He has been passionate about nature and conservation his entire life, and spends his free time organic gardening, camping, and hiking.



Chris Weber is working to build community support around the Calumet preserves. Prior to joining Friends, he managed a volunteer-run garden at the Lincoln Park Zoo and is a long-time environmental journalist.



Volunteers head into LaBagh Woods to remove invasive brush and help restore health to the woods. Friends is spearheading the Centennial Volunteers project with partners to recruit new leaders.

working closely with the two and sharing lessons from his decades of successful organizing.

The initiative comes at an important time. In its Next Century Conservation Plan, the Forest Preserve District set ambitious goals for increasing stewards and acreage under management. Meanwhile, the current generation of stewards – which has accomplished a tremendous amount over the years – needs young protégés who can continue their work in the decades to come.

The Centennial Volunteers initiative will empower volunteers to anchor future restoration efforts.

One of the first volunteers to sign up was June Webb, a Chicago Public Schools science teacher from the south side neighborhood, Chatham.

“Through this work, I have gained valuable knowledge about native and invasive species in the restoration of the prairie,” she says. “I share what I learn with my family, friends and students, in order to spark an interest to get them involved.”

Like most of the new volunteers, Lisa Youngberg, who lives in Northbrook and works in finance, is anxious to learn more.

“The learning has just began for me,” she says. “The more I know about the land’s rich history, the more I can contribute to its future.”

Besides learning about the natural world, meeting like-minded people is one of the chief benefits.

“I think it’s my responsibility to contribute to making my community a healthier place for people and all living things,” says Mary Debacker, a planner from Hyde Park. “In the Forest Preserves, I get to work with people who care about the community as much as I do.”

6th Annual Friends Photo Contest

Thank you to all of the amazing artists that shared their photos for this year's contest. Please enjoy their beautiful work.



Left Page: **First Place:** Kame-top diversity, Shoe Factory Road Prairie near Hoffman Estates, Robert Callebert; **Second Place:** White-tailed deer among Indian grass, Orland Grassland near Orland Park, Jeanne Mueller; **Third Place:** Six spotted tiger beetle, Bluff Spring Fen near Elgin, Doug Taron; **People in the Preserves:** Fisherman, Busse Lake near Elk Grove Village, Wesley Iversen; **Best Flora:** Sunflower hosting bee, Eggers Woods near Chicago, Jaharha Pryor.

Right Page: **Best Fauna:** Snapping turtle, Crabtree Nature Center near Barrington, Edward Boe. **RUNNERS UP:** Blue Heron with icicles on its chest, Busse Woods near Elk Grove Village, Wesley Iversen; Eastern Prairie Fringed Orchid, location withheld, Chris Benda; Common Yellowthroat with snack on Rattlesnake Master, Somme Nature Preserve near Northbrook, Lisa Culp; Hikers and purple prairie clover, Bluff Spring Fen near Elgin, Alice Brandon; Rider on Galloping Hill, Spring Creek near Barrington Hills, Jane Clement; Duck in snow on pond, Trailside Museum near River Forest, Fidencio Marbella.



One of the bike rides also involved learning about ecological management at Sand Ridge Nature Preserve and Calumet City Prairie and the cultural heritage of Michigan City Road, which traces the route of a Native American path through the low lying marshes. The highlight of the trip was examining a salamander as it crossed the bike trail with guidance from a naturalist from the Sand Ridge Nature Center.

Free fun in Calumet

Families and friends enjoyed several free recreation events in forest preserves in the Calumet Region on Chicago's south side. In late summer and early fall, Friends partnered with other organizations to run a youth fishing derby, bike rides and canoeing.

Natural areas in Calumet are underused and sometimes even misunderstood by local residents. To help overcome these obstacles, Friends organized a series of free family events that showcased some of the wonderful assets of the local forest preserves. To make participation as easy as possible sunscreen, bug spray, binoculars, fishing gear and Friends popular nature guides were provided for participants to keep. The activities were actively promoted at local events, businesses, libraries and other community connections.

The Calumet Outdoor Series was funded by the Illinois Coastal Management Program and the National Oceanic

UPCOMING FREE CALUMET RECREATION EVENTS

OPEN SPACES: Green Places Bus Tour - Sat. April 11, 10 am - 2 pm
Tour open spaces in the Calumet Region and learn about the rich cultural and natural heritage. Pack a sack lunch.

CANOE: Powderhorn Lake - April TBD
Free canoeing: gear and instruction provided.

and Atmospheric Administration and was conducted in partnership with Friends of the Chicago River, Fishin' Buddies, Friends of the Major Taylor Trail, Southeast Environmental Task Force, and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County.



With plenty of shore line and abundant fish, Wolf Lake hosted the youth fishing derby, which included prizes and free poles and tackle. For better or worse the youth learned about aquatic invasive species as the invasive round goby is a plentiful and easily caught fish.



The weather was perfect for a 5-mile canoe trip on the Little Calumet River. Paddlers learned about efforts to improve the river's water quality, diving cormorants hunting for fish, and other aquatic wildlife.



Riders take a break from their 12-mile round-trip ride to look at barge traffic on the Calumet River. The ride started in Dan Ryan Woods and traversed several Chicago neighborhoods on the Major Taylor Trail to Whistler Woods. Along the way they learned about the rich cultural heritage of the area, including who Major Taylor was. At lunch, riders learned about habitat restoration work that was being conducted by youth at Whistler.

Event Roundup

Friends fall was busy with 3 events, 2 free tours, a free photo contest reception and free recreational events (see previous page)

Friends had the pleasure of honoring Cook County and Forest Preserve President Toni Preckwinkle and Chairman and CEO Dan McCaffery of McCaffery Interests (pictured right with Friends President Benjamin Cox middle), at our inaugural Crystal Leaf Awards Gala on September 10. More than 300 people attended the awards celebration that recognized the honorees' commitment to conservation and sustainability. To see more photos of all of the events, visit our Facebook page [facebook.com/forestpreserves](https://www.facebook.com/forestpreserves).

Despite the first truly cold day in Cook County, we celebrated fall with one of our favorite family events, Ignite the Night. Held at the Spring Creek Forest Preserve and Barrington Hills Riding Center, Ignite the Night included a live band, an incredible raffle, and the warmth of a blazing bonfire! Families enjoyed flashlight tours, riding in horse-



drawn wagons, and gazing at the stars. This event wouldn't have been possible without the strong support of the many volunteers that made it happen, including Friends Board Member and Event Chair Ginger Underwood.

At Spring Creek and preserves throughout the county, Friends supports volunteer efforts to restore nature. We also lead free tours of preserves throughout the year: there were great ones at Spring Creek and Chicago Portage Woods this fall.

In Oak Park, we displayed our 2013 photo contest winners, and the 2014 winners will be on display in Blue Island in February. In December, our annual art auction and exhibition, "Into the Woods" featured local painters, sculptors and photographers. Thank you to all our members who celebrated a great year with us and who bid on the beautiful artwork.

Generosity extends leadership program

Friends members and supporters raised the last \$10,000 of funding needed to extend the Forest Preserve Leadership Corps to 12 months.

Thanks to the generosity of 75 donors \$11,375 was raised in the July campaign! A special thank you goes out to an anonymous donor who gave \$5,500 and the Connors Family Foundation which contributed \$1,000. We're grateful that Friends members and supporters want to see the Forest Preserve Leadership Corps succeed.

FPLC interns work 25 hours a week to remove invasive species and restore native plants throughout the forest preserves in Cook County. FPLC members give presentations, lead volunteer workdays, and are encouraged to pursue careers and education in conservation. Members are 18 to 20 years old and often from low-income neighborhoods on the south and west sides of Chicago.



Friends members and supporters raised \$11,375 to extend the Forest Preserve Leadership Corps to 12 months. The 18-to-20-year olds conduct stream quality monitoring as well as trail work and ecological restoration.



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Thank you for supporting Friends!

It has been a great year for Friends members, volunteers, and supporters. The preserves are better and it couldn't happen without you.

Please help make 2015 even better by making an end-of-year gift to our Annual Fund today.

If you already have! Thanks again!

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