

# Friends NEWS

Benjamin Cox, editor • benjamin@fotfp.org | Volume 24, Issue 2 • Cook County, Illinois • Fall 2024



## We won big, time to check on spending so far

By Benjamin Cox, Executive Director

With a resounding 69 percent of the vote in November 2022 for a referendum to bring more resources to the Forest Preserves of Cook County, voters demonstrated that they care deeply about wildlife, protecting, improving, and expanding open space, preserving clean air and water, and reducing pollution.

In response to the Vote Yes campaign spearheaded by Friends, voters agreed to increase their property taxes for forest preserves to buy land, improve its health, maintain trails, and more.

Of the approximately \$42 million that was collected, \$35.9 million got divided across different departments of the Forest Preserves of Cook County, with the remaining \$6.1 million going to the Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden for capital improvements.

“Because of the 2022 referendum, which provides more than \$40 million annually to the forest preserves, we can create a fiscally prudent, balanced budget that also supports unprecedented opportunities to advance our mission and make substantial progress toward the goals of our Next Century Conservation Plan,” said Forest Preserves President Toni Preckwinkle in her 2025 budget address.

In the first year, spending couldn't go exactly to plan because it takes time to put out bids for construction and improvement projects, hire staff to deliver promised services, and purchase equipment to help staff get more done. Funds that weren't spent in the first year were put into designated accounts that allow for multi-year spending on projects for restoration, capital improvements, and land acquisition.



*New resources have allowed the Forest Preserves of Cook County to increase the amount of acreage burned each year, which is a highly effective and cost-efficient management tool.*

A total of \$12.9 million was spent in 2023, including the purchase of 191 acres of land at a cost of \$1.1 million. To date in 2024, 182 acres have been purchased including seven acquisitions at a cost of \$7.6 million (not including grant leverage). Another 68 acres at a cost of \$1.3 million is on track to be purchased by the end of 2024.

The FPCC Resource Management Department has deployed \$4.3 million to engage contractors to restore priority sites including Bemis Woods, Sauk Lake, Jurgensen Woods, Tinley Creek Ravines, and others; to purchase vehicles and heavy equipment that expand capacity for restoration and research; and to add a new resource management crew in the Thorn Creek region (southeast Cook County). Included in these purchases is the first fully electric vehicle in the Forest Preserves' fleet, as well as significant investments in battery-powered chainsaws and other small equipment, marking a major transition away from gasoline-powered tools in pursuit of sustainability goals.

*Continued on page 3...*



## Friends Launches Engagement Corps in 2025

*Friends Engagement Team members Gloria Orozco and Sydney Armstead collecting little bluestem seeds at a recent Board-Staff Team Building Day.*

Friends will launch its Engagement Corps program in 2025 with a goal of increasing the accessibility of conservation-related jobs to all who are interested in working for a healthier planet.

We're accelerating conservation efforts by establishing dedicated engagement crews. As part of the program, Friends will hire and train crew members from targeted regions in the art and science of engaging people with the forest preserves in Cook County. The crew members then carry out regular public programming and community organizing initiatives.

It's modeled after our very own Conservation Corps program. The Conservation Corps was launched in 2014 and has a robust track record of success. We're building on the best parts of that program and employing those tactics within the Engagement Corps program.

"The Conservation Corps emphasizes career readiness by exposing interested professionals to the conservation field and giving them experience and support as they prepare for and obtain the certifications in the field," says Gloria Orozco, Friends' Community-based Conservation Manager. "The new Engagement Corps will also prepare individuals for careers in the conservation field as they focus on the efforts to engage community members in the forest preserves."

The program's core purpose is to increase the number of public engagement specialists from and in local communities. Attention will be focused on hiring people with identities that have been historically excluded from the environmental field. The initiative is designed for the team to start the program together and move through it as a unit, learning from each other and collaborating as the work progresses.

Sydney Armstead, Engagement Program Manager at Friends, explains that the Engagement Corps will gain experiences

and professional instruction on public engagement. "Starting in early 2025, the Engagement Corps will learn how to best develop and host a variety of programs on outdoor recreation, wellness, and environmental education. They'll create volunteer opportunities; conduct community organizing work; and use social media, flyers, and presentations to engage community members."

"During the two-year program, crew members will have the opportunity to network and to attend conferences and classes. In the second year of the program they'll do an externship with one of our existing or future partners."

Under the guidance of Friends engagement team and partner organizations, the 'trainees' will host free, public events for residents local to a forest preserve. Yoga and birding events are just a couple of the programs. The events are informed by the results of engagement Friends conducts in surrounding neighborhoods. They are often developed in collaboration with community leaders, who are paid a stipend to support event planning and network building.

Sydney says, "We've done a lot of community surveying in Riverdale (Calumet region). We don't just come in with a plan. We talk to the community first and then develop the plan. Without that input we wouldn't have the programming we have."

"Being intentional about gaining community perspectives is essential to the goals of the program and for making it accessible to Black and Brown people," said Gloria. This hyper-local engagement program model meets people where they are at—both figuratively and literally—to foster connections with the preserves in a way that cultivates community and improves wildlife habitat.

## We won big... *Continued from page 1*

In 2024 the FPCC focused the remaining funds for the Resource Management Department on purchasing critical equipment, a more robust build-out of a seed nursery in partnership with the Chicago Botanic Garden, a 150-acre restoration project launching at Chipilly Woods, and a 1,100-acre restoration project at Red Gate Woods. This will be the largest restoration project in FPCC's history at a cost of \$5 million with an additional \$5 million to restore trails and improve wayfinding.



*New resources have also allowed for extensive ecological restoration projects to get underway at preserves like this one at Chippilly Woods.*

The Conservation and Experiential Programming Department spent \$300,000 in 2023 to expand engagement activities including community group programming, accessible programming, as well as teacher and nature leader trainings. CEP needed to hire staff to deliver more engagement activities connecting more people to the forest preserves. Funds will also be used to make improvements to nature centers, purchase vehicles, and provide staff with professional development, further enabling them to deliver increased amounts of improved programming.

The Communications Department is seeing a significant boost. They doubled the advertising budget in 2023, adding an additional \$150,000 to expand and deepen their outreach efforts. They increased the print run for their annual calendar from 30,000 copies to 40,000 and updated its social media outreach service. In 2024 additional staff were hired, zone and trail maps were updated and reprinted, and other key resources and improvements for marketing and communications were put in place, with a focus on promoting inclusion and diversity of visitors to the preserves.

The Planning and Development Department spent \$7 million in 2023 on improving public-facing amenities including repairing trouble spots along unpaved trails in the Deer Grove preserves, along the Des Plaines River Trail, along Beverly Lake trails, and in Bemis Woods South. Improvements continued in 2024 to Beaubien Woods, including to Beaubien Woods, including the boat launch. Repair of 33 picnic shelters is underway, as well as a major renovation of the formerly

shuttered Caldwell Warming shelter, which will reopen as the new Caldwell Wellness Center in 2025.

“You can already see the impact of our investments of referendum funding in the Forest Preserves: expanded restoration work, new equipment, more events to reach a diversity of visitors, greener and more efficient garbage pick-up, maintenance and repairs at bathrooms, trails, parking lots, picnic shelters, and more,” said Eileen Figel, FPCC Interim General Superintendent. “We’ve purchased more land and we are expanding and improving programs like Conservation Corps—all thanks to this additional revenue.”

In 2023, Landscape Maintenance used funds to replace fossil-fueled equipment with fuel-efficient battery-powered and propane mowers, line trimmers and back-pack blowers that provide operational efficiency. They also acquired new graffiti-blasting and pressure washer equipment to keep the preserves cleaner and welcoming. In fall 2024, two electric garbage trucks were delivered, which will contribute to the FPCC's new modernized garbage removal operations. Also, another crew is being added to enable the FPCC to conduct hard-surface repair and maintenance in-house for parking lots, trails, and walkways.

Facilities and Fleet is converting older vehicles to propane, improving emissions, installing electric vehicle charging stations, and installing LED lighting fixtures at Little Red School House and Sagawau Environmental Learning Center. Mechanics have been trained and certified to install propane conversions, saving the Forest Preserves roughly \$5,000+ per vehicle doing it in house, with 24 trucks scheduled for the in-house propane conversion by the end of 2024.

The Permits, Rentals, and Concessions Department spent \$82,500 to enhance customer service and to improve its enforcement of permit compliance. It recruited field monitors to ensure adherence to permit regulations and also piloted a keyless entry system at off-leash dog areas.

Finally, while more than \$9 million per year is dedicated to solving the FPCC's pension shortfall, state law did not allow additional payments to be made in 2023. The designated funds were reallocated to high-priority initiatives in other referendum-supported categories. The law has now been updated, and additional funds were allocated to retirement benefits for FPCC employees in 2024.

“As we continue to expand what is possible, I am so appreciative of the coalition of advocates who spoke out so eloquently and forcefully for people to support the preserves, and of the huge number of voters who chose yes at the ballot box,” Figel said. “I’ve been with the Forest Preserves for more than a decade, and the momentum we now have thanks to the referendum is amazing.”

Friends and its coalition partners will continue to monitor FPCC funding and will look to the FPCC to provide similar reporting for 2024 on how spending went in a more normal spending year.

# 2023 Photo Contest Winners

Winners were honored in May at an exhibition and panel discussion at the McCord Gallery in Park.

Visit [fotfp.org/photo-contest](http://fotfp.org/photo-contest) to learn more about the annual contest and how you can submit your very own masterpiece.



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





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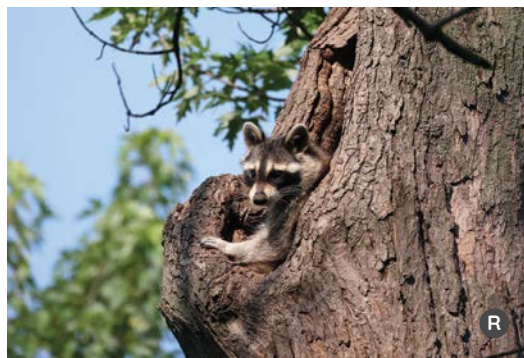
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- A 1st Place:** “Hungry Mouths,” Pileated Woodpecker at Palos South Woods in Palos Park by Tim Minnick
- B 2nd Place:** “Let the Light In,” Ruby-throated Hummingbird at Chicago Botanic Garden by Carlos Molano
- C 3rd Place:** “Common Water Snake Eating Goldfish,” at Little Red Schoolhouse in Willow Springs by Mark Hanna
- D Best Flora:** “Mushroom Family,” Busse Woods in Elk Grove Village by Maria Sacha
- E Best Fauna:** “Teaching the Owlets How to Fish,” Barred Owls in Linne Woods by Carlos Molano
- F Best People:** “Busy Morning in the Fog,” at Busse Woods in Elk Grove Village by Gary Aleksiak
- G Best Landscape:** “Magnificent Fall,” Yellow Trail on Sag Valley Trail, Palos Park by John Slivka
- H Best Youth Photo:** “Smooth Green Snake” (*Ophedrys vernalis*) in Orland Grassland by Jack Citlau
- I Honorable Mention:** “Touchdown,” Great Egret at Deer Grove Forest Preserve in Palatine by Monika Lupa Bobek
- J Honorable Mention:** “Monarch Butterfly,” at Wolf Road Prairie in Westchester by Fidencio Marbella
- K Honorable Mention Youth:** “Hunger,” Carolina Mantis at Paul Douglas Preserve in Hoffman Estates by Elm Stoelinga
- L Honorable Mention:** “Scarlet Tanager,” at McCormick Woods in North Riverside by Fidencio Marbella
- M Honorable Mention:** “Prize of the Preserves,” at Busse Woods in Elk Grove Village by Michelle Puszka
- N Honorable Mention:** “Sunning Myself,” Common Garter Snake in LaBagh Woods by Dennis Marton
- O Honorable Mention:** “Feed Me!” Barn Swallow fledglings at Deer Grove East in Palatine by Lisa Musgrave
- P Honorable Mention:** “Colorful Fungus,” (*Laetiporus sulphureus*) at Glenview Woods in Glenview by Paula Matzek
- Q Honorable Mention:** “Calling Out to My Mate,” at Busse Woods in Elk Grove Village by Gary Aleksiak
- R Honorable Mention:** “Who’s There?” Raccoon at National Grove in North Riverside by Tammie Dullum



# 2023 Annual Report

Friends of the Forest Preserves had a momentous year in 2023.

We marked a milestone: 25 years since our founding in 1998 by a small group of concerned community members. It's difficult to state just how much the preserves have improved in those 25 years. In fact, we're still growing in terms of size and impact just as a new inflection point is being reached for the forest preserves of Cook County.

That inflection point stems from the dedicated work of Friends, 167 partner organizations, and 69 percent of voters when we saw the passage of the 2022 referendum. As celebrated elsewhere in this newsletter, the referendum brought the Forest Preserves of Cook County \$42 million in 2023 and will do so annually in perpetuity.

Friends is meeting the moment.

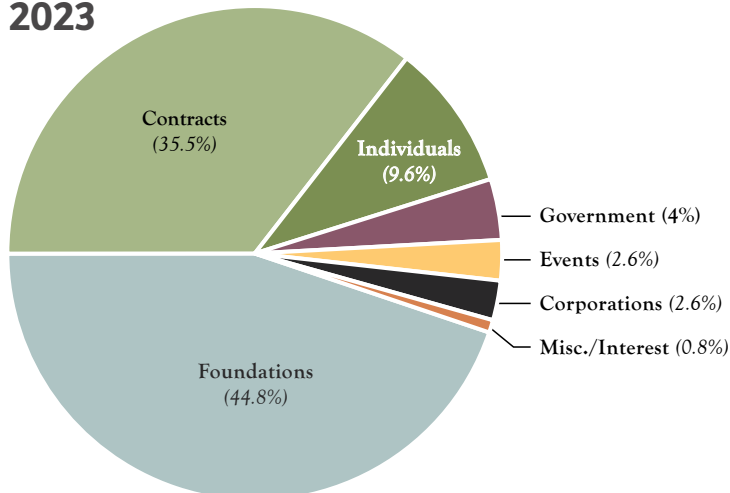
Our engagement events attracted more than 3,700 participants to 340 events over the course of the year. That's nearly 13,000 hours spent in the preserves.

Activities like Chai Shai & Yoga at Bunker Hill, an insect identification hike at Indian Road Woods, and the Dia de los Muertos event at Eggers Grove show the depth and breadth of the programming our team is putting together and attracting diverse participants.

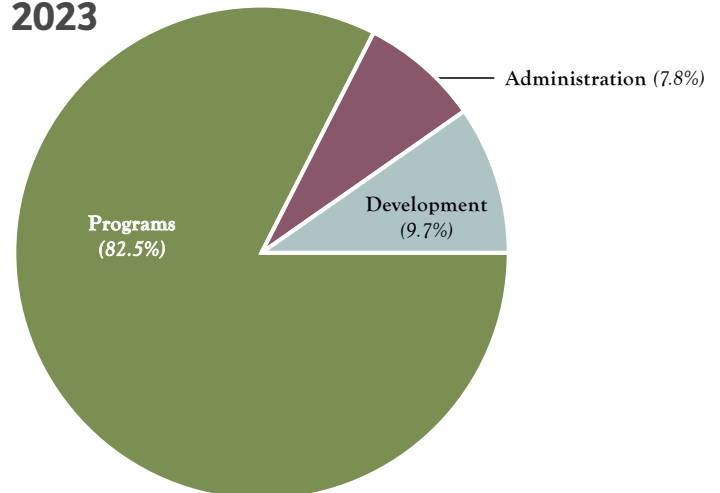
Community focus is the foundation of our work and therefore the expansion and deepening of partnerships is critical. To that end we successfully planned activities with new partners including Envision Unlimited and South Asian America Policy and Research Institute for the first time in 2023.

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## Revenue 2023



## Expenses 2023





Above: Friends staff and Board of Directors at Spears Woods in August 2023.

Opposite: The entire Friends staff gathered at Kickapoo Woods in March 2023 for a successful day of restoration work.

Restoration was proficiently carried out by our Conservation Corps. As intended since inception, the crews continue to learn about conservation while gaining vital leadership and teamwork skills that can be used in future careers. Those future careers very frequently are with the Forest Preserves. FPCC now counts more than half of its staff in the Resource Management Department (the folks that managed the natural areas) as coming from conservation corps programs, like the ones Friends runs.

Looking forward, Friends will establish a new strategic plan in early 2025, which will guide the organization over the next five years.

Thank you for being a member of this community, for supporting Friends and the forest preserves. Thanks to you, we're stronger than ever.

Revenue	2023	2022
Individuals	\$390,010	\$369,948
Foundations	\$1,818,620	\$735,718
Government	\$161,886	\$228,052
Contracts	\$1,441,975	\$1,602,248
Events	\$106,869	\$73,061
Corporations	\$105,081	\$43,391
Misc/Interest	\$33,392	\$14,263
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$4,057,833</b>	<b>\$3,066,681</b>

Expenses	2023	2022
Programs	\$2,746,228	\$2,893,150
Administration	\$259,364	\$241,623
Development	\$323,090	\$281,610
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$3,328,682</b>	<b>\$3,416,383</b>

Assets	2023	2022
Net Assets (beginning of year)	\$1,297,369	\$1,647,071
Net Assets (end of year)	\$2,026,520	\$1,297,369
<b>Change in Net Assets</b>	<b>\$729,151</b>	<b>(\$349,702)</b>

## Beer in the Woods: A Fun Fundraiser

The 8th Annual Beer in the Woods was enjoyed by more than 1,000 community members: families, friend groups, beer lovers, and folks that love to be outside - joined us at Labagh Woods in support of Friends. Guests enjoyed perfect weather, the region's best craft beer and cider, Labagh Woods itself, and the chance to learn about nature and the forest preserves in Cook County.



Left, lower left: Among programming highlights was the buckthorn tie dye station where Friends staff member Morgan Williams and others guided festival goers in tying bandanas.



Below: Festival-goers grabbed the popular Beer in the Woods mugs and sampled beers from 43 locally acclaimed breweries.





Friends of the Forest Preserves  
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Friends of the Forest Preserves unites people to protect, promote, and care for the forest preserves in Cook County. Thanks to your ongoing support we are collectively upholding our shared responsibility to carry on the legacy of healthy natural areas for future generations. Please consider making a donation today by visiting [fotfp.org](http://fotfp.org), scanning the QR code, or mailing a check to the address above. Thank you!



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*"Fox Sparrow,"  
Crabtree Nature Center,  
Barrington, by Janet Haugen*

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