



Lake County Forest Preserves

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DATE: February 2, 2026

Agenda Item # 11.2

TO: Sandy Hart, Chair
Legislative Committee

FROM: Rebekah Snyder
Director of Community Engagement and Partnerships

RECOMMENDATION: Recommend approval of a Resolution amending the 2025-2026 Legislative Program for the Lake County Forest Preserve District.

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS SUPPORTED: Organizational Sustainability; Leadership

FINANCIAL DATA: There is no immediate financial impact.

BACKGROUND: The State of Illinois owns multiple properties within Lake County that were originally acquired for the planned extension of Illinois Route 53. In 2019, the State discontinued the Route 53 extension project, and in 2021, the General Assembly passed a resolution creating the Illinois Route 53 Expansion Land Alternative Use Task Force (“Task Force”) to study alternative uses of the land that the State had acquired for the extension (the “State Land”). The Task Force issued a Final Report recommending that the State Land be transferred to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources for development and establishment of a State park, State trail, or other open space and natural area for conservation purposes.

Since April 2025, the District and the State have been in discussions regarding potential transfer of the State Land to the District. It is anticipated that legislative action will be required to authorize transfer of the State Land from the State to the District.

On February 12, 2025, the Board of Commissioners approved the District’s 2025-2026 Legislative Program. The proposed amendment to the 2025-2026 Legislative Program would add the following State legislative objective: “Advocate for the transfer of land formerly designated for the Route 53 extension from State of Illinois ownership to District ownership”.

REVIEW BY OTHERS: Executive Director, Chief Operations Officer, Deputy Director of Finance, Manager of Board Operations and Corporate Counsel.

**LAKE COUNTY FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT
LAKE COUNTY, ILLINOIS**

A RESOLUTION AMENDING THE 2025-2026 LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM

WHEREAS, the Legislative Committee of the Lake County Forest Preserve District (the "District") Board of Commissioners prepares and recommends the Legislative Program for the District in accordance with the District's Rules of Order and Operational Procedures; and

WHEREAS, on February 12, 2025, the Board approved a Resolution Approving the 2025-2026 Legislative Program (the "Program") based upon the Legislative Committee's review and recommendation; and

WHEREAS, the Legislative Committee has recommended that the Board approve the attached amended Program to add the following objective under "State Legislative Objectives": "Advocate for the transfer of land formerly designated for the Route 53 extension from State of Illinois ownership to District ownership" (the "Amended Program");

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Board of Commissioners of the Lake County Forest Preserve District, Lake County, Illinois, **THAT**:

Section 1: Recitals. The recitals set forth above are incorporated as part of this Resolution by this reference.

Section 2: Approval of Amended Program. The Amended Program is hereby approved. The President and Legislative Committee shall use the Amended Program to guide coordination of the District's legislative activities during 2026.

Section 3: Effective Date. This Resolution shall be in full force and effect from and after its passage and approval in the manner provided by law.

PASSED this _____ day of _____, 2026.

AYES:

NAYS:

APPROVED this _____ day of _____, 2026.

Jessica Vealitzek, President
Lake County Forest Preserve District

ATTEST:

Julie Gragnani, Secretary
Lake County Forest Preserve District

Exhibit No. _____

2025-2026 STATE LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM



Lake County
Forest Preserves

STATE LEGISLATIVE OBJECTIVES

- Protect the District's statutory authority.
- Prevent new, and reduce existing, unfunded mandates.
- Limit exposure to additional liability or legal costs and ensure that funds authorized by the Tort Immunity Act are able to be used appropriately.
- Ensure continued financial integrity of the Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund (IMRF).
- Maintain or enhance current grant funding sources.
- Oppose sweeps of dedicated accounts, specifically the Open Space Land Acquisition and Development (OSLAD) Grant Program.
- Advocate for adequate and consistent funding of Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR).
- Investigate a potential amendment to the Downstate Forest Preserve Act, such as an increase in the maximum allowable tax rates or a new levy authority, which would enable the District to request voter approval of additional operating funding.
- Advocate for the transfer of land formerly designated for the Route 53 extension from State of Illinois ownership to District ownership.

STATE LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES

Funding of State Matching Grant Programs

OSLAD, TAP, Bike Path, PARC and Public Museum Capital Grants

- Continued funding for Open Space Land Acquisition and Development (OSLAD) Grants will leverage locally approved funds for public land acquisitions, trail development and other public access improvements to our Forest Preserves. Countywide surveys have consistently shown that Lake County residents frequently use Forest Preserve trails for walking and biking and want new trails created in the future. They also supported children's play equipment, picnic shelters, educational facilities and youth campgrounds. All of these are the types of projects supported by OSLAD grants.
- The Transportation Alternatives Program Grants (TAP) and Illinois Bike Path Grants also benefit Lake County in many similar ways by providing safe trails and road crossings, such as recent TAP grants for the Millennium Trail tunnel connecting Raven Glen to Ethel's Woods and to extend the Millennium Trail from Ethel's Woods to Pine Dunes. The Governor is requested to commit to continuing use of federal Transportation Alternatives dollars to maintain TAP funding at the current percentage of total federal transportation funding received, not diverted for other uses.

- Advocate for consistent funding for Park and Recreational Facility Construction (PARC) Grant Program. The program provides grants to eligible local governments for acquisition, development, construction, rehabilitation or other capital improvements to park and recreation facilities in Illinois.
- Illinois Public Museum Capital Grants have helped create educational exhibits and restore historic buildings at Edward L. Ryerson Conservation Area, the Dunn Museum and Bonner Heritage Farm and are needed to leverage local funds for similar projects in the future. The Historical Records Grant Program from the Illinois State Archives has also helped to preserve the cultural resources of Lake County and should continue to be supported.

Curtailing Sweeps of Dedicated Accounts

Future “sweeps” of dedicated park, recreation, conservation and youth accounts into the General Fund should be prevented so that the dedicated funds can be used as intended.

Illinois Department of Natural Resources

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) benefits from having leadership that is qualified in the conservation, park and recreation profession. Adequate and consistent Illinois General Revenue funding for IDNR to continue existing IDNR services is supported, as is diversification of IDNR revenue sources to provide a sustainable funding stream for the long term. IDNR support of the Illinois Coastal Management Zone, Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, Illinois Endangered Species Act, Illinois Clean Water Act, and other regional efforts such as Chicago Wilderness and the Ecosystem Partnerships for the Fox, Des Plaines and Chicago Rivers and Lake Michigan should be strengthened. In addition, the IDNR oversees many grants essential to Forest Preserve projects and initiatives such as OSLAD, PARC, Habitat fund, and the State Museum Program.

Local Government Tax Levy Funds Usage

Ensure that funds from certain taxes authorized under the Local Governmental and Governmental Employees Tort Immunity Act may be used for the funding of sprinklers, health or medical insurance premiums or health savings plans, and pension funds.

2025-2026 Federal LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM



Lake County
Forest Preserves

FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE OBJECTIVES

- Protect existing authority to issue tax-exempt municipal type bonds, reinstate the ability to issue advance refunding bonds and prevent additional reductions in existing rebate incentives for Build America Bonds.
- Support continuation of tax incentives for conservation easement donations.
- Oppose disproportionate cuts to federal conservation programs, including grants and other funding sources.
- Support continuation or strengthening of existing federal protections for the Great Lakes, clean air and water, and endangered and threatened species.
- Support continued implementation of Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge in McHenry County and Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area in Kankakee and Iroquois Counties.
- Support the continuation and funding of the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACOE) programs that create and enhance healthy aquatic ecosystems: the Great Lake Fishery and Ecosystem Restoration Program; the Aquatic Ecosystems Restoration Program; the Upper Des Plaines River Flood Reduction Program; and the flood risk management study of the Fox River.

FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES

Protecting and Restoring Lake Michigan and Other Great Lakes

The US EPA, NOAA, and other agencies need to be adequately funded so they can continue initiatives designed to protect and improve water quality and supply, and the natural and recreational resources found in Lake Michigan along Lake County's shoreline and elsewhere in the Great Lakes Basin. Public education about the Great Lakes' natural and cultural history also should be supported. Sustain Our Great Lakes Coastal Management Program and the Great Lakes Fishery and Ecosystem Restoration Program are federal programs that have provided important support for our efforts to restore coastal habitats in Lake County and have led to the designation of 3,900 acres as a Wetland of International Importance by the RAMSAR Convention.

Endangered Species, Clean Air and Clean Water

Lake County is home to more rare, threatened and endangered species than any other county in Illinois. Voters have consistently supported efforts to preserve and restore habitat for these and other native plants and animals. Protections provided by the federal Endangered Species Act benefit both the wellbeing of humans and native wildlife and plant populations that live in or migrate through our Forest Preserves. The District supports efforts to strengthen the protections provided by the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts to ensure the health of Lake County residents. Federal discussions about potential changes to environmental protection laws and regulations should be held separately and transparently, not combined with budgetary bills or other issues.

Tax-Exempt Public Bonds

Lake County voters have overwhelmingly and consistently supported referenda to authorize the Forest Preserve District to issue tax-exempt bonds for preserving land, restoring wildlife habitat, and constructing new trails and other public access improvements. Federal tax exemptions for municipal-type bonds need to be maintained. Removal or reduction of the tax exemptions would increase costs to Lake County voters for future bond issues.

Transportation Alternative Program (TAP) Grants

Federal transportation programs, such as TAP, should continue to fund trails, bike lanes and other non-motorized transportation projects. These federal dollars have been key in the development of the Millennium Trail and other important trail connections throughout Lake County and the region. *Transportation Alternatives* funding helps construct safe road crossings and connections for regional trails.

Funding for Federal Matching Grant and Assistance Programs

Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, Land and Water Conservation Fund, National Coastal Zone Management Program, Transportation Alternatives, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act, State and Tribal Assistance Forestry Grants, North American Wetlands Conservation Act, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Wildlife Services, Save America's Treasures, Institute for Museum and Library Services, United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) Healthy Waters.

Federal matching grant programs leverage bond dollars approved by Lake County voters, and other local funds for important projects to preserve land, restore wildlife habitats, create trail connections, improve public access to outdoor recreation, educate local citizens, and care for historic buildings and collections. Funding for such programs should not be disproportionately cut during budgetary deliberations. Lake County Forest Preserves are part of a system of natural areas, forest preserves, parks, outdoor recreation and historic facilities at the national, state, regional, county and local levels.

Water Conservation Fund, including stateside pass-through grants to local agencies, and similar national grant programs such as State and Tribal Wildlife Grants and North American Wetlands Conservation Act, acquire and restore habitats needed by migratory wildlife, create multi-agency trail and greenway corridors, acquire and manage lands along waterways, promote public health through outdoor recreation, and preserve historic sites. Restoration and protection of Lake Michigan and other Great Lakes have been greatly enhanced by the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and the National Coastal Zone Management Program, which has led to designation of over 3,900 acres of Lake Michigan Lake Plain as a RAMSAR Wetland of International Importance. USFWS Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act assists with the District's restoration efforts of the largest Illinois population of Blanding's turtle at the RAMSAR international wetland which includes Spring Bluff Forest Preserve, Illinois Beach State Park and Chiwaukee Prairie in Wisconsin. USDA Wildlife Services provide contracted assistance to the District and other nearby conservation agencies for regional wildlife management and restoration efforts. Save America's Treasures has supported design of exhibits for the District's Adlai E. Stevenson II Historic Home, and the Institute for Museum and Library Services has supported improved public access to the Bess Bower Dunn Museum of Lake County and its collections.

In addition, support for research and development of new technologies and commercialization of existing technologies will contribute to reducing atmospheric carbon emissions. Programs that invest in the construction and installation of clean energy should be supported. Similarly, programs that provide direct payment for clean vehicles, including heavy-duty vehicles, need to be prioritized to lower vehicle pollution. These types of programs will contribute to the Forest Preserve's priority to implement plans and projects in an environmentally and fiscally responsible manner.

Conservation and Trail Easement Incentives

Congress has regularly extended enhanced tax incentives for donors of conservation easements. The incentives need to continue to be reinstated in the future and made permanent or multiyear to assist the District in securing needed conservation and trail easements.

Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge and Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area

Support continued implementation of these federal land management initiatives in northeastern Illinois and southeastern Wisconsin. As proposed, these newly dedicated areas will protect private property rights, retain local ownership and control of existing public forest preserves, conservation areas and parks. They will also enhance protection and restoration of habitat for federally and state-listed endangered and threatened species, and expand public education and outdoor recreation opportunities, all nearby to the Chicago region and other major metropolitan areas in the Midwest.

US Army Corps of Engineers (USACOE)

Support the continuation and funding of the 2020 USACOE Water Resources Development Act programs that create and enhance healthy aquatic ecosystems: the Great Lake Fishery and Ecosystem Restoration Program (Section 506); the Aquatic Ecosystems Restoration Program (Section 206); and the Upper Des Plaines River Flood Reduction Program. Also support the implementation of the flood risk management study of the Fox River that will address flooding along the Fox River and Chain of Lakes that has been damaging homes and businesses, decreasing property values, and creating unsafe infrastructure conditions. This study authorization is an important step towards compiling accurate data to guide important local decisions in the Fox River Valley, and towards directing more federal resources and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers intervention in this large challenge facing our communities.

National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF)

Support continued federal funding for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, which works with dozens of America's leading corporations to implement their philanthropic conservation strategies. They collaborate with each partner on goals and actions, investing funds in priority conservation projects that ensure the highest impact. NFWF administers an environmental grant portfolio for each corporate partner, basing awards on sound science and measurable outcomes. Through the partnership with NFWF the District has received funding for the Lake Plain Collaborative and the Pilot Buckthorn Removal Project at Middlefork Savanna Forest Preserve.