



CHAPTER 1 — A HIGH-PERFORMING SYSTEM

The Forest Preserve District of Kane County’s natural areas, trails, greenways, facilities and amenities all add-up to a better quality of life for Kane County residents. This *Comprehensive Master Plan* is intended as a tool to guide decision-making at the District — to protect and maintain the assets we have now, to provide direction to sustain these assets long into the future, and to prioritize requirements to manage the growth the District has experienced over the past 15 years — all in the service of our vision of Reconnecting Residents with Nature.

Four Key Principles

Throughout this plan, we’ll propose actions that adhere to one or more of four key principles:

1. Acquire, protect and preserve natural areas
2. Strengthen community connections
3. Manage growth
4. Plan for sustainability

Completing the actions identified will take time. **Staff will need to refocus efforts on determining precisely the level of maintenance and investment that is required to properly maintain the District’s existing lands and amenities, while continuing to identify trends and meet the needs of residents and the natural environment.** Protection of our existing investments is critical. The plan must prevent assets from falling into disrepair, thereby costing the District and taxpayers unnecessary dollars to bring improvements back to an acceptable and safe condition.

Before we can look forward, first, let’s look at the District’s history.

Origins of the District

Kane County is located approximately 40 miles west of Chicago’s “loop” business district, and encompasses an area of approximately 600 square miles. Neighboring counties include McHenry County to the north, Cook and DuPage Counties to the east, Kendall County to the south and DeKalb County to the west. The natural character of Kane County is painted by thousands of acres of wetlands, woodlands and prairies throughout the landscape. The Fox River is the main natural feature here, with towns, cities and forest preserves located along its edges, from north to south. Kane County has a unique blend of farming, rural and large urban areas.

The Forest Preserve District of Kane County was created by an act of the state legislature in 1925, and by public referendum. The District is an independent agency responsible for governing, maintaining and developing the

forest preserve system in Kane County. The District is governed by a 24-member board. Commissioners are elected to the Kane County Board and, as part of the position, serve as a commissioner on the Forest Preserve Commission. Each commissioner represents a geographic district, and members are appointed to various committees that handle different aspects of District operations. These committees include: Executive, Land Acquisition & Enterprise, Planning & Utilization, and Finance & Administration. The Forest Preserve president chooses which commissioners will serve on each of the committees.

Mission

It is the mission of the Forest Preserve District of Kane County to acquire, hold and maintain lands within Kane County that contribute to the preservation of natural and historic resources, habitats, flora and fauna, and to restore, restock, protect and preserve such lands for the education, recreation and pleasure of all its citizens.

Goal

Our goal is to preserve and restore the nature of Kane County.

The District, Today

We've come a long way since 1925. The Forest Preserve District currently owns and operates 98 forest preserves consisting of 20,650 acres of forest, prairie and wetland, plus more than 215 miles of trails, and other amenities.

Since its inception, the District's extensive land acquisition program was designed to:

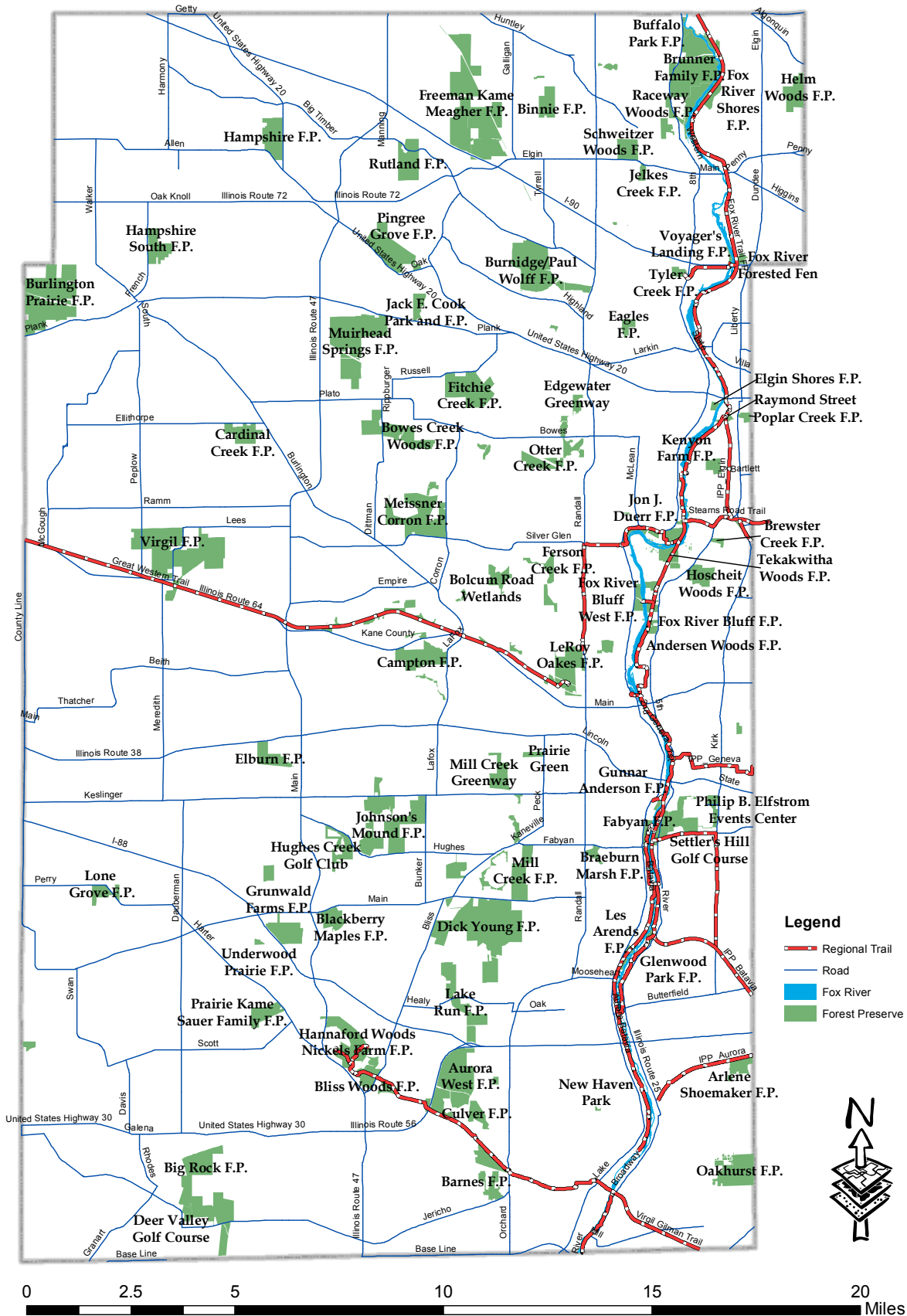
- Preserve existing natural areas
- Restore areas to natural conditions
- Create continuous bands of open space along major waterways and flood-prone areas
- Provide open-space buffers and greenways between communities

The District recognizes its important responsibility to preserve and protect the natural heritage of the County. Further, the Forest Preserve Commission created an ordinance that designates unique areas in the District as nature preserve areas. These designated natural areas are places where the native plant community survived the effects of farming and development use, and which represent the original nature of Kane County.

Throughout the District, there are recreational opportunities for picnicking, boating, fishing, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, golfing, horseback riding, camping and bicycling. Trails include the 40-mile Fox River Trail (stretching north to south and reaching beyond the limits of the county), 14 miles of the Great Western Trail (which originates at LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve and runs to the west), the 11-mile Virgil Gilman Trail in the southern part of the County, plus Elgin and Batavia spurs of the Illinois Prairie Path. In addition to preserves and multi-regional trails, the District provides a mix of amenities including interior preserve trails, a nature center, two public campgrounds, two youth-group campgrounds, three golf courses, a minor league baseball stadium, a soccer facility, a two-sheet ice arena, two special-event rental facilities, wildlife rescue center, snowboard park, and a historic museum and windmill.

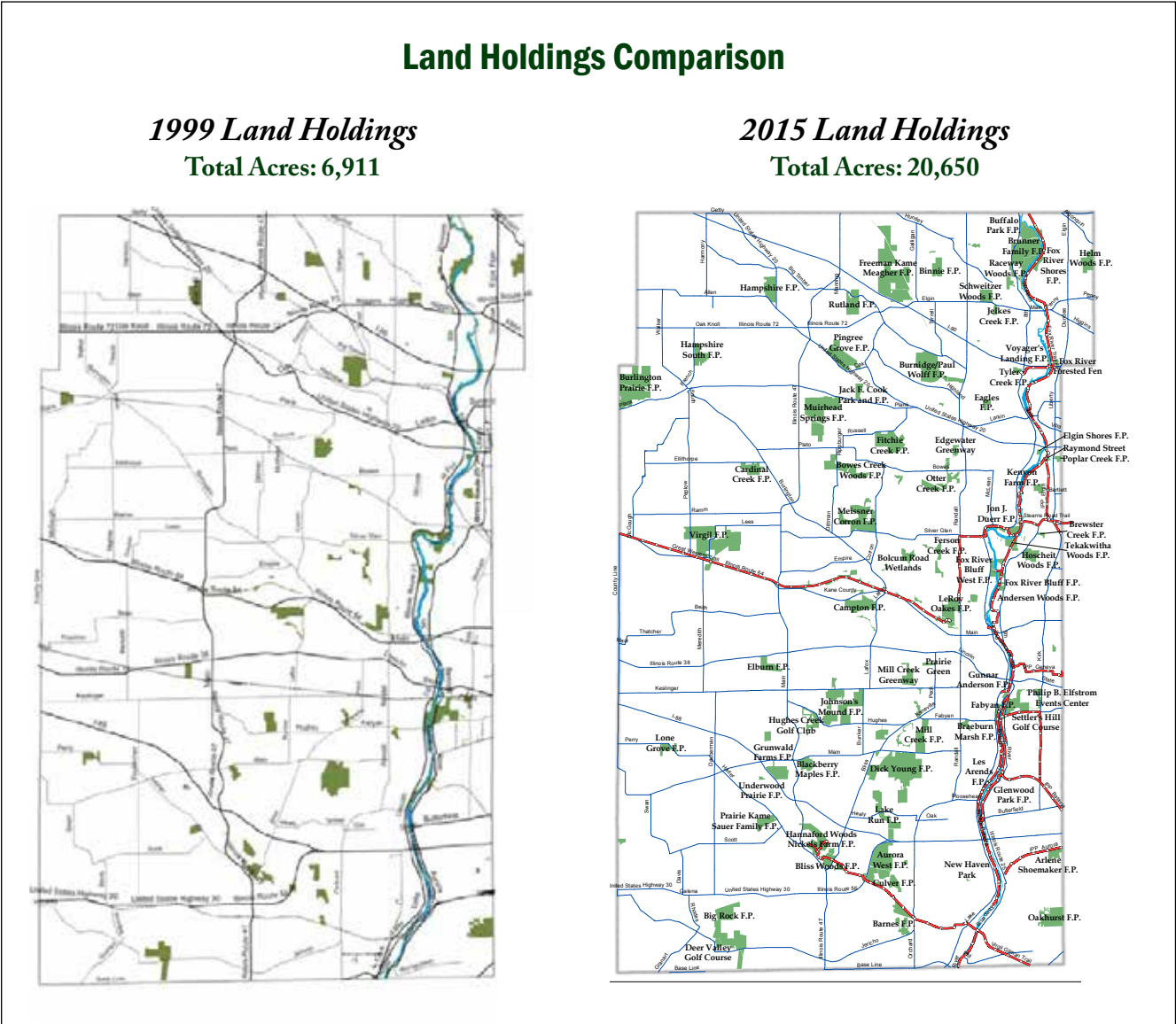
The forest preserves in Kane County mean something different to everyone, from the casual user who enjoys simply being outside, to the certified naturalist who identifies species and immerses him or herself in the natural world, to the commuter who relies on bike trails to get to work. Residents not only enjoy but *depend* on the preserve system.

2015 Land Holdings



However, managing more than 20,000 acres under tightening budget constraints means a strategic approach to finding efficiencies is required. The plan has to be flexible but resilient. Based on the District’s mission, this plan establishes principles, followed by objectives and action items for implementation — all working toward achieving a high-performing, efficient system that we can sustain under any circumstances.

The District’s land acquisition initiatives began in 1999 with the passing of our first referendum. The District grew to 12,561 acres between 1999 and 2004. In 2005, the District passed its second referendum, and grew to 16,700 acres. In 2007, we passed our third referendum, and grew to 18,752 acres.



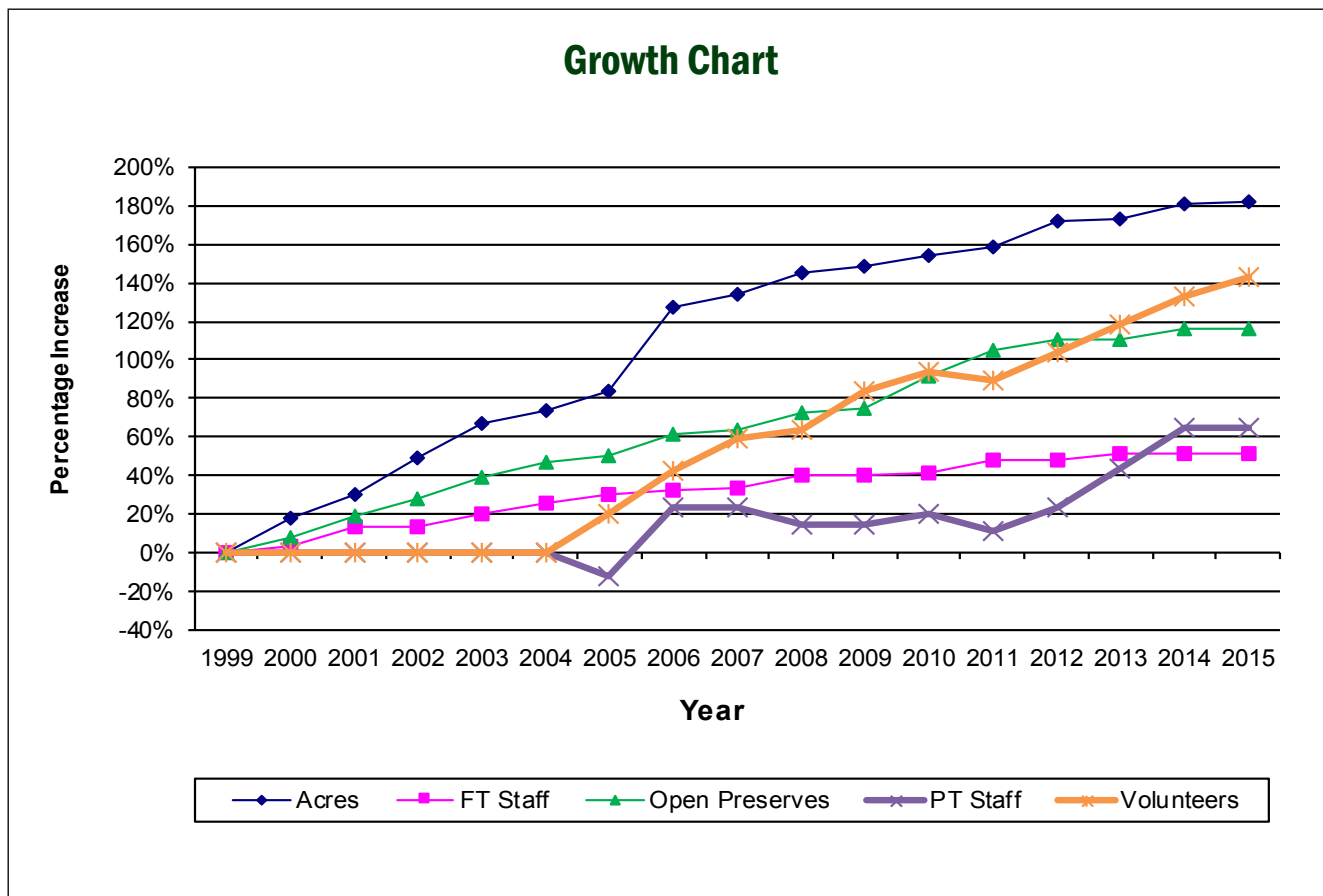
Growth: Successes and Challenges

The District’s last *Comprehensive Master Plan* was completed in 2007. During that time, the District was growing at a rapid rate and much has been accomplished. Since 2007, we’ve:

- Grown the District to more than 20,650 acres in 2015
- Received continued support from the public for our land acquisition and capital improvement program, with approval of referenda in 2007 and 2011
- Opened 11 new forest preserves
- Opened 15 new preserve access locations/entrances to existing preserves
- Remodeled and opened two special-event rental facilities — the Barbara Belding Lodge and Creek Bend Nature Center
- Relocated our museum exhibits from Tekakwitha Woods Forest Preserve to LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve, and doubled our museum exhibit space
- Opened two youth-only campgrounds: one at Camp Tomo Chi-Chi Knolls (which has been further improved and expanded, doubling capacity) and the other at LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve
- Doubled capacity at Paul Wolff Campground in Burnidge Forest Preserve
- Created and opened Big Rock Campground, part of Big Rock Forest Preserve
- Remodeled and relocated District administrative headquarters
- Planted more than 40,000 trees
- Converted 1,000 acres of cropland to tallgrass prairie

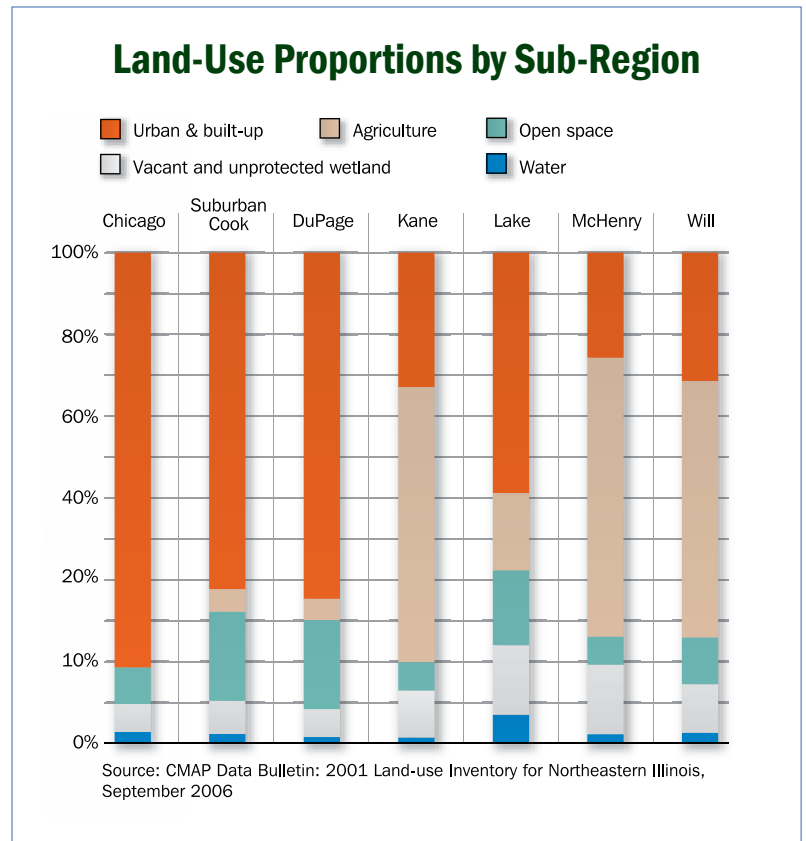
And that’s just a brief list of accomplishments and amenity improvements. Now, with remaining land acquisition funds from the 2011 referendum already committed, the District moves from a period of expansion to one where **the focus has shifted to maintaining infrastructure.**

Over the years, the District has been challenged to manage growth and maintain a high level of service, without similarly increasing revenues. **We’ll continue to look for efficiencies and reduce costs where possible, while continuing to provide the level of service our residents expect. We will consider community needs first, and then analyze and implement the best methods to deliver each service.** Opening new preserves as soon



as possible and adding new facilities or amenity improvements — as we’ve done in the past — may *not* be the best course of action, going forward. Building new partnerships and using only existing facilities *may* be the best alternative. **Our plan is to look at the system as a whole, and build additional partnerships — both public and private — to maximize cost savings.** A quick snapshot of how the District has grown in acreage and open preserves over the years, compared to our growth in staff, is displayed in the Growth Chart graphic.

Population growth is another factor. The Forest Preserve District continues to work with state and local agencies to project area growth and develop plans to manage projected growth. Urban growth in the Chicagoland area continually imposes strain on agencies trying to plan for it. The District frequently reviews and compares other existing land uses to forecast future growth and develop management plans. In the path of development, protection of natural resources typically takes a back seat. It is the District’s purpose to keep natural resources protection at the forefront. The District has a good working relationship with other local and regional agencies that help protect and preserve open space and natural areas. The Land-Use Proportions by Sub-Region graphic depicts how urban and built-up land use severely limits open space.



Our approach to developing a plan for an economically sustainable, high-performing system is to adhere to the four principles identified earlier, set objectives, and incorporate actions that achieve the following:

- Promote stewardship of the land
- Track operating costs
- Create equitable access to nature
- Strengthen partnerships
- Find efficiencies
- Replace aging infrastructure or adaptively reuse facilities
- Target new trends

These actions will take time, effort, resources and support from the Commission. With the downturn in the economy and pressure to hold the tax levy flat over the past three years, and into the future, Forest Preserve District departments are being asked to do more with less. The growing demand for natural areas and access to newly acquired open space, coupled with limited funding, has forced the District to develop new ways to meet the needs of our residents. The District’s staff has become more efficient by enlisting the help of a growing volunteer base, and partnering with various local park districts and other agencies to assist in delivering services to the community and maintaining sites. **We will continue to search for efficiencies to deliver the services we and our residents expect.**