



## CHAPTER 2 — TRENDS

Open-space needs and trends are dynamic. Forest preserve uses continue to evolve, as both demographics and the popularity of outdoor activities shift. Users of the preserves regularly look for new recreational opportunities. New technologies, cultures and activities create the need for continued adjustments and flexibility to keep pace with these changing needs. This chapter outlines key trends that we see influencing the outcome of how forest preserves are designed and used.

### Impacts on Preserve Design & Use

#### *Less Pressure from Developers*

In preparation for the District's first *Master Plan*, in 2007, the District conducted a County-wide study which focused on how residents use and perceive the District and its preserves. One of the main concerns reported was the high rate at which housing developments were using-up available, open land. That led to a large concern for protecting the open space in Kane County. Residents reinforced those concerns by approving a referendum in 2007 and again in 2011 to acquire land for public open space. Since then, economic conditions have varied. The need for protecting open space is still a concern, however, competition with developers has diminished. With housing development at a fraction of what it once was, our concern shifts away from acquiring and protecting *new* land to preserving, improving and maintaining *existing* land and infrastructure.

#### *Environmental Awareness*

Every year, environmental awareness seems to increase. New remedies to protect the environment are developed daily. From extreme summer heat and winter freezes, to more frequent “100-year storm” events and extended periods of drought, a changing climate has redefined how we view and plan for the use of the forest preserves. Interest in environmental sustainability and energy efficiency has put a greater emphasis on water conservation, wastewater treatment, the protection of natural areas, and bike trail connections. Society is becoming more environmentally aware, and as such, is seeking areas that offer alternative transportation options, greener developments and walkable communities where they can take pride in making a difference by living a more sustainable lifestyle. The desire for sustainable living is evident in our survey results. More than half — 60 percent of our survey respondents — said they utilized the bike/nature trail systems during the previous year, compared to 53 percent in our prior survey. Birding and simply enjoying nature are up comparably, as well. **We'll continue to provide trails and improve access to nature, over providing other forms of recreation.**

## *Interest in Natural, Outdoor Experiences & Sustainability*

Increased sensitivity to ecological issues and the benefits of a healthy ecosystem have boosted desire for natural, outdoor experiences. Citizen groups and volunteer groups have expressed interest in invasive species removal, stream restoration and protection, and the desire for more educational or interpretive nature programs. This creates a need for more-passive open space and venues for these activities to take place. Sustainable development has risen out of increased interest in preserving nature. Developing new preserves using “green” technology and renewable building materials, reducing energy costs, and minimizing the impact on the landscape and our natural resources has and will continue to be a primary focus of the District and its residents. **Protecting natural resources and providing educational opportunities to our visitors gives the District a chance to create a positive experience and follow-through on our vision.**

## *Partnerships*

We’ll discuss in many areas of this plan how partnerships and volunteers are vital. By continuing to make agency partnerships a priority, both sides reach their goals and provide needed amenities to constituents. Through leases, license agreements and intergovernmental agreements, the District provides needed amenities throughout the community. Active recreational resources like ball fields, playgrounds, bike trails and open-field play areas can be provided through these partnerships. These amenities might not have occurred without the foresight of the agencies and the cooperation to get it done. Partnerships reinvest in communities that, when built, did not have open space and park resources. Now, high-density urbanized areas have places for everyone to enjoy the outdoors. Creating these partnerships and bringing agencies and the public together for a common goal is sometimes the only way to accomplish these goals. **The District will continue to make partnerships a priority.** An additional benefit of marrying active recreation with passive natural areas is that we have another opportunity to educate visitors about open space communities and garner support for volunteering.

## *Healthy Communities*

The media regularly reports increasing levels of obesity — not only in adults, but also in children. Sedentary lifestyles generally have more health risks. The transition to a motor vehicle-based or sprawling community has allowed residents to lead lives that are more sedentary. Families regularly drive to locations for sports and other activities. Kids today are less likely to explore the outdoors. They are growing up *without* understanding the value of nature. Promoting walkable, active communities and providing open space close to home makes it easier for people to incorporate outdoor activity into their daily lives. The increased interest or trend toward locally-grown and organic food creates an opportunity for communities to expand local markets or gardens. **The District will continue to foster partnerships with local agencies to promote healthy lifestyles.**

## *Lifestyles and Special Interests*

The District has a diverse population. Lifestyles vary across Kane County, from the urban settings of Aurora and Elgin to the rural settings of Kaneville, Burlington and other farming communities. Regardless of lifestyle, the residents of Kane County have many special interests. From the high number of residents who own dogs, to horse owners, to avid bicyclists — the Forest Preserve District strives to meet the lifestyle needs of our residents by providing off-leash areas for dog owners; equestrian trails, parking areas and camp sites for horse owners; bicycle trails for recreational riders and commuters; and multi-purpose trails for walking and hiking. The District also has intergovernmental agreements with several agencies to provide many other open space and recreational

amenities. **With recreation a key part of our mission, we will focus on maintaining these areas.** While encouraging more partnerships, the District will bring greater control over actively used areas, to keep them usable longer, so that they don't become worn out or over-used.

## *Demographics*

Review of the County's population changes, both in the past and projected, is important in determining the future needs of the District's residents. The data in the 2010 Census indicates that the median age of our residents is increasing. Expanding populations, along with an increase in racial and ethnic diversity, are apparent within Kane County. The percent of minorities increased by more than 10 percent in the last 10 years. The number of children ages 18 and under has decreased slightly, as our retiring population has increased by approximately 3 percent. The population continues to grow, but not at the rate we saw in the 2000s. Therefore, planning for the future in Kane County will assume a stable population, continued diversity and planning for all segments of the Illinois population. Outdoor recreation planning will encompass planning for people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, economically disadvantaged and the older population, who are seeking a change in lifestyle to reflect their increase in available leisure time. **Improving preserve access for all is a key priority of this *Comprehensive Master Plan*, and part of our action plan.**

## **Economic Trends**

The U.S. economy is climbing out of a recession, directly affecting the family way of life. The forest preserves have become important amenities that provide stay-at-home recreation opportunities, even "staycations." Research has shown that while people have cut-back on other expenses, they still use the forest preserves for leisure activities. Our last survey showed the number of preserve visits increased, and it continues to climb as we provide more amenities for our residents. Preparing plans as well as implementing acquisitions and capital projects have allowed the District to continue to provide new amenities despite the economic downturn. Nevertheless, as we come to the end of our referendum resources and prepare plans for continued improvements, reduced revenue will play a large role in how the District prioritizes projects, the number and type of projects, going forward.

## **Public Input**

The District continually invites input from Kane County residents, whether it is through public meetings, surveys or social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The need to communicate with residents is vital. Prior to development of this *Comprehensive Master Plan*, the District held six community meetings, where we invited the public to local, regional venues to discuss what residents wanted from the Forest Preserve system. We asked for reviews of our draft concept plans for the District's preserve sites. Congruent with the past public interest surveys, the most-discussed topic at the public meetings was trails and connectivity. In every meeting, comments revolved around the need for additional trails and the need for additional maintenance of the trails. Participants also favored continued acquisitions, *but only when adding to existing preserves*. Other interests included the need for additional amenities like fishing, picnicking and canoeing. Participants even indicated locations for needed services, which tells us that they take an active interest in the District and its preserves. Overall, comments were positive, validating the high rating for the overall satisfaction of the Forest Preserve District.

Continuing to achieve a healthy, sustainable future will take time, cooperation, change and additional resources. This *Comprehensive Master Plan* helps set the stage for that positive future through actions and strategies that will continue the high level of maintenance, increase services to connect the community, and embrace the value of our partners and volunteers. **The District will continue to reach out to users, making sure they learn more about the District, educate themselves about the natural world, and learn to live “greener” lifestyles.**

The District conducted *Public Interest Surveys* in 2006 and 2011. While these surveys were five years apart, the data was positively consistent. As stated in the Executive Summary of the 2011 Survey, satisfaction with the appearance, maintenance and cleanliness of Forest Preserve facilities remained extremely high. In rating the importance of future initiatives, maintaining existing services was rated the highest, followed by providing additional recreational and educational opportunities. Rated lowest was providing new facilities. However, 72 percent of respondents were very or somewhat concerned with protecting existing open space and only 10 percent were either not too or not at all concerned, suggesting land acquisition remains an important goal of the Forest Preserve District.

The District continues to reach-out through different media channels to gather information. We’re planning another survey in 2016 to further measure public perceptions and satisfaction. We’ll compare 2016 data to determine any fluctuations and changes that may need to be made, as a result. **We will work to strengthen public relations and build community connections.** This is a key objective and part of our action plan.

## Preparing for Sustainability

The District is a stable presence in the County, and its preserves are well-located. Forest preserves, by their static nature, have become icons by which people relate to geographically. We are encouraged by the growing number of visitors each year, but also understand that increased use creates sustainability and maintenance issues. The preserves are, in a strategic sense, located to provide and meet changing trends well into the future. Many improvements took place since the last *Master Plan*, including creation of large tracts of open space reaching well over 1,000 acres in size, along with greenway and trail connections that provide wildlife and pedestrian corridors. As recent acquisitions continue to be improved upon, costs will increase. **To ensure a positive future for the District and meet the goals of this *Comprehensive Master Plan*, there must be adequate and sustainable funding.**

The increased rate at which we have acquired land and made improvements over the last 15 years has put pressure on the District to do more with less, become more efficient, and prioritize actions in an effort to maintain the preserves while meeting residents’ expectations. An evaluation of the preserves has shown that existing infrastructure is currently being maintained and is in good condition. While initial maintenance costs of new infrastructure added over the last 5-7 years have been relatively low, everything is aging. **Careful review and planning will be needed to determine priorities and costs. Setting preferred maintenance intervals, continuing to find efficiencies and identifying additional resources will ensure that the preserves are being maintained at the prescribed standard to provide for the protection of District infrastructure.** These are key objectives as part of this *Comprehensive Master Plan*.

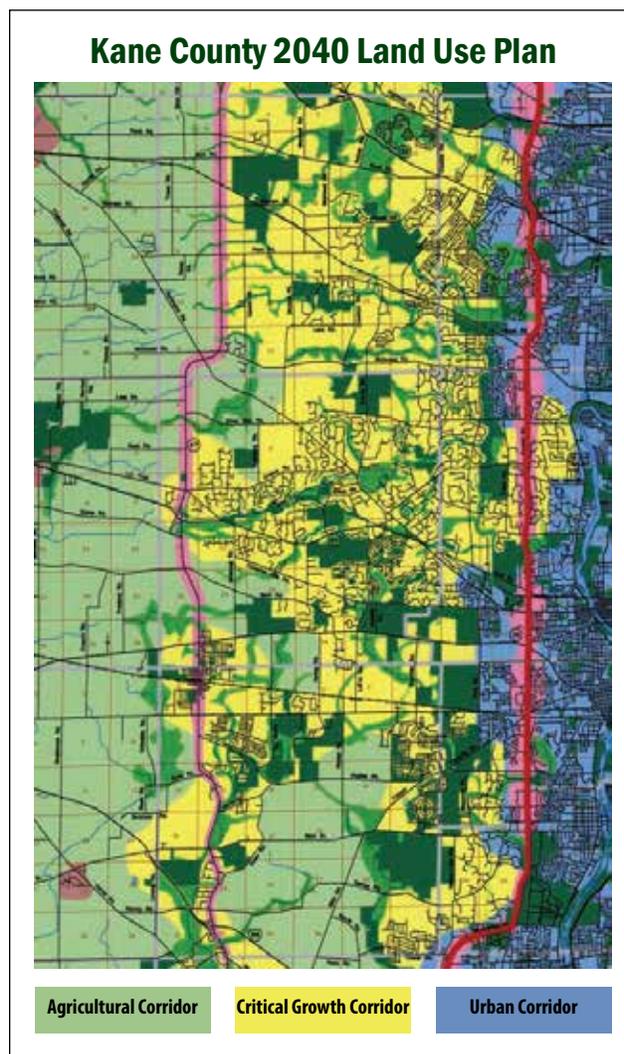
## Connecting Preserves

The District provides a variety of experiences in the preserves that adhere to and promote the District’s mission. After reviewing data from all the input and evaluations of the preserves, the overall health of the District is good. The District has 98 sites, of which 78 are open to the public. The preserves range in size from a few acres to more than 1,200 acres.

The District has been fortunate to have the support of its residents when it comes to acquiring and preserving open space. The voters have approved four referenda in the last 15 years, and with that, the District has acquired and protected an additional 13,000 acres of land to bring the District’s current land holdings to more than 20,000 acres. The open space coverage through the corridors, as seen in the 2040 Land Use Plan, is good. We have primarily focused land acquisition efforts in the central third of the County, the “critical growth corridor,” where the primary development has taken place over the last 10 years. **Continued work on preserving natural areas, expanding existing preserves and connecting preserves through greenway and creek corridors is needed to continue improving the system.**

### *Trail Popularity*

Above all, trails are the most-popular amenity in the District. In addition to many interior preserve trails, the District manages portions of four regional trail systems: the Fox River Trail, Illinois Prairie Path, Great Western Trail and Virgil Gilman Trail. Work is also underway to develop a Mid-County Trail, from central northern to central southern Kane County. Our trail system has been developed over decades and continues to improve, but still shows a greater need for connectivity. Some of the challenges to creating trail connectivity are barriers like private lands, busy roads, railroads and creeks. **Better access and way-finding systems should continue to be a priority, as will continued work on how to traverse these areas and better-connect trails.**



### *Preserve Condition*

The quality of our users’ experiences is based on several factors, and the condition of the preserves is one of those. Preserve condition specifically includes:

- Condition of structures, trails and parking lots
- How well-maintained the site appears
- Whether or not it is regularly mowed
- If the weeds are under control

These conditions all affect how individual users perceive the preserves and the Forest Preserve District as a whole. Knowing there is a growing concern for the continued maintenance of our facilities, **the District will continue to prioritize or balance the need for maintaining existing facilities with building new ones.** The quality of a visitor’s experience hinges on how well the preserves are maintained, highlighting the need for adequate and sustainable funding to continue to provide the level of maintenance necessary.