

NEWS

Champaign County Forest Preserve District
P.O. Box 1040 • Mahomet, IL 61853
E-Mail: HQ@ccfpd.org
Website: www.ccfpd.org

LAKE OF THE WOODS FOREST PRESERVE • HOMER LAKE FOREST PRESERVE • MIDDLE FORK RIVER FOREST PRESERVE
HERON VIEW FOREST PRESERVE • SANGAMON RIVER FOREST PRESERVE • RIVER BEND FOREST PRESERVE • KICKAPOO RAIL TRAIL

July 19, 2022

Contact: Bridgette Moen
bmoen@ccfpd.org
217-586-1285

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CHAMPAIGN COUNTY FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT TO ENHANCE STARGAZING AMENITIES AT INTERNATIONAL DARK SKY PARK

Penfield, IL – The Champaign County Forest Preserve District (CCFPD) was awarded \$294,000 in grant funding by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) Open Space Land Acquisition and Development (OSLAD) Grant Program to support the construction of a dark sky trail and amenities at Middle Fork River Forest Preserve in Penfield, Illinois.

Middle Fork is the largest preserve in Champaign County and is a popular camping and hiking destination. It also boasts some of the darkest skies in the county, making conditions optimal for stargazing; and in 2018, was recognized as an International Dark Sky Park, the first and only in Illinois. Since then, Middle Fork's visitation has significantly increased, and the park later won Visit Champaign County's 2021 Tourism Impact Award for its expanding role in local astro-tourism.

Champaign County Forest Preserve District staff have collaborated with local stargazing enthusiasts to make Middle Fork River Forest Preserve a stargazing destination. Champaign-Urbana Astronomical Society (CUAS) Founder David Leake said CUAS is "excited to work with the Champaign County Forest Preserve District to expand the dark sky adventure at the Middle Fork River Forest Preserve."

The grant from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources will help CCFPD continue to leverage the Middle Fork's unique assets. Plans include constructing a dark sky trail with dark-sky-friendly lighting, trail nodes for stargazing, an observatory where visitors can set up their own telescopes, an open-air shelter, a small parking lot, expanded campgrounds, and a nature play area. In addition to enhancing its stargazing amenities, the award will help Champaign County Forest Preserve District meet the high demand for hiking trails and improve ADA accessibility. Construction is anticipated to start in 2023.

"We are thrilled to receive this grant and enhance the experience we offer visitors to our dark sky preserve. Middle Fork River Forest Preserve is the ideal place to marvel at the night sky, and these improvements will make stargazing and our preserve more accessible to everyone," said Lorrie Pearson, Executive Director.

The Champaign County Forest Preserve District strives to connect people with their natural world. Funding from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Open Space Land Acquisition and Development Grant Program will help the District make Middle Fork River Forest Preserve's dark sky viewing experience more accessible and enjoyable.