



CHAMPAIGN COUNTY
Forest Preserves



2040

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

From the Executive Director

*The prairie at Middle Fork River Forest Preserve.
Photo by Forest Preserves staff, 2022.*

Focusing the Forest Preserves to Help People and Nature Thrive

When the Forest Preserves set out to create a plan that would guide the organization into the future, it was an exercise in asking, “What is the most good we can do for Champaign County?” To answer this, we did not simply ask ourselves – we asked what taxpayers wanted to see, in a process that was, well, comprehensive. The opinions provided by the public are the foundation of this plan, shaping what the Forest Preserves will be doing for the next decade-plus.

The Forest Preserves connect people with their natural world by immersing them in all the adventures it offers – from restoring natural landscapes, to offering recreation for people of all abilities and interests, to providing education that creates life-long nature and culture enthusiasts. While we provide daily enriching experiences to visitors, we are also thinking long-term. The Forest Preserves exist to ensure future generations can enjoy nature, too. The Comprehensive Plan ensures the decisions that guide the Forest Preserves through 2040 are publicly supported, research-informed, and strategically aligned.

As stewards of the county’s natural areas, the Forest Preserves play a vital role. Research shows time in nature is crucial to human wellbeing. The recommendations in this plan make sure we keep protecting the nature we have, adding more, and finding more ways to connect people to nature.

Our work is important and pressing. With environmental issues at the forefront of public awareness, this plan acknowledges the Forest Preserves can, do, and will continue to influence the local experiences of these critical issues. Nature is one of the most powerful tools we have for managing climate change, and the 2040 Comprehensive Plan sets out to make the most of this potential.

From protecting more nature, to reaching more of the county with our services, to making sure we are always growing within our means, the Forest Preserves have many important issues to balance. Everything we do is about enhancing peoples’ connection to nature. The 2040 Comprehensive Plan and its recommendations provide a framework for making decisions that ensure taxpayers’ investments in nature are well spent, and that nature is protected for future generations of Champaign County residents.

Implementing this plan will require a coordinated, collaborative effort. With your support, the Forest Preserves will achieve these recommendations and ensure nature becomes a more prominent part of people’s lives.

Lorrie Pearson

Executive Director



Executive Summary

*The night sky at Middle Fork River Forest Preserve
Photo by M. Vishwakarma, 2021.*

UNDERSTANDING THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

A comprehensive plan is a document to guide the growth and development of an organization over a longer time span than staff typically consider in their daily work. Its research-based, long-term vision spans multiple shorter-term, more specific strategic plans, and helps ensure the organization meets present and future needs. The Forest Preserves' last organization-wide plan was their 2010 Master Plan.

In 2021, the Forest Preserves embarked on a comprehensive planning process to help guide their decision-making for the next 10 to 20 years. In this process, the Forest Preserves sought feedback from hundreds of community members and dozens of internal stakeholders. Alongside their feedback, staff assessed the state of the Forest Preserves: their services, facilities and finances, in context with their history, trends, and the state of other forest preserve and conservation districts. Through this analysis, the Forest Preserves determined six key areas that will be a focus for success within the organization. The 2040 Comprehensive Plan delivers these recommendations, which will help address the needs identified throughout the Forest Preserves' detailed process of research, input-gathering, and analysis.

UNDERSTANDING THE FOREST PRESERVES

Chapter 1: A bird's-eye View

Forest preserve and conservation districts in Illinois are local taxing districts charged with protecting and providing public access to nature for "education, pleasure, and recreation." Together, Illinois' 19 forest preserve and conservation districts manage over 233,000 acres. As of 2024, Champaign County Forest Preserves owns over 4,000 acres. Their growth has been gradual except for surges in the 1970s and 1990s. Since 2001, the Forest Preserves have added three preserves and the Kickapoo Rail Trail.

The three-pronged mission of the Forest Preserves includes conservation, recreation, and education. Conservation is led by the Natural Resources Department, which is committed to restoring native ecosystems. Trails are the hallmark amenity of the Preserves' expansive recreation repertoire, and the Museum and Education Department is primarily responsible for education within the preserves and throughout the community.

Among other Illinois forest preserve and conservation districts, Champaign County Forest Preserves rank in the lower one-third in acres owned relative to both county size and population. Less than 1% of Champaign County is protected natural area, of which the Forest Preserves own about three-quarters. The lack of nature in Champaign County is not unique, as just 4.1% of Illinois is protected natural area. Restoring nature brings manifold benefits, from preserving biodiversity, to improving resilience to climate change, supporting human health, and benefiting the economy. Public feedback and state and national direction support an expanded role for public landholding agencies through land acquisition, climate change adaptation, education, expanded trails, and more equitable service provision.

Chapter 2: Community Profile

Understanding demographic dynamics helps the Forest Preserves anticipate changes in demand and identify potential gaps in service provision. Champaign County is younger than average but aging. The county has a higher-than-average poverty rate. The proportion of White-only residents decreased from 2010 to 2020. The Forest Preserves receive a significantly lower proportion of visitors from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds compared to the county average. The Forest Preserves should remain attuned to the changing needs of residents and ensure their services are equitably distributed.

Chapter 3: Community Input

To inform the recommendations of this plan, the Forest Preserves gathered input from 602 people through in-person discussions, internal surveys, and a statistically representative, county-wide survey. Participants included community members, Board Commissioners, staff, and members of the Citizens Engagement Committee and Forest Preserve Friends Foundation.

The county-wide survey found the Forest Preserves are highly regarded in the community but have opportunities for improvement. Major themes from the feedback where all groups aligned include praise for land stewardship, concerns over a lack of public awareness, and the need to remain financially sustainable. All groups highly value the Forest Preserves' natural areas and trails as well as the Forest Preserves' role in protecting and restoring land; these are top reasons people visit, and buying and restoring more land are their top future spending priorities. All surveys indicated a lack of public awareness and the need to expand the Forest Preserves' reach beyond their traditional user base. In particular, Forest Preserves programs are highly regarded but do not reach most, and Forest Preserves visitors tend to be significantly whiter and wealthier than the county at-large. Internal stakeholders were concerned about the Forest Preserves' financial outlook - this was also a concern but less of a priority among public survey respondents.

Chapter 4: Inventory of Facilities

To help the Forest Preserves balance resources among their maintenance obligations, infrastructure upgrades, and improvements for educational and recreational opportunities, the Forest Preserves inventoried each property. Report cards grade the state of facilities and structures, and several important improvements and necessary plans are identified. This

inventory complements the shorter-term, 5-year capital planning process by providing a bigger-picture view of the state of infrastructure and improvements to consider at the Forest Preserves.

Chapter 5: Finances

Financial health is imperative to a tax-funded, public-serving organization like the Forest Preserves. Compared to districts of similar sizes, the Forest Preserves' operating and capital expenses appear typical. Their operating expenses have consistently risen since 2007, including a large uptick since 2019 reflecting continued investment in staffing. Their capital expenses as a proportion of all expenses have also risen recently, reflecting the Forest Preserves' expanded capacity to provide services and maintain facilities due to the 2020 referendum.

Chapter 6: Recommendations

The recommendations reflect areas where public feedback, internal surveys, and background research aligned to clearly indicate a direction that would benefit the Forest Preserves. This plan recommends the Preserves:

- Create a programming plan & improve the nature education space
- Expand trails & outdoor recreation opportunities
- Evaluate & maintain facilities & infrastructure
- Increase engagement
- Lead on climate & conservation
- Provide more land for conservation & recreation

These six recommendations will ensure Forest Preserves achieve their mission and provide the best possible value to the taxpayers of Champaign County well into the future.

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Acknowledgements

This plan, adopted in June 2024, was made possible with help from Commissioners, staff, and community members who provided comments, direction, and input. The Forest Preserves thanks the agencies who provided data, including the Forest Preserve Districts of Byron, DeKalb, Kendall, Rock Island, and Vermilion Counties; and the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission. Special thanks to Marla Beyer whose artwork was adapted for some of the illustrations.

AUTHORS

Sam Ihm, Planning Assistant
Bridgette Moen, Planning Director
Michael Daab, Deputy Executive Director
Lorrie Pearson, Executive Director

COMMISSIONERS

William Goodman
Bobbie Herakovich
Wendy Hundley
Andrew Kerins
Greg Knott

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*Monarchs visit
New England
Aster. Photo by C.
Hendrickson, 2021.*

Introduction

Since 1948, the Forest Preserves have stewarded vital resources to bring Champaign County residents closer to nature. The Forest Preserves have consistently provided in-demand opportunities and new ways to connect with nature according to three pillars: conservation, recreation, and education. Three-quarters of a century after their founding, the pillars remain the same and the Forest Preserves remain an integral part of Champaign County. The role of the Forest Preserves will only become more important in the coming years. The demands of an increasingly complex world make it more difficult for nature to thrive and for humans to connect with nature, yet nature provides enduring solutions to so many of today's problems. To continue expanding their influence amid these challenges, the Forest Preserves created this plan. The 2040 Comprehensive Plan encapsulates the essential details of the organization and helps maximize its impact over the coming decade-plus.

This plan is the result of years of research, input-gathering, and analysis. It details the Forest Preserves' work, puts it into context with broader trends and other forest preserve districts' work, then takes readers through a robust public input process. The information gathered for and presented in these background chapters forms the basis of the plan's recommendations. The six recommendations are the culmination of the 2040 Comprehensive Plan. Drawing directly from the background research and input themes, they provide a framework to address the deficiencies and leverage the strengths of the organization. The Comprehensive Plan sets a data-driven path for the Forest Preserves to meet community needs, weather the challenges ahead, and thrive into the future.

What is a Comprehensive Plan?

A comprehensive plan is a document to guide the growth and development of an organization over a longer time span than staff typically consider in their daily work. A comprehensive plan helps an organization evaluate itself and set goals for the future. Detailed analysis of existing conditions and any relevant context, combined with public input often in the form of a needs assessment survey, inform the goals the plan sets. For example, a comprehensive plan may identify the need for a new facility, but not the amount of square feet required. Strategic plans covering 3- to 5-year spans typically follow with more specific objectives, which dictate annual

budget initiatives. Staff regularly reference their comprehensive plans to demonstrate how projects and decisions further the demonstrated interests of the organization. In this way, a comprehensive plan is a guidepost directing staff's daily work toward goals the organization has agreed are important.

The 2040 Comprehensive Plan's long-term vision both strengthens and gives meaning to the Forest Preserves' daily efforts, helping ensure the Preserves meet the needs of today and tomorrow to leave a positive legacy long into the future.

Planning Process from Research to Action





A Bird's-eye View

Evaluating the Forest Preserves' growth, role, & context

*A dickcissel on its perch.
Photo by J. Dunn, 2023.*

A Bird's-eye View

This section contextualizes the Champaign County Forest Preserves with an overview of their history, impact, and a summary of relevant local, state, and national plans and public opinion that orients readers to the rest of the plan. The section is organized according to the three pillars of the Forest Preserves' mission: conservation, recreation, and education.

How the Forest Preserves Came to Be



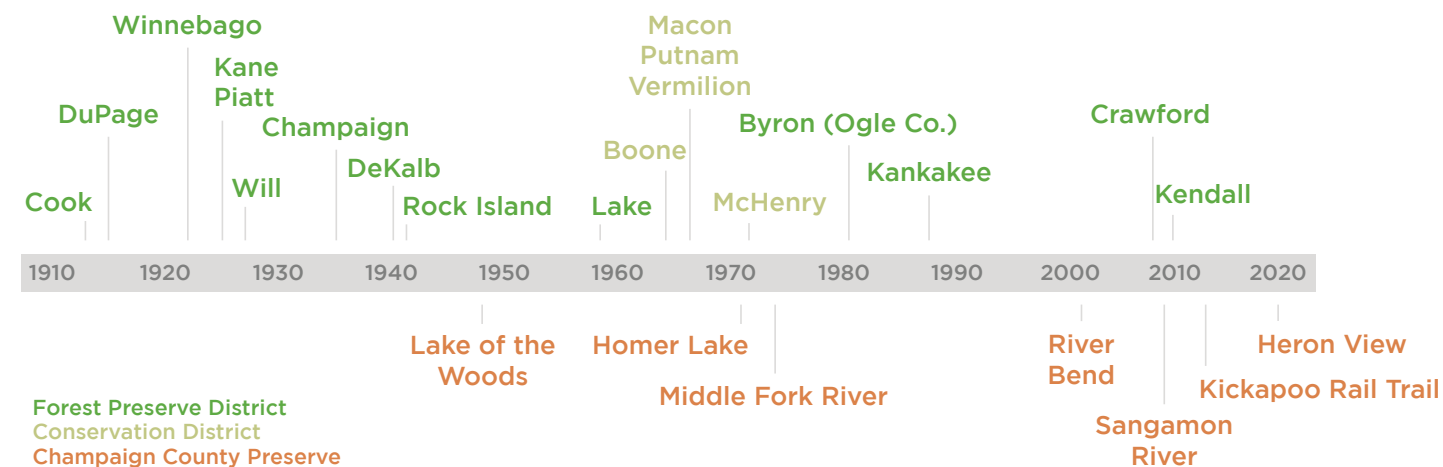
Cook County established the first forest preserve district in 1914 after decades of planning and organizing by visionary advocates. The legislation this advocacy produced, the Cook County Forest Preserve District Act of 1914¹ and the Downstate Forest Preserves Act of 1915,² allowed Illinois counties to create forest preserve districts. By 1927, DuPage, Winnebago, Kane, Piatt, and Will had all formed theirs, and Champaign County followed in 1935.

a county-wide referendum in 1935 to establish the Champaign County Forest Preserve District.³ The effects of the Great Depression made a tax increase unpopular with many voters, but the referendum passed by 22 votes to create the state's seventh forest preserve district. The Forest Preserves did not begin growing in earnest for more than a decade, due at first to lingering opposition and financial stress and then World War II.

Work on what would become the Champaign County Forest Preserve District began two decades before the first preserve opened in 1948. Volunteers in the 1920s formed the Forest Preserve Association but lost steam. That effort was revived in the next decade by the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC), who inspired the Izaak Walton League – then a budding conservation organization, which has since shaped environmental policy in America – to push for

In 1948, the Forest Preserves acquired a property in an ideal location for a county park, accessible by major roads and with rolling terrain and woods along the Sangamon River. A lot has changed since Lake of the Woods' days as a swimming destination – the Forest Preserves have grown steadily, adding new preserves and expanding existing ones. The oldest preserve had more than tripled its original size when the newest preserve, Heron View, opened in 2021.

Forest Preserve District, Conservation District, & Champaign Co. Preserve Foundings



WHAT IS A FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT?

In Illinois, a forest preserve districtⁱ is a government agency supported by local property taxes. Illinois' Downstate Forest Preserves Act authorizes forest preserve districts to acquire, protect, preserve, and restore lands "in their natural state and condition, for the purpose of education, pleasure, and recreation of the public."⁴ Forest preserve districts are considered "special districts," or local government bodies created by constituents via referendum to meet a local need. Illinois has more special districts than any other state, and they provide services like parks, schools, sanitation, and libraries.

HAVING PUBLIC LAND FOR PUBLIC ACCESS TO THE GREAT OUTDOORS IS AN AWESOME PART OF OUR DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM.

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

The services provided by forest preserve districts in Illinois may be captured by city, county, or state governments elsewhere. Some states have special districts similar to forest preserve districts, like Ohio's Metroparks. Of the 102 counties in Illinois, only 14 have forest preserve districts. Five counties have conservation districts, which are slightly less autonomous special districts similar to forest preserve districts that work more closely with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. Counties with forest preserve or conservation districts tend to be more metropolitan.⁵ Together, Illinois' forest preserve and conservation districts manage over 233,000 acres.

FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICTS AND PARK DISTRICTS

People often confuse forest preserve districts with park districts. Both entities' missions generally coalesce around providing people with outdoor experiences. It is common for park districts to have grassy open space for recreation and less natural area compared to forest preserve districts. Notably, park districts locallyⁱⁱ and across the US are restoring more habitat and waterways and using more native plants.⁶ Park districts also commonly offer more active recreational opportunities such as sports facilities, leagues, and lessons. Locally, the Forest Preserves and the park districts balance one another's services.

According to the Forest Preserves of Cook County, the distinction between park and forest preserve districts has existed from their conception:

The forest preserves idea differed from other county parks of the early 20th century by emphasizing the preservation of space in its natural, undeveloped state... The forest preserves were to be natural areas and to provide citizens with a different kind of enjoyment: the scenic beauty provided by nature.⁷

The Champaign County Forest Preserves offer residents a unique service by protecting and restoring natural areas that may have otherwise been developed. Through these properties the Forest Preserves provide experiences unavailable elsewhere which allow people to explore wilder nature in Champaign County.

ⁱ Despite the Prairie State having been two-thirds prairie, legislators named its nature protection agencies "forest preserve districts," possibly due to the negative historical perception of prairies.⁸

ⁱⁱ Five percent of Champaign Park District land is natural area, but all 4 parks with natural areas were built after 2000. One of Urbana's most popular parks, Meadowbrook Park, is 62% natural area.⁹

How the Preserves Have Grown

LAND ACQUISITION HISTORY

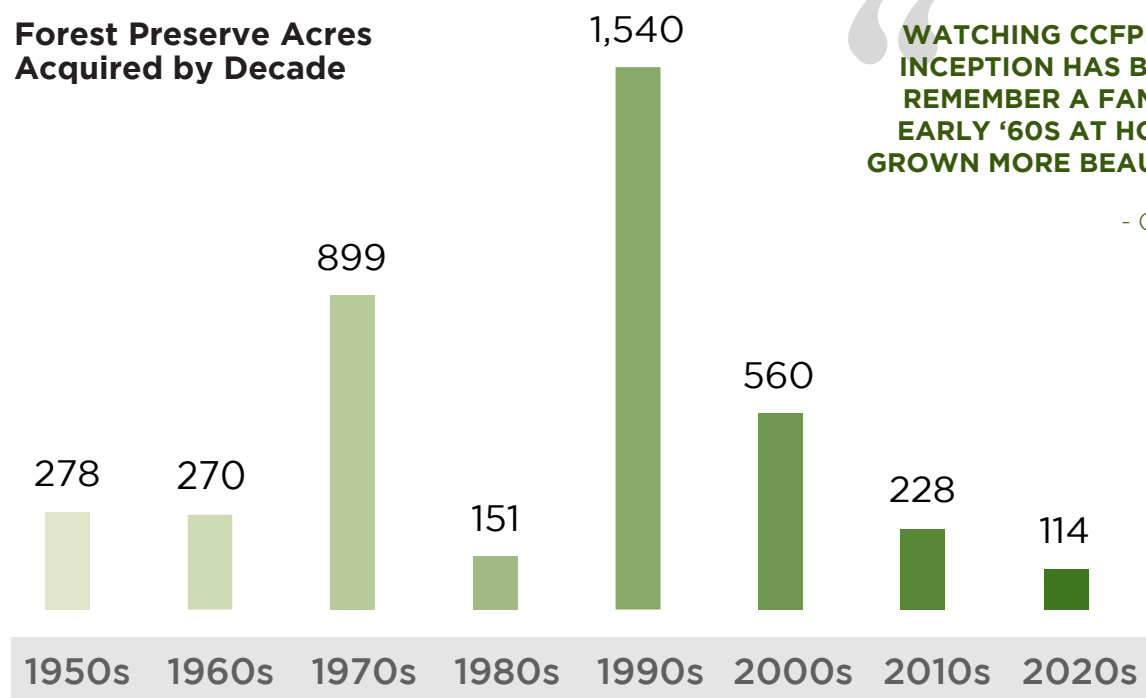
Today's forest preserves are the result of both incremental growth and major defining additions. The Forest Preserves have expanded through a variety of acquisition types, including large land donations as well as purchases of small parcels adjacent to existing preserves. Slow growth over the first few decades was followed by surges in the 1970s and the 1990s. Since then, the Forest Preserves have added four preserves but relatively little acreage. Each addition into public ownership provides tremendous benefits to Champaign County and all of its living things.

The three largest preserves, Middle Fork (1,712 acres), Lake of the Woods (874), and Homer Lake (764), all experienced major growth spurts in the 20th century. Lake of the Woods grew mostly from the 1940s through the 1970s with three separate acquisitions of over 100 acres as well as a handful of smaller parcels. In

1992, nearly 90% of what is now Homer Lake Forest Preserve was purchased from the Illinois Department of Conservation (now the Illinois Department of Natural Resources). The next year, Middle Fork River Forest Preserve more than doubled in size when the Forest Preserves added 828 acres. By 1993, the three forest preserves had grown to over 3,000 acres.

Since 2001, the Forest Preserves have opened three preserves and the Kickapoo Rail Trail. Limited financial and staff resources during the 2000s and 2010s strained the Forest Preserves' ability to manage and improve existing properties. The 2020 referendum brought increased property tax revenue that has allowed the Forest Preserves to address a backlog of deferred maintenance and begin to plan for future land acquisitions. See [Recommendations](#) for more discussion of land acquisition.

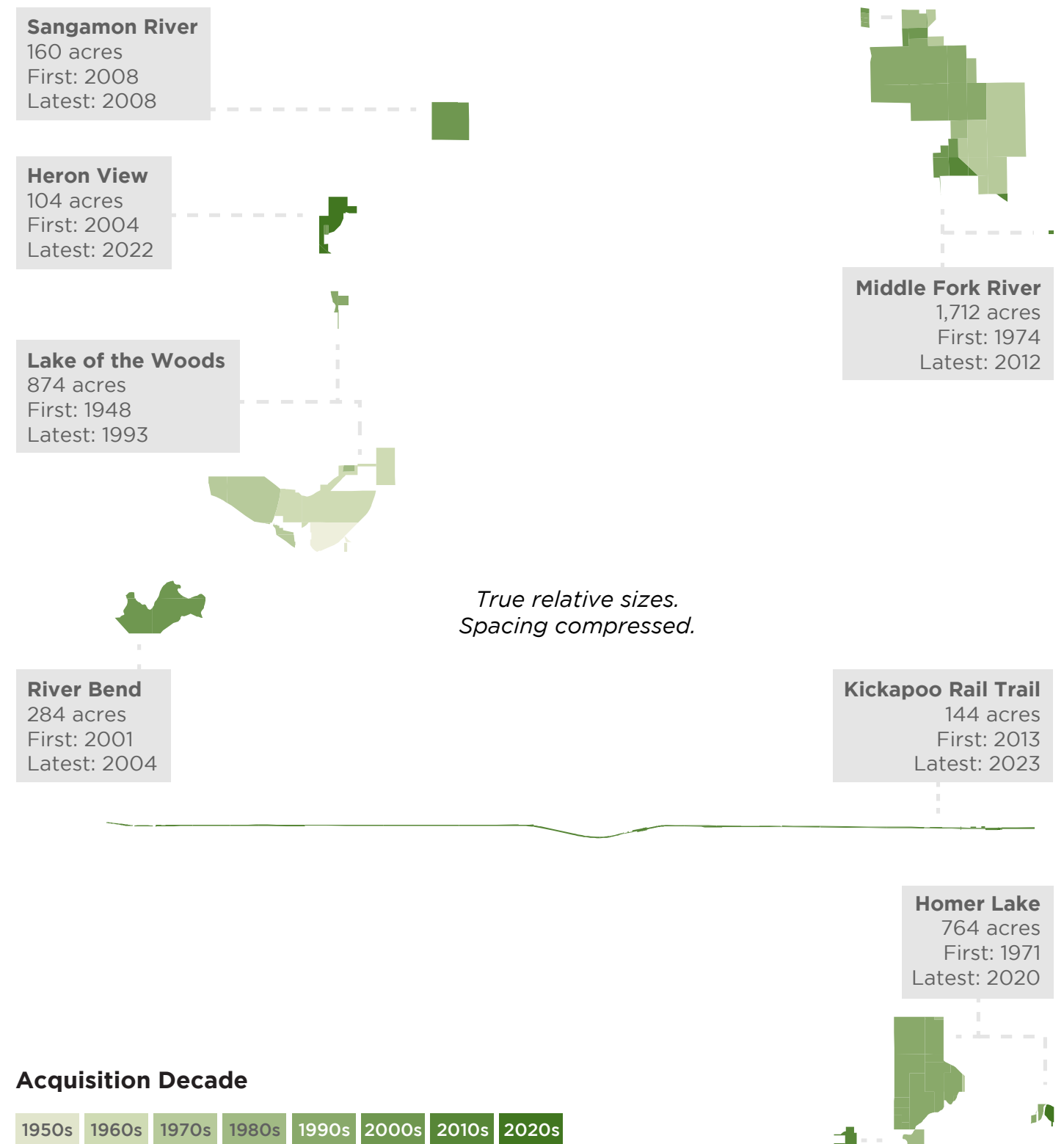
Forest Preserve Acres Acquired by Decade



“WATCHING CCFPD GROW SINCE ITS INCEPTION HAS BEEN SUCH A JOY! I REMEMBER A FAMILY PICNIC IN THE EARLY '60S AT HOMER LAKE. IT HAS GROWN MORE BEAUTIFUL OVER TIME!”

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

GROWTH OF THE PRESERVES BY DECADE



The Three Pillars

CONSERVATION, RECREATION, & EDUCATION

The Champaign County Forest Preserves own and manage six preserves and the Kickapoo Rail Trail totaling over 4,000 acres. The preserves offer respite for people and wildlife, opportunities for recreation, and educational spaces where the Forest Preserves promote their message of connecting with nature. These three aspects – conservation, recreation, and education – are the pillars of the Forest Preserves’ mission. See [Appendix A](#) for the Forest Preserves’ organizational chart.

“EXCELLENT ORGANIZATION WITH A RELEVANT MISSION AND GREAT USE OF OUR TAX DOLLARS!

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

MISSION, VISION, & VALUES

The 2010 Master Plan (see [p. 25](#)) summarized the Forest Preserves’ historical mission:

The Forest Preserve District has had a three-pronged mission since it opened its first preserve in 1948, which is to provide for the citizens and guests of Champaign County: 1) the conservation of the county’s natural and cultural resources, 2) educational opportunities designed to increase the community’s knowledge and appreciation of these resources, and 3) recreational opportunities consistent with conserving the natural qualities other Forest Preserve’s resource base.

In 2024, for the first time, the Forest Preserves defined their organizational values to inform how the mission and vision are achieved. Today, the Forest Preserves’ guiding statements are:

MISSION

Protect Champaign County’s natural and cultural resources and inspire people to care for, enjoy, and explore their natural world.

VISION

Protecting Nature. Creating Connections.

VALUES

Stewardship: We act thoughtfully and responsibly to care for one another and nurture the financial, natural, and cultural resources entrusted to us.

Community: We respect and trust our colleagues and community and work to earn their trust. We foster a welcoming and collaborative environment, embracing differences and new ideas.

Discovery: We encourage curiosity, self-discovery, learning, and growth. We inspire wonder and awe through exploration of the world around us.

CONSERVATION: COLLABORATIVE MANAGEMENT THROUGHOUT THE PRESERVES

Conservation has been a pillar of the Forest Preserves’ mission since their founding but has become more of a focus over time. Protecting and restoring native ecosystems provides cultural value directly to the citizens of Champaign County. Native landscapes restored to pre-settlement conditions embody Champaign County’s natural and cultural history and provide green, wild spaces for passive recreation. With a few exceptions made for educational purposes or cultural value, Forest Preserve staff focus on restoring and maintaining native habitat and biodiversity according to pre-settlement conditions throughout all six forest preserves and the Kickapoo Rail Trail.

Managing complex terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems across seven large properties with limited time, staff, and resources poses logistical challenges. Led by the Natural Resources Department, and in collaboration with Site Operations departments, a systems approach enables the Forest Preserves to optimize output and implement manageable projects. Aided by mapping software and other digital tools, the small Natural Resources Department works strategically to lead the restoration and maintenance of biodiverse native habitat throughout the preserves using the most up-to-date management practices.

Behind habitat loss, the proliferation of invasive species is the greatest driver of biodiversity loss in the Midwest. Because of this, the Natural Resources Department spends the vast majority of its time and resources on

integrated pest management (IPM) practices – mechanical, chemical, and cultural methods that control invasive plant species and prevent re-invasion. The department prioritizes sites of highest ecological quality, using natural processes and low-impact control methods (like prescribed fire and hand-pulling weeds) to maintain high species richness. For low-quality, highly degraded ecosystems, the department focuses on restoring structure, function, and natural processes before biodiversity. This includes systematic mechanical and chemical control of invasive plants, reestablishment of native vegetation, and prescribed fire.

Ecological monitoring, or repeatedly measuring conditions over time, is an important component of tracking changes to natural areas. Two methods staff use to monitor changes in ecosystems are photo monitoring and transects, or walking through natural areas and recording occurrences of native plant species. The department uses ecological monitoring to calculate an area’s floristic quality index (FQI), which conveys relative ecological quality.

The work of the Natural Resources and Site Operations Departments, as well as significant contributions by our volunteers, is integral to the Forest Preserves’ mission. Restoring some of Champaign County’s native landscapes and managing them for biodiversity brings manifold benefits to residents of all species, and the department’s approach ensures the preserves will continue to provide the greatest possible benefit into the future.

MANAGING NATURAL ECOSYSTEMS TO REDUCE CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS

Natural areas store carbon in plant biomass and soil, provide resistance to flood and drought, clean the air and water, and regulate temperature – in addition to providing and increasing the quality of habitat. The Forest Preserves’ Climate Commitment (2022) states that while climate change poses a direct threat to forests, wetlands, and prairies, “forest preserve lands, programs, and management practices can also help to reduce climate change impacts ... If managed to their full potential, natural ecosystems could offset over 20% of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions each year.”¹⁰ The Forest Preserves’ 4,000+ acres help protect all residents from the effects of climate change. See [p. 23-24](#) for more on the importance of nature.

CCFPD PROVIDES THE TYPE OF TRAILS AND HIGH-QUALITY NATURAL AREAS THAT CAN'T BE FOUND ELSEWHERE IN THE COUNTY OR NEARBY.

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

THE THREE PILLARS: CONSERVATION, RECREATION, & EDUCATION
RECREATION: AMENITIES THROUGHOUT THE PRESERVES

Each preserve has its own character and unique array of amenities. Recreating in or near nature adds further benefits to physical activity; Parks and Recreation Magazine called spending time in nature “upstream preventative care” because of the way it underpins health.¹¹ This section describes some of the flagship amenities and the graphic below shows a more complete list.

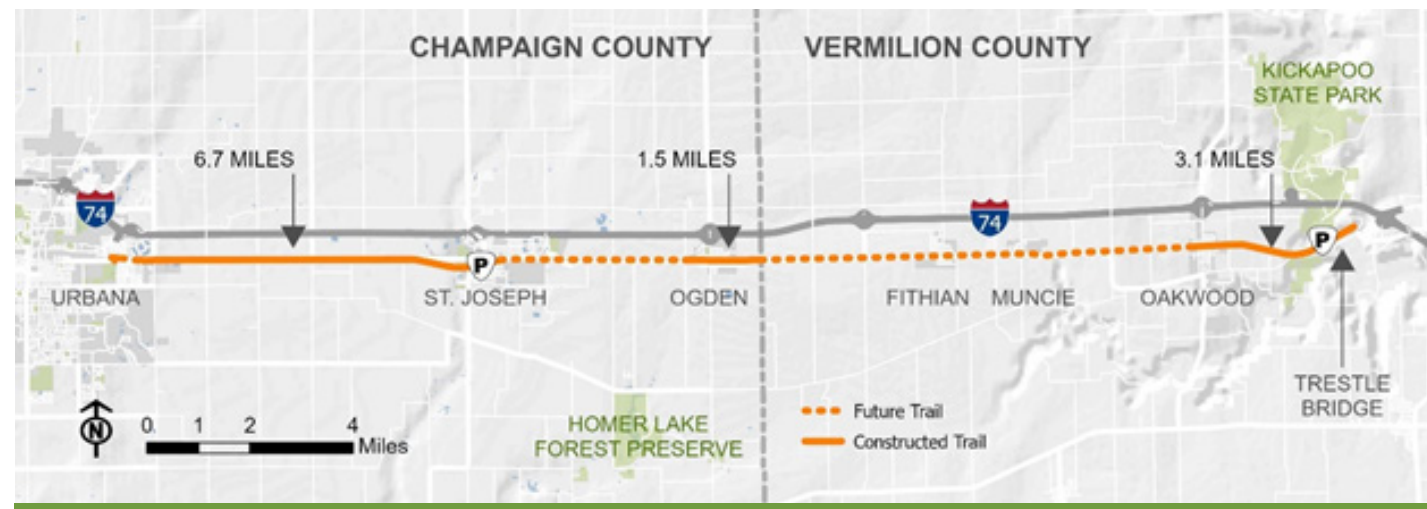
“WONDERFUL PRESERVES, LOTS OF VARIED ACTIVITIES... EACH PRESERVE SEEMS TO HAVE ITS OWN ‘PERSONALITY’.”

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

Preserve	Accessible Facilities	Accessible Parking	Boat Ramps	Boat Rentals	Campground	Education Facility	Education Programs	Fishing (*Accessible Pier)	Golf	Interpretive Signs	Paddling (*Kayak launch)	Play Area	Rental Facilities	Restrooms	Swim Beach	Shelters- Picnic Tables, & Grills	Trails- Hiking	Trails- Paved/Multi-use	Volleyball (Sand)	
Heron View																				
Homer Lake	•	•	•			•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Kickapoo Rail Trail																				
Lake of the Woods	•	•	•	•		•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Middle Fork River	•	•				•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
River Bend	•	•	•				•	•		•	•			•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Sangamon River	•	•					•	•		•	•			•	•	•	•	•	•	•

TRAILS

The Forest Preserves have over 46 miles of trails, including mowed and maintained walking trails through diverse ecosystems at every preserve, as well as over 14 miles designed to accommodate bikes and wheelchair users across 4 preserves and the Kickapoo Rail Trail. Trails are the most popular amenity at the Forest Preserves according to results from the 2022 Needs Assessment Survey. Trail development is a complex negotiation considering demand, habitat encroachment, and accessibility.



The Kickapoo Rail Trail as constructed and planned (2024)

Kickapoo Rail Trail

In addition to their six preserves, the Forest Preserves operate a large portion of the Kickapoo Rail Trail (KRT). The long-distance, off-street, multi-use trail offers a convenient recreation option for cyclists, walkers, and runners. St. Joseph is the busiest section of the KRT in Champaign County and receives about 3,000 users per month during the summer. Forest Preserve staff manage the 139 acres adjacent to the trail as they would a preserve, with a commitment to restoring biodiverse native ecosystems. As of 2024, 11.3 of the originally planned 24.5 miles of trail have been completed, and the Forest Preserves secured grant funding to complete the remaining 13.2 miles.

The trail is jointly managed by the Forest Preserves, the Urbana Park District and the Vermilion County Conservation District. As the original trail is completed, partners in Urbana and Champaign will steward the extension westward. Planning is also underway for future connections to other regional trails. The Forest Preserves have provided this amenity to taxpayers at minimal cost, having secured grant or private funding for 100% of the trail.

The KRT makes active travel easier, safer, and more enjoyable, while bringing health, social, environmental, and economic benefits to residents and the region. The Forest Preserves are excited to complete the originally planned trail and help coordinate future expansions that extend the impact of the Kickapoo Rail Trail in Champaign County and beyond.

Lake of the Woods Bike Path

One of the many trails traversing the preserves is the 3.2-mile Lake of the Woods Bike Path. The 10-foot-wide multi-use asphalt path spans much of the preserve, from its western end at Buffalo Trace Prairie, across Route 47 and past the Botanical Garden, through the woods along the Sangamon River and to its eastern endpoint at Stidham Woods. The path connects with several miles of other trails and is linked to a growing network of in-town and regional trails, including the Lake of the Woods Road Path that takes users to downtown Mahomet. The Forest Preserves recently secured grant funding to renovate three different portions of the path.



THE THREE PILLARS: CONSERVATION, RECREATION, & EDUCATION
RECREATION AMENITIES CONTINUED

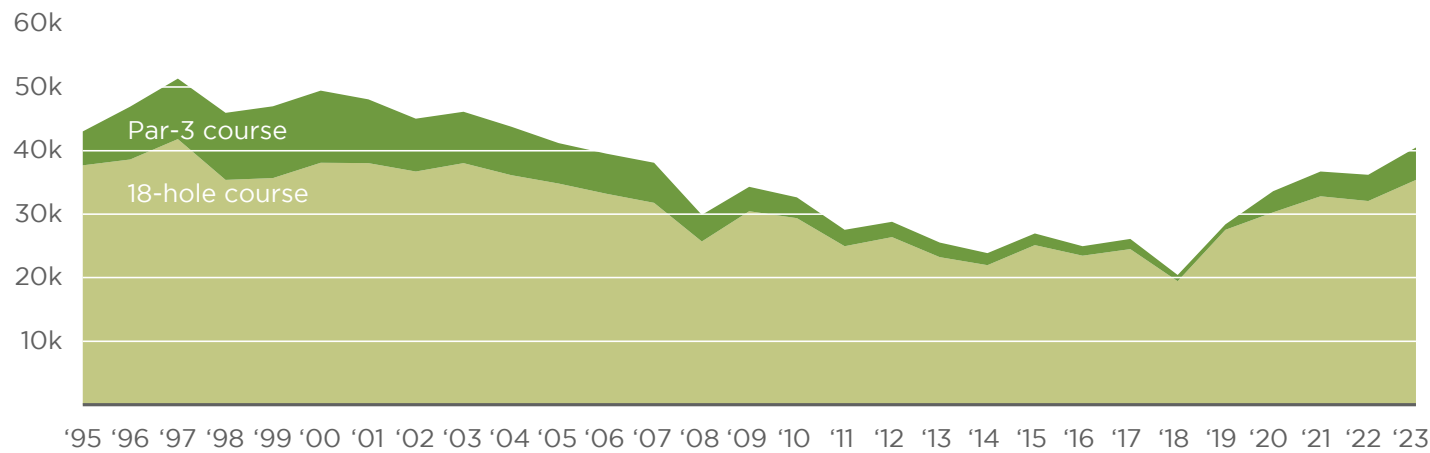
FLAGSHIP AMENITIES

Lake of the Woods Golf Course

One of the Forest Preserves' first major projects was to create the Golf Course. In 1951, when the Forest Preserves were just three years old, they opened Hartwell C. Howard Lake of the Woods Golf Course. Howard, among several other donors, helped bring to fruition the vision for a golf course in a natural setting. Over 70 years later, the course, designed by nationally known architect Robert Bruce Harris, remains a popular and affordable recreational attraction for the Forest Preserve District. The course offers an 18-hole, 5,000 to 6,500-yard regulation course accommodating all ages and skill levels. The course provides excellent value with its great upkeep, affordable rates, and beautiful surroundings. A variety of other activities attract visitors, such as the 9-hole par 3 course, driving range, golf simulators, lessons for all ages, and foot golf. Play at the Golf Course has steadily rebounded in recent years after a long decline.

A Certified Audubon Sanctuary, Lake of the Woods Golf Course is committed to a high standard of environmental management, an example of how the Forest Preserve pillars work cohesively.

Rounds of Golf Played Per Year, 1995 to 2023



Rounds played in 2018 were less than half of peak play in 1997, but since 2019, golf has consistently rebounded and it exceeded 40,000 rounds in 2023.

Mabery Gelvin Botanical Garden

The Mabery Gelvin Botanical Garden, one of the Forest Preserves' most popular attractions, has evolved from a small group of plantings outside the museum to the eight acres it covers today. The area was named after Forest Preserves founder H.I. Gelvin's late wife after a major renovation in 1974. The setting for dozens of weddings each year, it showcases a diversity of flora and several attractions, including the gazebo; the red bridge, pond, and waterfall (renovated in 2019); a guided nature trail with interpretive signs; the award-winning, ADA-accessible Miriam Davies Enabling Garden; and the former Hensley Town Hall, built in 1895 and moved to the Gardens in 1982, which now hosts educational programming as the Historic One-Room Schoolhouse. Grant funding will also help the Preserves renovate the Discovery Garden and Greenhouse to provide even more ways to connect to nature.

The Botanical Garden has been the subject of several master plans and studies from the past few decades. Several recommend a complete redesign of the site. None of these master plans are currently being followed because of their drastic nature.



The dark sky at Middle Fork. Photo by M. Vishwakarma, 2023.

Harry L. Swartz Campground

The Harry L. Swartz Campground at Middle Fork River Forest Preserve, open April through October, offers over 50 sites in a forested setting among large oaks, hickories, hackberries, and wildflowers. Campers are within a short walk of the swimming beach, shower house, and several hiking trails ranging from prairie and wetland to forested river walks. The campground hosts naturalist programs most weekends during the summer that are free for all ages. The campground is named in honor of a past president of the Forest Preserves who helped focus the organization's efforts on preserving natural areas around the Middle Fork River. Grant funding from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources will help enhance Middle Fork's International Dark Sky Park experience, including the addition of ADA-accessible dark sky campsites uncovered by trees. Middle Fork attracts thousands of visitors from around the county, country, and even internationally for stargazing as it is the only internationally certified Dark Sky Park in Illinois.

THE DARK SKY PARK AT MIDDLE FORK WAS A STANDOUT ACHIEVEMENT AS IT IS THE FIRST PARK IN ILLINOIS TO DO THIS.

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

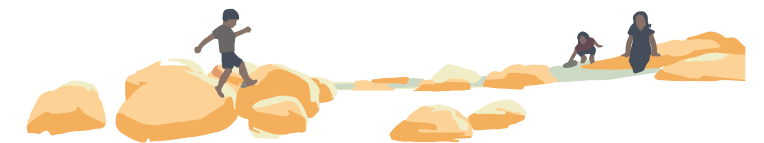
ADDITIONAL AMENITIES

The preserves also offer fishing, paddling, and affordably priced rental facilities. Paddling has grown in popularity in recent years and there are launches at Homer Lake, Lake of the Woods, and River Bend. Rental facilities throughout Lake of the Woods, Homer Lake, and Middle Fork River allow patrons to commune in a natural setting. These rentals can be gateways to visitors discovering more of the preserves.

THE FACILITIES ARE GREAT! MY DAUGHTER LOVES THE NATURE PLAYGROUND AT HOMER LAKE.

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

Another unique amenity is the Natural Playscape at Homer Lake Forest Preserve, a playground designed with natural materials and running water to provide kids an immersive way to connect with nature. Nature-based play supports child physical,⁵⁰ cognitive,⁵¹ social,⁵² and emotional⁵³ development; enhances creativity and problem-solving,^{54,55} and improves risk management.⁵⁶



THE THREE PILLARS: CONSERVATION, RECREATION, & EDUCATION

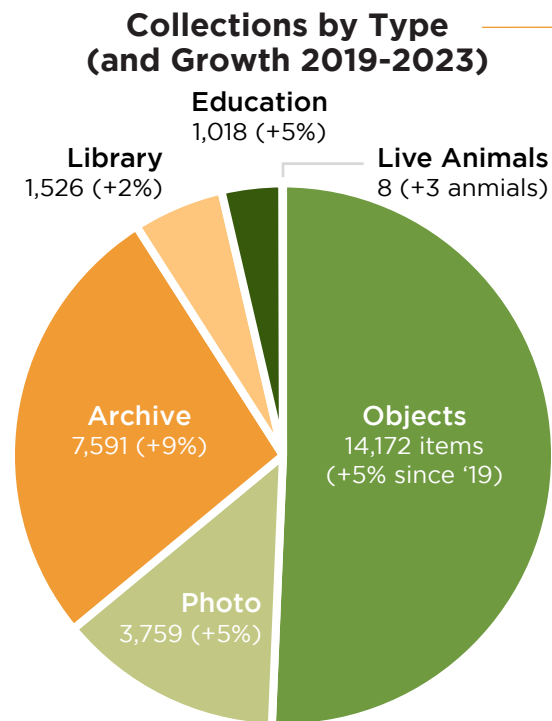
EDUCATION: COLLECTIONS & PROGRAMS

The Museum and Education Department is the primary provider of education at the Forest Preserves. Information is also shared through interpretive signage, and other departments and volunteers (see [p. 17](#)) contributing to public education in various ways. The mission of the Museum and Education Department is to collect, preserve and interpret the natural and cultural history of Champaign County and East Central Illinois for all generations, which it does primarily through school programs, summer camps, public programs, exhibits, and collections. The department serves over 20,000 people each year from all walks of life, including the general public, educators, and students (public, private, and homeschool). Museum and Education Department staff work from the Museum of the Grand Prairie and the Homer Lake Interpretive Center.

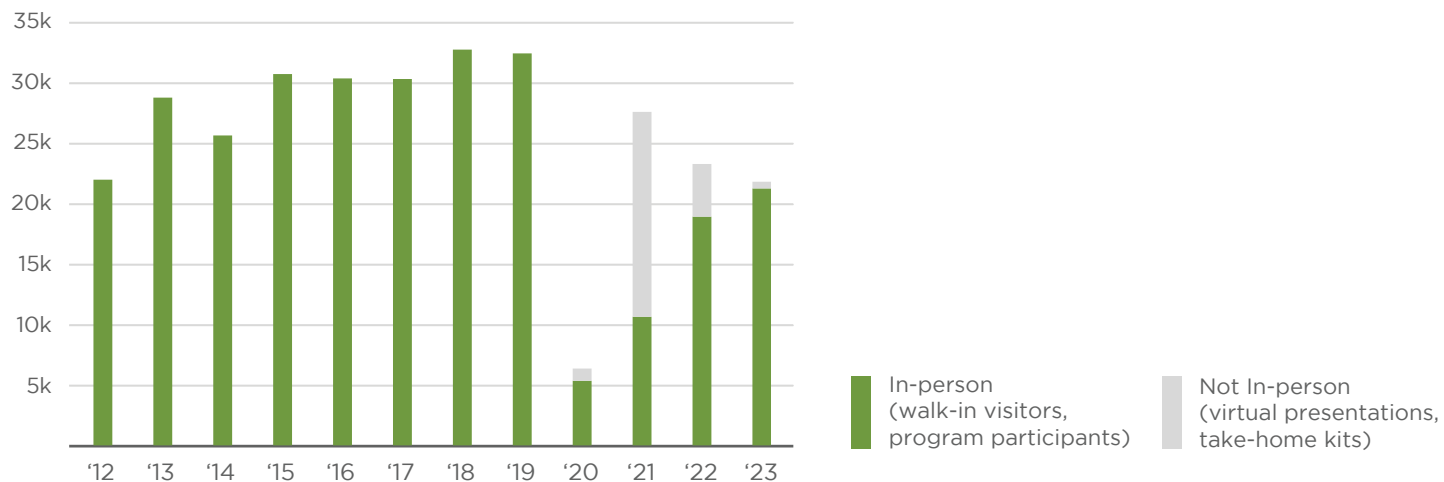
The department is guided by its Strategic Institutional Plan (2021) and several sub-plans for areas like interpretive signs, exhibits, collections, and facilities management. The Strategic Institutional Plan calls for the creation of a programming plan (see graphic on p. 16) and an inclusion plan.

“BEYOND MAINTAINING HABITAT... CITIZENS CAN HIKE, FISH, CAMP, BIKE, ETC. IN ADDITION, PUBLIC PROGRAMMING HELPS EDUCATE ON VARIOUS TOPICS. CCFPD DOES A GOOD JOB OF BALANCING CONSERVATION AND EDUCATION.”

- COMMUNITY MEMBER



People Reached by Museum & Education



COLLECTIONS

The Forest Preserves' collections span over 28,000 records. The majority of the collection is located at the Museum of the Grand Prairie, with a subset located at the Homer Lake Interpretive Center. The Museum was founded in 1968 and has been accredited by the American Alliance of Museums since 1973, making it a unique asset to the Forest Preserves. In addition to exhibiting artifacts, Forest Preserve staff use artifacts to support exhibits and programs. The Museum is dedicated to preserving and sharing the cultural and natural history of Champaign County. Collections increased slightly but remained relatively stable since 2019. The department focuses on quality over quantity, only adding artifacts with meaningful local connections. As of July 2023, 2,800 artifacts, or 12% of collections, were on exhibit.

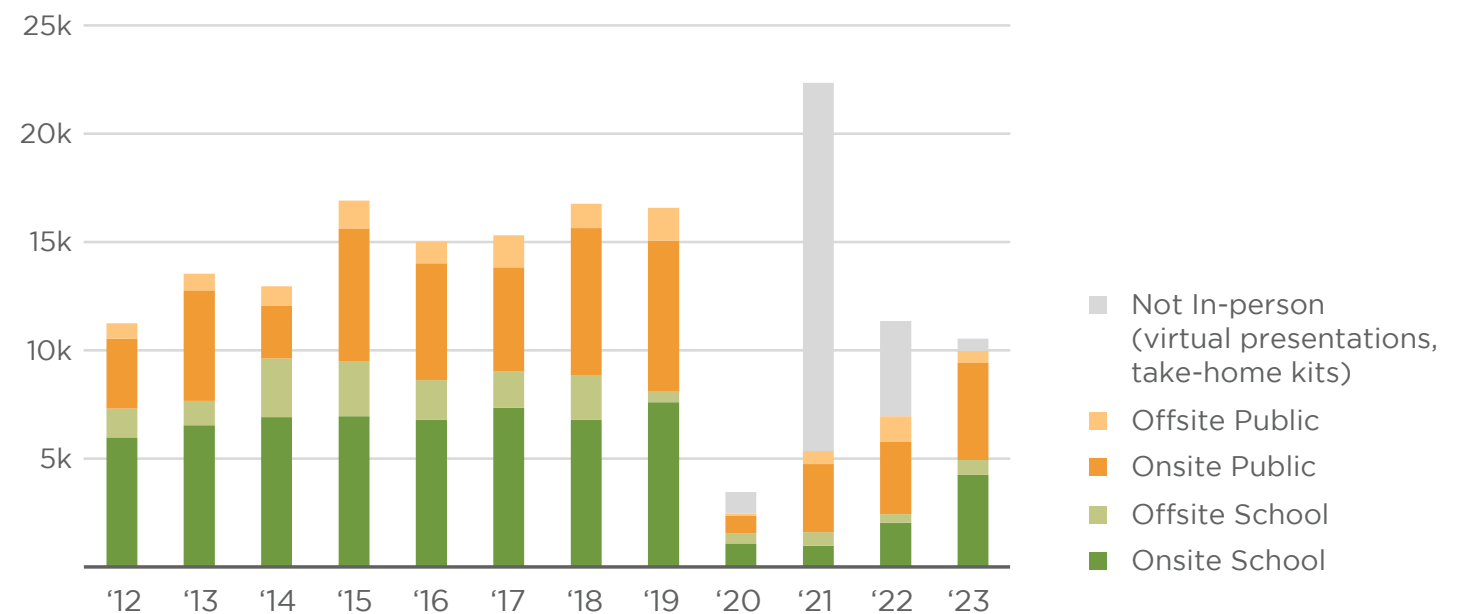
PROGRAMS

Public programs, school programs, and summer youth opportunities through the Museum and Education Department deliver hands-on experiences with the history and environment of Champaign County and East-central Illinois. Thoughtful programs facilitated by knowledgeable guides provide positive experiences that encourage participants to connect with nature and history. The Museum and Education Department's programs include onsite and offsite programs for schools and for the public. Programs are held at several facilities throughout the preserves but nearly half take place at either the Museum or the Interpretive Center. Programs reached over 10,000 people in 2023, but participation remains below pre-pandemic levels. See [Recommendations](#) for a more detailed analysis of programs.

Programming Goals from the Museum & Education Strategic Institutional Plan (2021)

- Create new programs
- Expand program locations
- Expand self-guided opportunities
- Attract a more diverse audience

Participants by Program Type



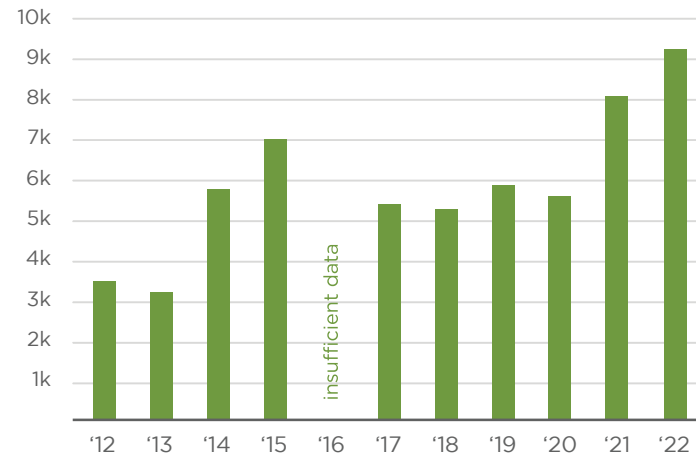
THE THREE PILLARS: CONSERVATION, RECREATION, & EDUCATION

VOLUNTEERS

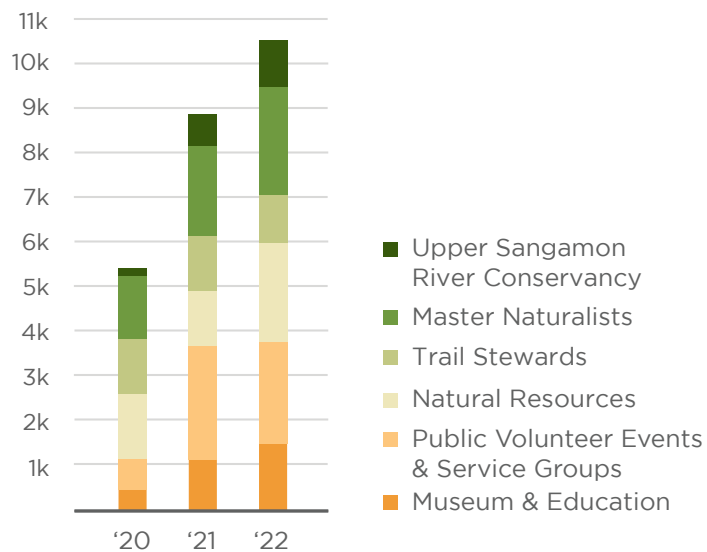
Volunteers help the Forest Preserves with every pillar of their mission. Volunteers contribute to conservation through tasks such as restoration and invasive species removal; they support recreation through trail maintenance; and they further public education by tabling at events and advocating on social media. Natural Resources staff estimate volunteers' work has pushed the department 20 years ahead of its restoration schedule for Lake of the Woods' Buffalo Trace Prairie. Volunteers' work is directed or delegated by the Forest Preserves' part-time Volunteer Coordinator. Before the pandemic, volunteers consistently contributed about 5,000 hours per year. From 2019 to 2022, volunteer hours increased over 50%.

The volunteer program is an important aspect of the Forest Preserves' outreach; staff educate the volunteers who work alongside them, and volunteers help to educate others. Many service group and event volunteers are introduced to the Forest Preserves' locations, services, and mission through their volunteering. Regular volunteers learn skills like plant identification that help them succeed in their role and that can be applied outside their volunteer work. As a result of investing their time with the Forest Preserves, volunteers can become better stewards of natural areas and unofficial ambassadors for the Forest Preserves.

Forest Preserves Volunteer Hours



Forest Preserves Volunteer Hours by Affiliation



Several different volunteer groups help the Forest Preserves meet their mission, and engagement has increased over time. Master Naturalists have averaged over 1,900 hours per year since 2012 and gave over 2,400 hours in 2022. Members of the Upper Sangamon River Conservancy gave over 1,000 in 2022, up from 150 just two years prior.

Totals are higher in the second graphic because some volunteers affiliated with multiple groups are double-counted.

[THE FOREST PRESERVES HAVE] A STRONG COMMITMENT TO PROMOTING VOLUNTEERISM AND A PHILOSOPHY OF VOLUNTEER EMPOWERMENT.

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

Volunteers from the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority at a KRT Cleanup event. Photo by Forest Preserve staff, 2023.



THE THREE PILLARS: CONSERVATION, RECREATION, & EDUCATION

BALANCING CONSERVATION & RECREATION

Per their mission, the Forest Preserves protect and restore natural areas for human and non-human purposes. Balancing these can be a challenge; surveys consistently show people want more trails and natural areas, but since trails can degrade habitat these desires can be at odds. The Forest Preserves balance conservation and recreation for the greatest benefit to people and wildlife.

Early on, the Forest Preserves developed many of their spaces with a focus on recreation. Lake of the Woods is the most developed of the preserves with the Museum, Botanical Garden, Golf Course, pavilions, bell tower, and historic bridges. These amenities offer ways for people of all comfort levels to be in or near nature. The variety at Lake of the Woods attracts many visitors - and it opens up the space for other preserves to remain more primitive. Every preserve offers opportunities for recreation, but the contrast between Lake of the Woods and recent acquisitions, like the more rustic Heron View Forest Preserve, reflects how the Forest Preserves have evolved while meeting the varied needs of the county. The Forest Preserves look to leverage the unique character of each preserve while protecting natural areas and offering a variety of ways for people to experience nature.

COMPARING CONSERVATION AND RECREATION WITH OTHER DISTRICTS

The Forest Preserves gathered data from the other 18 forest preserve and conservation districts in Illinois to see how Champaign County compares. While the Forest Preserves provide essential services on a large scale, their share of county land is just over 0.6%. Among the 19 forest preserve and conservation districts, Champaign County ranks 9th in acres owned but 14th relative to county size. Their acres per 1,000 residents ranks 13th. They are in the top half of counties in population which yields a lower ratio. However, 6 of the 7 counties with higher populations also have a higher acres per 1,000 ranking.



Champaign County and the Most Similar Forest Preserve Districts

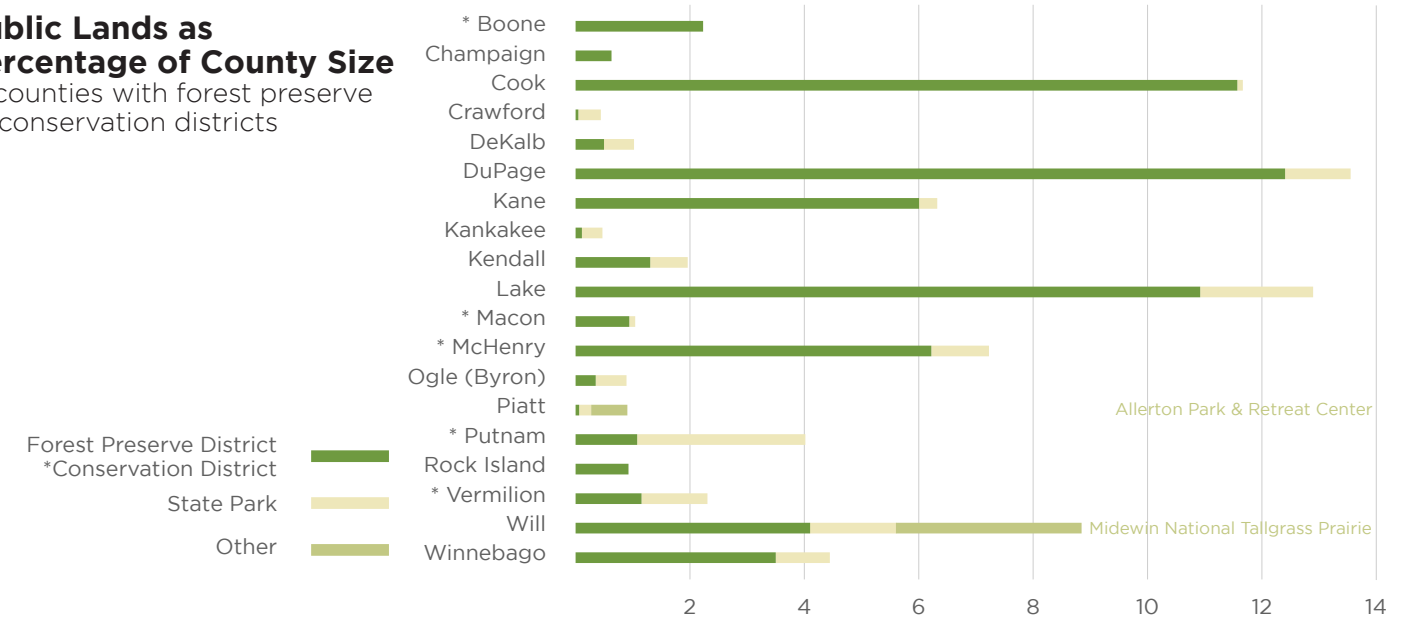
District (Founded)	County Pop.	County Size	Acres Managed	Ac./1k Residents	Ac./Sq. Mi.
Champaign (1935)	209,689	996 sq. mi.	4,041	19.3	4.1
DeKalb (1940)	104,897	631	2,000	19.1	3.2
Kendall (2006)	128,990	320	2,663	20.6	8.3
Rock Island (1941)	141,879	428	2,529	17.8	5.9

Source: Illinois Forest Preserve and Conservation District Database (Champaign County Forest Preserves, 2024)

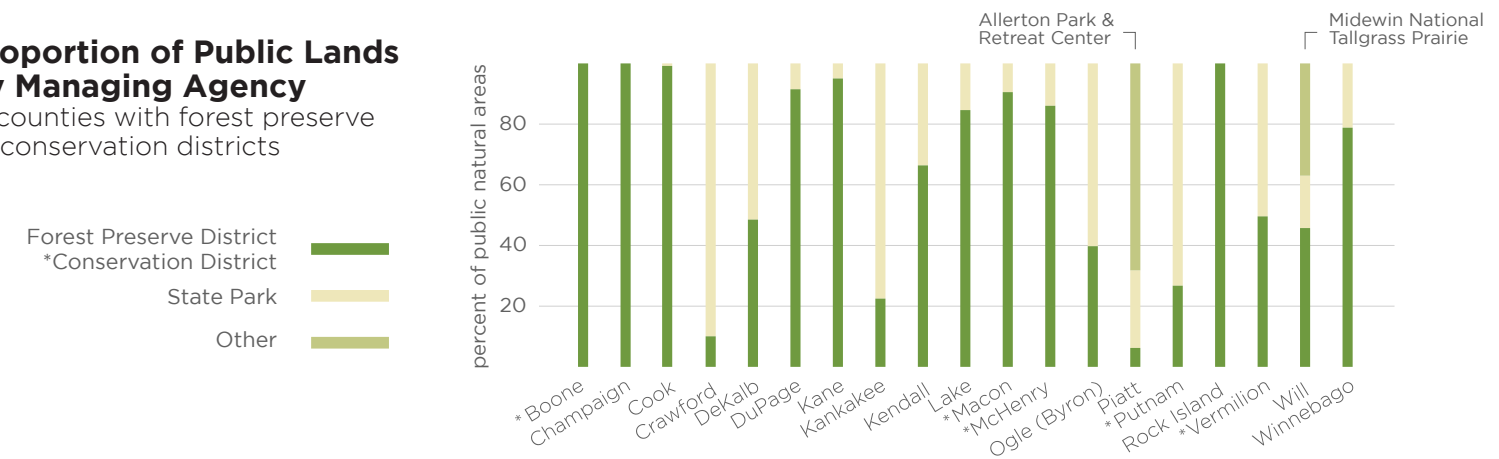
Less than 1% OF CHAMPAIGN COUNTY IS PROTECTED NATURAL AREA,

a significantly lower proportion than the national and state averages. Illinois itself has a relatively low percentage of protected natural areasⁱⁱⁱ (4.1% as of 2021¹²). As the figures below illustrate, while forest preserve and conservation districts own relatively small portions of their counties' land areas, their lands comprise a significant proportion of their counties' natural areas. **In Champaign County, the Forest Preserves own about three-quarters of the protected natural areas and over half of all parkland.**

Public Lands as Percentage of County Size in counties with forest preserve or conservation districts

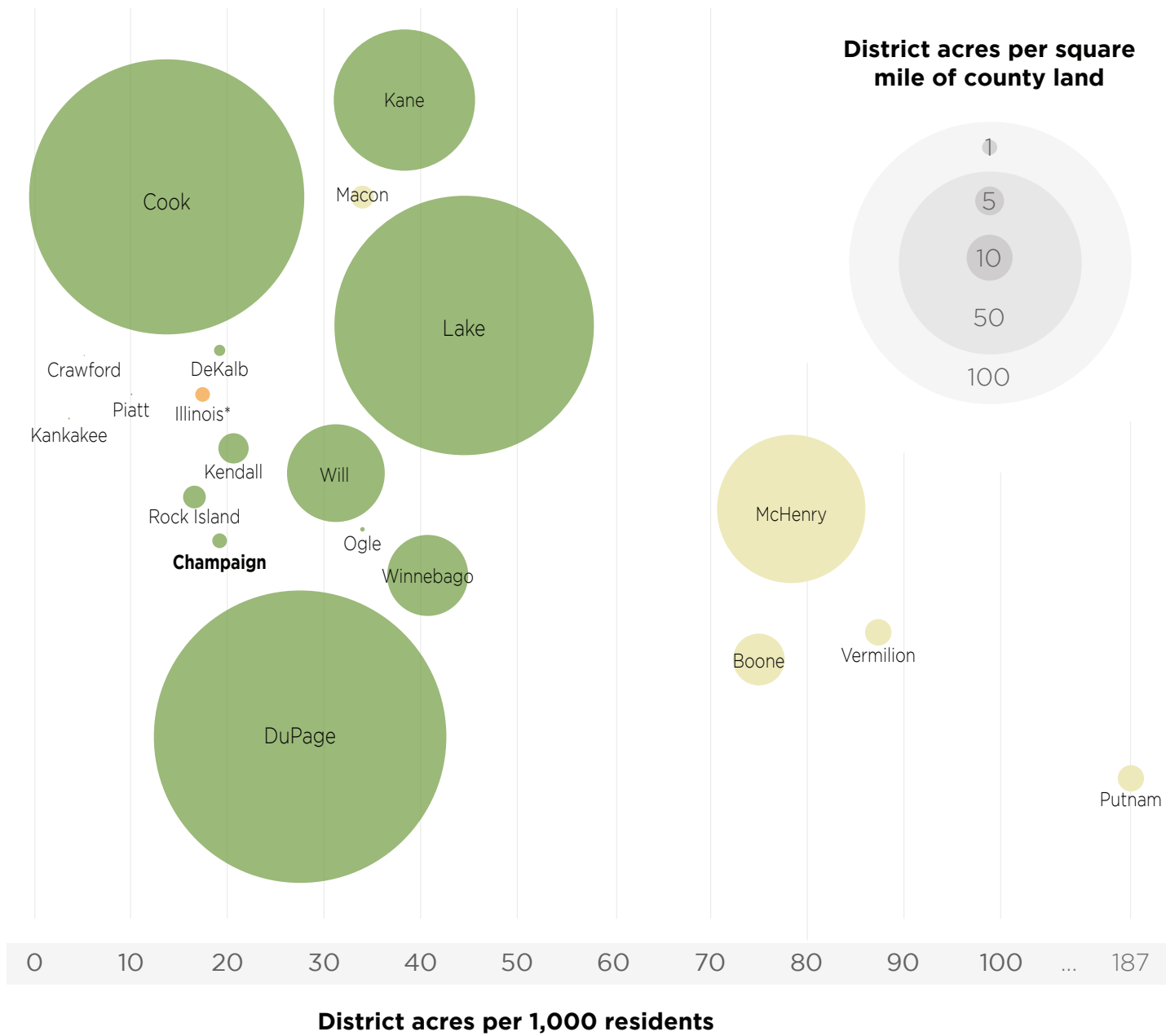


Proportion of Public Lands by Managing Agency in counties with forest preserve or conservation districts



ⁱⁱⁱ Natural areas are lands whose primary function is nature. (Forest Preserve lands are 87% natural area.) This plan uses Champaign County Regional Planning Commission data on "Protected Natural Lands" to generate statistics on natural areas for Champaign County. Municipal parks (0.23% the county) are excluded from these statistics because they are not primarily natural area, although a more precise count would include the natural areas in municipal parks.

MEASURING CONSERVATION & RECREATION District Acreages Relative to County Size & Population (Below) and Other Districts (Right)



- Forest preserve district
- Conservation district
- Illinois aggregate (all FPD and CD acres over IL population)

The graphic on p. 21 illustrates two different ways to measure forest preserve districts' services. The size of circles shows acreage relative to county size, which is a proxy for the amount of land in conservation. The x-axis shows acres per 1,000 residents, a common measure of access to parks for recreation. In both categories, Champaign County ranks in the bottom third. It ranks 9th of 19 in acreage (shown in the graphic on right).

Forest preserve and conservation district lands comprise about one-quarter of Illinois' protected lands. The Forest Preserves of Cook County's 70,000 acres are 30% of the 233,000 acres owned by Illinois forest preserve and conservation districts. Together, forest preserve and conservation districts protect 0.63% of Illinois lands.¹³

By law, Cook County is allowed to acquire up to 75,000 acres and all other forest preserve districts are allowed 55,000.¹⁴ Cook is the only one approaching its limit.

“**MY FAVORITE PART OF THE PRESERVES ARE ALL THE PRAIRIES AND WOODLANDS! I THINK THEY DO A GREAT JOB OF KEEPING THE PLACE CLEAN AND BRINGING BACK HISTORIC ECOSYSTEMS.**

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

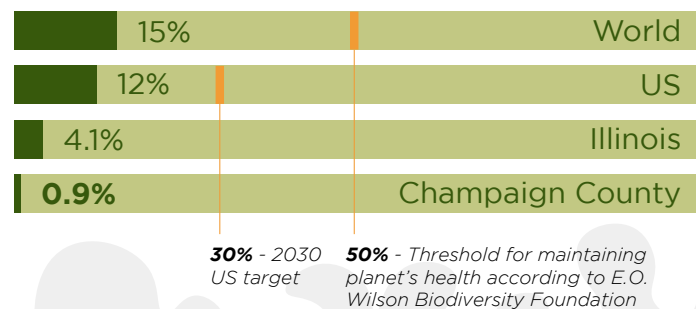


The Need for (More) Nature

Before it was an intensively developed agricultural landscape, Central Illinois was a “lush tallgrass prairie ecosystem supporting countless species of flora and fauna.”¹⁵ The fertile prairie soils that supported those flora and fauna would become “the most valuable natural resource in central Illinois” for agriculture.¹⁶ In 1820, prairie comprised an estimated 92.5% of Champaign County, or 592,300 acres.¹⁷ By 1976, only one acre remained.¹⁸ The modern landscape is largely unchanged from that created by settlers in the 1800s; less than 1% of Champaign County is protected natural area.^{iv}

Natural areas are fundamental to wellbeing and resilience for all living things, from providing habitat, to helping address climate change causes and effects, and supporting human mental, physical, and social health. Biodiversity is both inherently valuable and it promotes ecosystem services that protect humans from climate change effects.^{19,20} Natural areas store carbon in plant biomass and soil, provide resistance to flood and drought, clean the air and water, and regulate temperature.^v Natural areas also benefit human health: Parks and Recreation Magazine called spending time in nature “upstream preventative care” because of the way it underpins health,²¹ and many scientists believe being in nature supports fundamental body-regulating processes.^{vi} Natural areas can be large preserves, smaller installations of green infrastructure, and even private yards with native landscaping.

How Much Land is Protected?

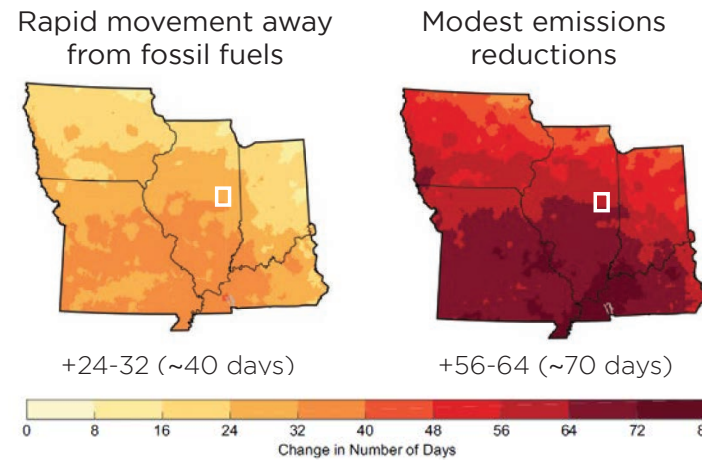


The loss of natural areas throughout the county decimated biodiversity, stripped humans of valuable climate change management tools, and created a human environment with unprecedentedly little nature. Agricultural development altered 95% of the first-order streams with headwaters in Champaign County, damaging aquatic ecosystems, increasing flooding and erosion risk,²² and depriving the region of the prairie's carbon sink, increasing atmospheric temperatures.²³ Based on the importance of biodiversity and natural areas to human and planetary health, there is a strong case for re-naturing to better balance the built and natural environments.

Environmental risks are perceived by global leaders to be the five most critical long-term threats to the world as well as the most potentially damaging to people and planet.²⁴ Climate action failure is the clear top perceived threat, followed by extreme weather and biodiversity loss. In Illinois, climate change is expected to continue to bring hotter average temperatures, longer droughts, and more heavy rain events.²⁵ According to the US Climate Vulnerability Index, Illinois ranks 11th of the 50 states in estimated deaths from climate disasters.²⁶ The top perceived threats of climate action failure, extreme weather, and biodiversity loss are related and reinforcing, but nature-based solutions can help address them simultaneously by providing climate action that dampens extreme weather while supporting biodiversity. Scientists estimate expanded and well-managed natural areas could offset one-fifth of US emissions²⁷ and provide one-third of the mitigation required to limit warming.^{28,29}

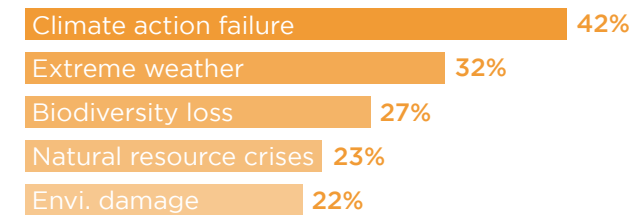
Left: Current totals of protected natural areas reveal significant county and state progress is needed to contribute to the White House's initiative to protect 30% of US lands and waters by 2030.

Changes in “Very Hot” Days by 2100



The Nature Conservancy's 2021 report used data from 32 global models to predict changes by 2100. Its two emissions scenarios predict one to two more months of 95+ degree days. Well-managed natural areas would help mitigate these changes.

Critical Threats for the Next 5-10 Years According to Global Leaders



Environmental issues are the top five perceived global threats for the next 5-10 years, according to the World Economic Forum's 2022 survey of 12,000 leaders from 124 countries.

- iv Local natural area loss parallels the global trend; humans have altered 97.2% of ecosystems in the last 500 years.³⁵
- v The global value of ecosystem services was estimated in 2015 to be \$29 trillion,³⁶ including thousands of dollars per acre from wetlands.³⁷
- vi Much of the existing research on the benefits of time in nature was summarized by Univ. of Illinois Professor Ming Kuo in a 2011 report for the National Recreation and Parks Association.³⁸
- vii This is an identical proportion to the 0.63% of land Illinois' 19 forest preserve and conservation districts protect.

The White House's initiative to protect 30% of US lands and waters by 2030 reflects the urgency communicated by global leaders. As of 2021, about 12% of US lands and 23% of waters were protected,³⁰ compared to about 15% globally.³¹ Locally, Champaign County's 0.9% protected natural area and Illinois' 4.1%³² fall drastically below targets. Illinois ranks 48th in percentage of protected natural area.³³ For Illinois to achieve 5% protected natural area as a state, its forest preserve and conservation districts would have to double in acreage.³⁴

Recommendations in The Nature Conservancy's *Assessment of the Impacts of Climate Change in Illinois* include conserving, restoring, expanding, and connecting natural ecosystems, specifically restoring wetlands along waterways and prairie at landscape scales. The *Champaign County Regional Environment Framework* (2014) recommends expanding protected natural areas within Champaign County. These recommendations align with the Forest Preserves' work and illustrate the importance of the Forest Preserves as the main source of nature in Champaign County. The Forest Preserves' 4,041 acres represent most of Champaign County's green space but just 0.63% of the land.^{vii}

Nature has the unique ability to concurrently address several of today's most pressing problems. The modern landscape's lack of nature carries consequences for all living things, including the loss of all of nature's benefits. Consensus from global leaders, national direction, and local recommendations align to indicate a greater role for nature. The Forest Preserves are one of the only organizations in Champaign County that can provide and expand the essential public services nature offers. These services – preserving biodiversity, managing climate change, and providing a nurturing human environment – will enable humans and non-humans to thrive and weather the problems of the present and future.

Existing Plans and Updates

FOREST PRESERVES MASTER PLAN (2010)

The last comprehensive plan was approved in 2010. Many of the goals in this plan have been either completed or seen significant progress. A portion of the initiatives have not been completed, not because of a lack of effort or resource allocation, but because the intent of the goal has evolved in the lifespan of the plan. Below is a summary of the most notable recommendations and the progress the Forest Preserves has made. As applicable, some of the ongoing initiatives in the 2010 plan have been incorporated into the current plan recommendations.

NOTABLE RECOMMENDATIONS

PROGRESS AS OF 2024

Land Acquisition

- Acquire land near River Bend
- Acquire land within Salt Fork watershed
- Acquire land adjacent to Middle Fork and along the Middle Fork River
- Assess Kaskaskia and Embarras watersheds for acquisitions

- Some small acquisitions completed, but land acquisition - especially in areas adjacent to preserves and near waterways - remains a recommendation

Museum & Education

- As outlined in the Interpretive Plan, interpret “natural” and “cultural” histories together
- Assess potential expansion of Museum
- Provide sufficient and adequate storage for Museum collection and potential additions

- Department reorganized to unify “natural” and “cultural” divisions
- No longer in plans to expand Museum
- Met primary objectives with additions of Education Center Classroom and Rankin Collections Care Center

Natural Areas Restoration

- Continue restoring Sangamon River’s landscape and ecosystems to presettlement conditions
- Continue ecosystem and natural area restoration within the forest preserves
- Prepare resource management plans for each of the preserves

- All specific restoration initiatives completed or in progress
- Management plans in draft

Outreach

- Look for opportunities to broaden our audience base and the media forms we use to communicate with them.
- Expand presence through partnerships, especially in urban areas (consider transportation).

- Increased social media presence but remains a recommendation
- Remains relevant - will reevaluate as part of recommendation

Homer Lake Forest Preserve

- Develop the county’s first natural playscape

- Playscape installed 2011

Lake of the Woods Golf Course

- Replace the irrigation system
- Address issues with sand bunkers

- Irrigation system mostly complete. Final phases are included in the Capital Plan
- Renovation of sand bunkers is completed

Mabery Gelvin Botanical Garden

- Create a plan for the Botanical Garden area addressing “the leaking pond, deteriorating waterfall, irrigation line replacement, new walkway design and an energy-efficient greenhouse.”

- Pond, waterfall, and greenhouse projects completed



Right: Photo by S. Schleef, 2021.

EXISTING PLANS AND UPDATES
RELEVANT LOCAL PLANS

Several local plans reference the Forest Preserves' properties and trails. The following organizations recognize the preserves' value to the community and seek to create regional connections.

VILLAGE OF MAHOMET, COMPREHENSIVE PLAN (2016)³⁹

The Village of Mahomet is a key partner of the Champaign County Forest Preserves. Its 2016 *Comprehensive Plan* states that the Sangamon River and the preserves are “perhaps the most influential elements in defining Mahomet’s character as a community.”

Relevant Excerpts

- “ Establish a joint marketing campaign between the Champaign County Forest Preserve District and Mahomet-area businesses.
- “ Partner with the Champaign County Forest Preserve to better align and market existing passive and active recreation amenities.
- “ Create a continuous trail along the Sangamon River, linking to the River Bend Forest Preserve, Sangamon River Greenway, Barber Park, and Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve.
- “ Explore the potential for boat/canoe/kayak access [on the Sangamon River].

The plan also discusses expanding walking and biking trails to complement Forest Preserves properties. The Sangamon River Walk is a potential trail along a nearly contiguous band of publicly owned land that the Village hopes could connect River Bend Forest Preserve to Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve. The Village’s multi-purpose path between US Route 150 and the east Lake of the Woods entrance has been completed since the plan was published.

CHAMPAIGN COUNTY REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION, GREENWAYS AND TRAILS PLAN (2014)⁴⁰

The “Future Conditions” section of the *Greenways and Trails Plan* notes several connections of the Kickapoo Rail Trail (KRT). The St. Joseph section from Main St to the Salt Fork River was completed in 2017. Some sections, like CR 1600 E (High Cross Rd) in Urbana to CR 2650 E in Ogden and CR 2650 E Ogden to CR 2800 E (county line), are expected to be completed shortly after this plan is published. The plan also lists with medium priority 3.33 miles of side paths along US Route 150 in Mahomet and 1.42 miles of multi-use paths along Route 150 in Champaign. The plan positions trails like the KRT as conduits to conserve environmentally sensitive areas such as wetlands. The *Greenways and Trails Plan* includes several paths that would connect to forest preserves. The plan also notes several shorter connections, some complete as of 2024, that make Lake of the Woods more accessible throughout Mahomet.

Planned Connections to Preserves

<p>Homer Lake Forest Preserve</p> <p>Old Homer Park to Homer / 1.08 mi / Medium priority</p> <p>Homer Lake Forest Preserve to Old Homer Park / 1.12 mi / Medium priority</p> <p>Homer Lake Forest Preserve to Urbana / 9.36 mi / Medium priority</p>
<p>Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve</p> <p>IL 47 Paths to Lake of the Woods Path / 1.67 mi / Complete</p>
<p>Middle Fork River Forest Preserve</p> <p>County Hwy. 9 to US 136 / 5.2 mi. / Medium priority</p> <p>County Hwy. 22 to Ludlow limits / 8.81 mi. / Medium priority</p>
<p>River Bend Forest Preserve</p> <p>Riverbluff Path to River Bend Forest Preserve / 0.32 mi / Medium priority</p> <p>Harris Trail to River Bend Forest Preserve / 2.33 mi / Medium priority</p> <p>Mid America Road to River Bend Forest Preserve Path / 1.47 mi / Low priority</p>

CHAMPAIGN COUNTY REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION, REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL FRAMEWORK (2020)⁴¹

The *Regional Environmental Framework*, also written by the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission, details environmental conditions to facilitate their consideration in development planning. The plan recommends expanding protected natural areas within Champaign County and offers several strategies to help reintegrate nature.

KICKAPOO RAIL TRAIL IN OTHER PLANS

Local and state plans from several agencies discuss establishing new segments of the Kickapoo Rail Trail in Champaign County. Plans involve local cities and park districts as well as the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission, which has published two studies evaluating the feasibility of extending the KRT. The Illinois Department of Transportation has also issued guidance, recommending a regional trail corridor be completed between Danville, Urbana-Champaign, and Bloomington-Normal. The progress of the KRT represents significant headway in creating the connection from Danville to Urbana-Champaign.

Plans Discussing the Kickapoo Rail Trail

<p>Municipal Plans</p> <p>City of Champaign Trails Plan (2011)</p> <p>City of Urbana Bicycle Master Plan (2016)</p> <p>City of Urbana Bicycle Wayfinding Plan (2020)</p> <p>City of Urbana Pedestrian Master Plan (2020)</p> <p>Urbana Park District Trails Master Plan (2016)</p> <p>Urbana Park District Strategic Plan (2020)</p>
<p>Champaign County Regional Planning Commission</p> <p>Champaign-Urbana Long Range Transportation Plan (2011)</p> <p>Champaign County Greenways and Trails Plan (2014)</p> <p>Kickapoo Rail Trail Connectivity Study (2018)</p> <p>Kickapoo Rail Trail Extension Study (2020)</p>
<p>State Plans</p> <p>Illinois Department of Transportation Bike Transportation Plan (2014)</p>

EXISTING PLANS AND UPDATES

STATE AND NATIONAL GUIDANCE

ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES, STATEWIDE COMPREHENSIVE OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN (2021)⁴²

The SCORP is a statewide plan by the Department of Natural Resources that presents recreational resources, an assessment of outdoor recreation supply, examination of outdoor recreation activities, and attitudes toward recreation in Illinois. Based on its findings, the SCORP produces recommendations for conservation agencies across the state, summarized in the graphic to the right.

Recommendations for Conservation Agencies

Improving Health and Wellness

- Promote health benefits of nature-based activities to strengthen connections
- Plan for “active transportation” for safer and easier travel to parks
- Develop more programs for social interaction

Access to Parks and Recreation

- Acquire land for natural resource preservation and outdoor recreation
- Develop trail plans

Natural Resources and Conservation Mgmt.

- Take care of aging infrastructure
- Work toward equitable access to trails, greenways, parks, and natural areas
- Design communication campaigns to educate the public on the environment

Funding

- Identify and purchase land and water for preservation
- Partner and collaborate with public, private, and philanthropic agencies to achieve land acquisition and natural resource preservation goals
- Bolster support by demonstrating the economic, environmental, community/social, and health impacts and value parks have for their communities

Plan Implementation

- State aligns grant criteria with priorities such as land acquisition

ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES, ILLINOIS COMPREHENSIVE WILDLIFE CONSERVATION PLAN & STRATEGY (2005)⁴³

The Department of Natural Resources developed the CWCP as a condition of receiving federal conservation and restoration funding. The plan promotes conservation actions to protect threatened and endangered species and their habitats. It outlines strategies for addressing challenges to natural areas statewide, including:

- Purchase/protect grasslands of at least 80 acres;
- Emphasize ecological connectivity among forests and other habitat patches;
- Emphasize restoring floodplains and riparian corridors;
- Protect, enhance and restore aquatic habitats where priorities have been identified (sections of the Sangamon River and Middle Fork of the Vermilion in Champaign County);
- Acquire land where existing SGCN (Species of Greatest Conservation Need) populations are declining and require protection, enhancement, and restoration;
- Acquire and protect existing wetlands or restorable wetlands; and
- Increase access to open lands and waters within and near urban areas for wildlife-related recreation.

ILLINOIS ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY, STATE OF ILLINOIS PRIORITY CLIMATE ACTION PLAN (2024)⁴⁴

Illinois' *Priority Climate Action Plan (2024)* includes the Natural Carbon Storage Initiative, which emphasizes natural carbon storage for climate change mitigation. The initiative and its incentives will target private and urban landowners. Its explicit integration of natural areas restoration, recreational opportunities, and climate resilience is an important private-sector complement to the work of public landholding bodies like forest preserve and conservation districts.

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY, ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN ILLINOIS (2021)⁴⁵

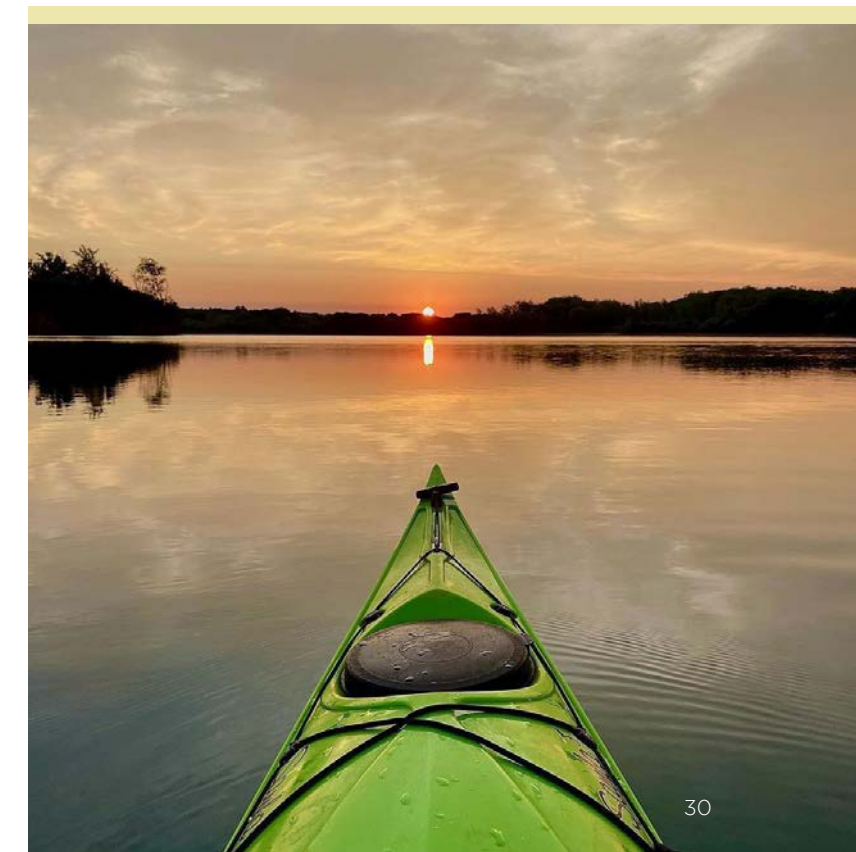
The Nature Conservancy's *Assessment of the Impacts of Climate Change in Illinois* recommends conserving, restoring, expanding, and connecting natural ecosystems, specifically restoring wetlands along waterways and prairie at landscape scales. These recommendations align with the Forest Preserves' work and have implications for their role as the climate changes in Champaign County. See [p. 24](#) for more discussion of this report.

THE WHITE HOUSE, EXECUTIVE ORDER: CONSERVING AND RESTORING AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL (2021)⁴⁶

In 2021, the White House introduced a national initiative to conserve at least 30 percent of our lands and waters by 2030. A follow-up report outlined strategies for agencies including:

- Conserving and restoring wildlife migration corridors through incentives and local collaboration; and
- Prioritizing conservation and outdoor recreation in land and water management planning.

A kayaker enjoys Homer Lake at sunset. Photo by A. Sobh, 2023.



EXISTING PLANS AND UPDATES

PUBLIC OPINION OF PARKS AND RECREATION

THEMES FROM STATE AND NATIONAL SURVEYS

Findings from recent National Recreation and Parks Association reports⁴⁷ and the *Illinois Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (2021)* highlight the assets and challenges of parks and recreation agencies. Parks and recreation services are economically, socially, environmentally vital.⁴⁸ During the pandemic, these ideas became increasingly mainstream. However, the disparity between White and non-White people's attitudes toward their local facilities signifies the need to make parks services, facilities, and agencies more equitable.

Compared to those identifying as white, non-white and/or Hispanic people consistently report feeling their local parks and facilities are:

- less easily accessible;
- less safe and welcoming; and
- less inclusive to people of all ages, incomes, races, ethnicities, abilities, gender identities, expressions, and sexual orientations.

According to Illinois residents in a 2020 survey,⁴⁹ developing more inclusive and ADA-accessible programs and facilities ranked as the fourth-highest funding priority for their local agencies. The top three were:

- Maintaining existing areas;
- Providing educational programs; and
- Improving existing natural areas.

US residents surveyed strongly support parks and recreation agencies and want them to help their communities adapt to climate change and make equity a priority. Illinoisans also want their agencies to acquire land for trails, wildlife protection, and natural areas.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS

Nationwide, residents highly value their local parks and recreation agencies and the work they do. However, these services are unequally distributed. In addition to wanting their agencies to continue providing vital services through trails, land acquisition, natural areas provision, and climate change management, residents would like to see their local parks and recreation agencies prioritize racial equity.





Community Profile

Champaign County demographics & trends

*Attendees await the Grand Opening of the Kickapoo Rail Trail.
Photo by Forest Preserve staff, 2017.*

Community Profile

This section presents, analyzes, and summarizes key metrics to evaluate demographic changes in Champaign County. Population trends help inform how the Forest Preserves provides their services.

POPULATION

Champaign County's population has grown steadily since 1900, from around 50,000 to just over 200,000 today. The first preserve, Lake of the Woods, opened in 1948 during the peak of the county's growth.

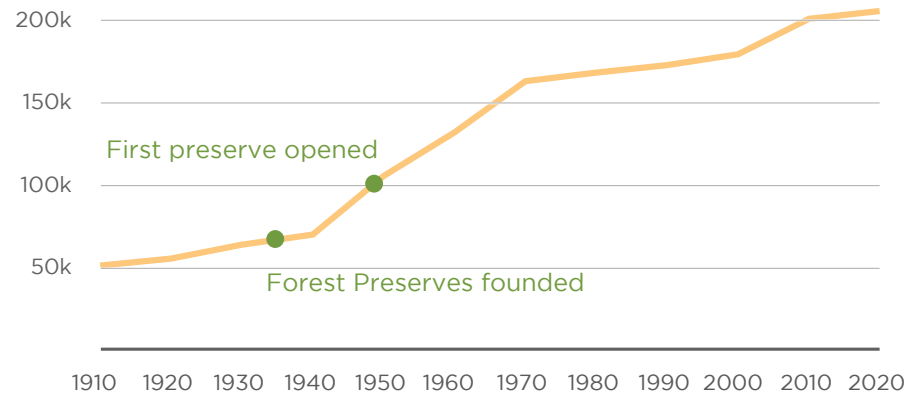
Like many places, Champaign County grew fastest during the post-war boom, expanding by over 50% from 1940 to 1950 and maintaining about 25% growth for the next two decades. According to Census data, the county population has never decreased from one decade to the next.

Municipality Populations

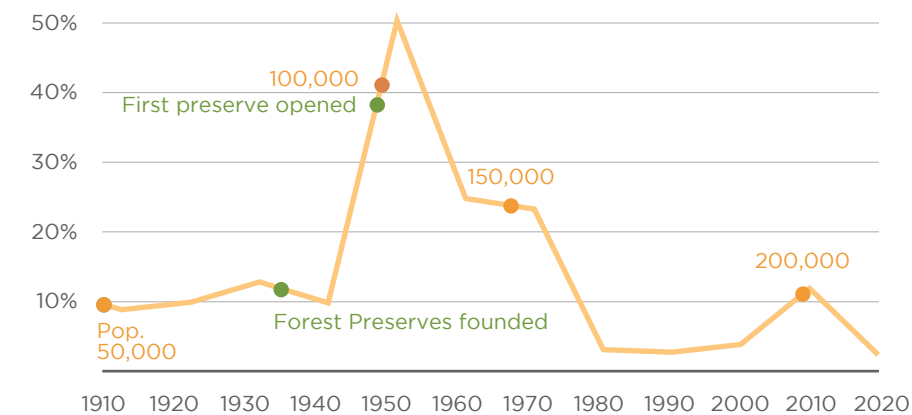
Municipality	2020 Pop.	Change
Champaign	88,302	8%
Urbana	38,336	-8%
Rantoul	12,371	0%
Mahomet	9,434	23%
Savoy	8,857	18%
St. Joseph	3,810	-4%
Tolono	3,604	4%
Fisher	2,062	9%
Philo	1,392	-5%
Sidney	1,208	-2%
Homer	1,073	-11%
Thomasboro	1,034	-9%
Gifford	911	-7%
Ogden	729	-11%
Pesotum	550	0%
Sadorus	402	-3%
Bondville	388	-14%
Broadlands	316	-10%
Ludlow	308	-20%
Royal	293	0%
Ivesdale	265	-1%
Longview	112	-37%
Foosland	75	-35%
Champ. Co.	205,865	2.38%
Illinois	12,812,508	-0.14%

Source: 2020 Census Redistricting Data Summary Files

Champaign County Population Over Time



Population Growth Over Previous Decade

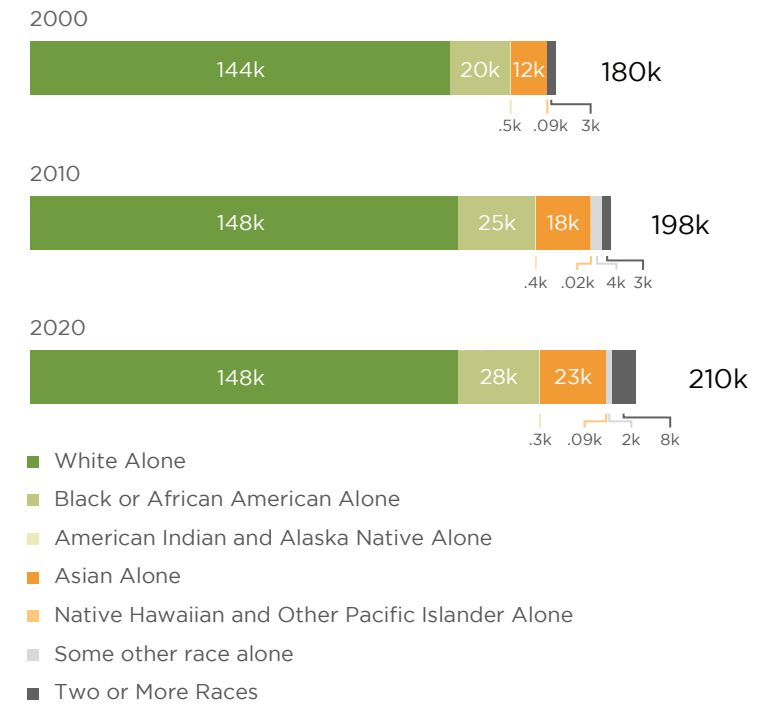


From 2010 to 2020, growth was slower than in any other 10-year period, but the county still gained 5,000 residents. Champaign grew more than any county outside Chicagoland and was one of only 15 counties in Illinois to grow from 2010 to 2020. Still, within Champaign County, 18 of 23 municipalities shrank, and only Champaign (+7,207), Mahomet (+2,176), and Savoy (+1,577) grew by more than 200.

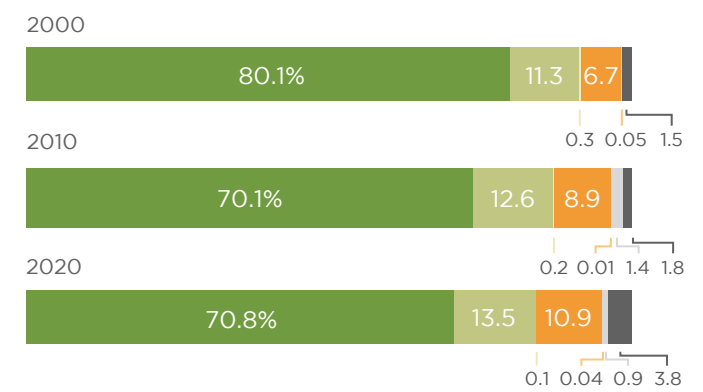
RACE & ETHNICITY

The heavy majority of Champaign County identifies as white alone. However, that majority shrunk from 80% to just over 70% from 2000 to 2020. The population of people identifying as White alone remained relatively stable during that time, while the Black, Asian, and multiracial populations all grew significantly.

Population Count by Race



Population Proportions by Race



Proportion Changes, 2000-2020



By percentage, the multiracial population grew the most, nearly tripling since 2000. By count, the Asian population grew the most, from 12,000 to 23,000. The Black population also grew by 8,000, about 40%, from 2000 to 2020.

See [p. 101](#) for discussion of racial and ethnic demographics and Forest Preserve visitation.

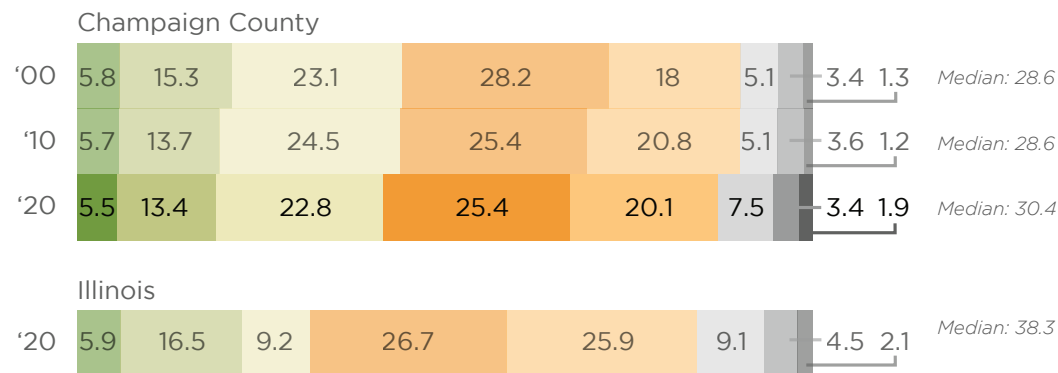
AGE

Champaign County skews young but its proportion of older residents is increasing. The median age of 30.4 in 2020 was nearly 8 years younger than the Illinois median. Much more of Champaign County – 67.1% versus 58.3% for the state as a whole – was under 45 in 2020. Champaign County’s young population is anchored more by students as opposed to families with children. 22.8% of the county was 18 to 24 in 2020 compared to just 9.2% of Illinois, but more of the state was under 18.

While Champaign County’s population remains younger than average, the dynamics are shifting. The three youngest age ranges,

Population by Age Group

■ < 5 ■ 5-17 ■ 18-24 ■ 25-44 ■ 45-64 ■ 65-74 ■ 75-84 ■ 85+



including people from birth to 24, all shrank in proportion to the total population compared to 2010. The proportion of people aged 25 to 44 stayed the same as in 2010 but was still nearly 3% down from 2000. This supports the idea that campus was undercounted when students returned home during the pandemic.

Meanwhile, those 65 and older comprised 2% more of the population than in years past, including 2.4% share increase among people 65 to 74, the largest growth of any age group. The only other group in Champaign County to gain in proportion in 2020 was people 85 and older.

Younger & Older Populations in Champaign County

	0-44	65+
2000	72.4%	9.8%
2010	69.3%	9.9%
2020	67.1%	11.8%

Sources: ACS 5-Year Estimates, 2000 Census of Population and Housing

LANGUAGE

Nearly one in five Champaign County residents speaks a language other than English at home. The county’s bigger cities generally have highest concentration of non-English speakers. In 4 of the 5 largest cities, over 11.8% of the population speaks a language other than English at home.

However, the county’s concentration of non-English speakers is well below the state’s. Only Urbana’s rate is above the state average. In 18 of the 19 smallest municipalities, over 96% of the population speaks English at home.

Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home - Highest Rates

City (Size Rank)	% Pop.
Urbana (2)	24.2
Champaign (1)	22.7
Savoy (5)	20.4
Rantoul (3)	11.8
Champaign County	17.4
Illinois	23.0

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2016-2020

INCOME & POVERTY

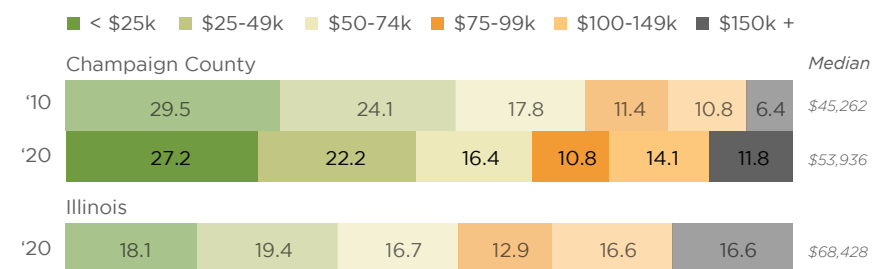
From 2010 to 2020, Champaign County’s median income increased from over \$45,000 to just under \$54,000 (IL: \$68,428). While wealth increased during that time, it became less evenly distributed.

Lower income categories comprised 4.2% less of county households and 8.7% more households earned over \$100,000 than in 2010. However, more households earned under \$25,000 than earned over \$100,000, and the proportion earning between \$25,000

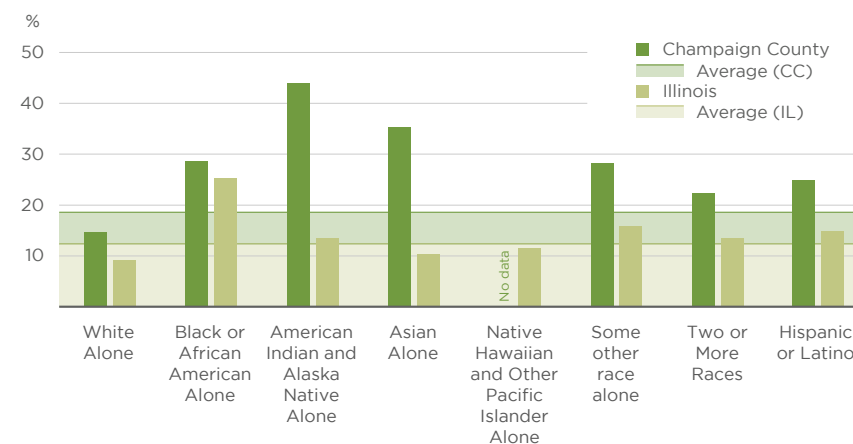
and \$100,000 shrank by almost 4%. With this shrinking of middle incomes, those on the extremes – under \$25,000 and above \$100,000 – comprised over half of all households in 2020.

Champaign County’s poverty rate dropped from 21.3% in 2010 to 19.1% in 2020. However, it was still well above the state’s 12%, and every race and ethnicity measured had a higher poverty rate in Champaign County compared to the state average.

Median Income - Percentage of Households



Poverty Rate by Race & Ethnicity



COMMUNITY PROFILE SUMMARY

Trends show Champaign County continuing to diversify. The Forest Preserves should ensure they meet the changing needs of the county and provide their services equitably.

The poverty rate in the county is relatively high, and wealth inequality increased sharply from 2010 to 2020. The Forest Preserves should take the high these factors into consideration when setting rates and creating fee structures for paid services.

Champaign County is disproportionately young but the older generation is increasing relative to the whole. The Forest Preserves should remain aware of this shift when planning amenities and programming.

Illinois officials have expressed doubt in Census totals, claiming populations were undercounted in 2020 due to the pandemic.



Community Input

Feedback methods & results

Photo by Forest Preserve staff, 2023.

Community Input

Gathering input is vital to creating a plan that responds to and anticipates community needs. To maximize the impact of the Comprehensive Plan, staff gathered feedback through: conversations with residents at farmers markets and street fairs in Champaign, Mahomet, Rantoul, and Urbana; detailed surveys of staff, board members, and other key stakeholders; and a county-wide, generalizable needs assessment survey. This variety of feedback gives the Forest Preserves a more complete picture of participation and attitudes than ever. The input gathered, alongside other background research and analysis of existing conditions, informs the [recommendations](#) of the 2040 Comprehensive Plan.

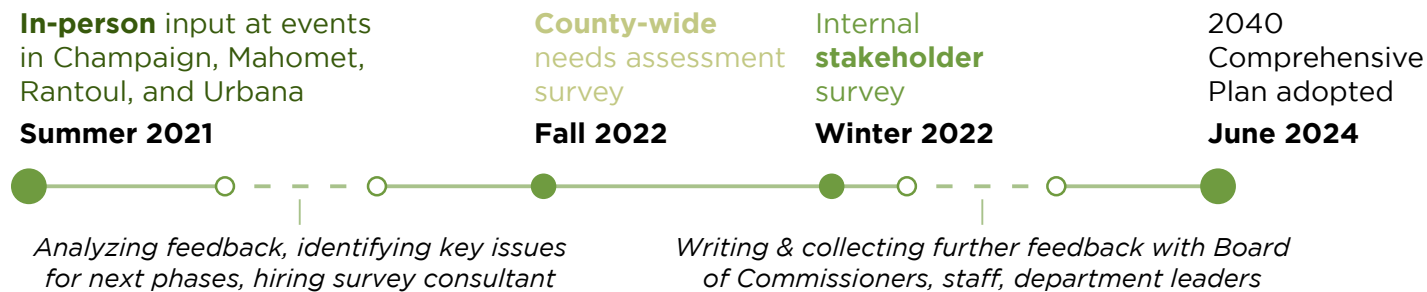


Overview

The Forest Preserves heard from hundreds of people and analyzed their input extensively. Below is a brief description of each phase of input gathering followed by abbreviated results. See [Appendix N-O](#) for methods, [P-U](#) for full stakeholder survey results, and [AJ](#) for the complete county-wide survey.



Community Input Timeline



IN-PERSON INPUT AT COMMUNITY EVENTS

The Forest Preserves began gathering input for the Comprehensive Plan in summer 2021. Rather than hosting an event specific to the Forest Preserves, staff attended farmers markets and street festivals to reach a broader sample of the population. Staff asked attendees about their favorite preserves, what improvements were important to them, and how the Forest Preserves could serve them better. This less formal research was not representative of the whole community but it helped direct the next phases of input, including what topics to explore in greater detail with the needs assessment survey.

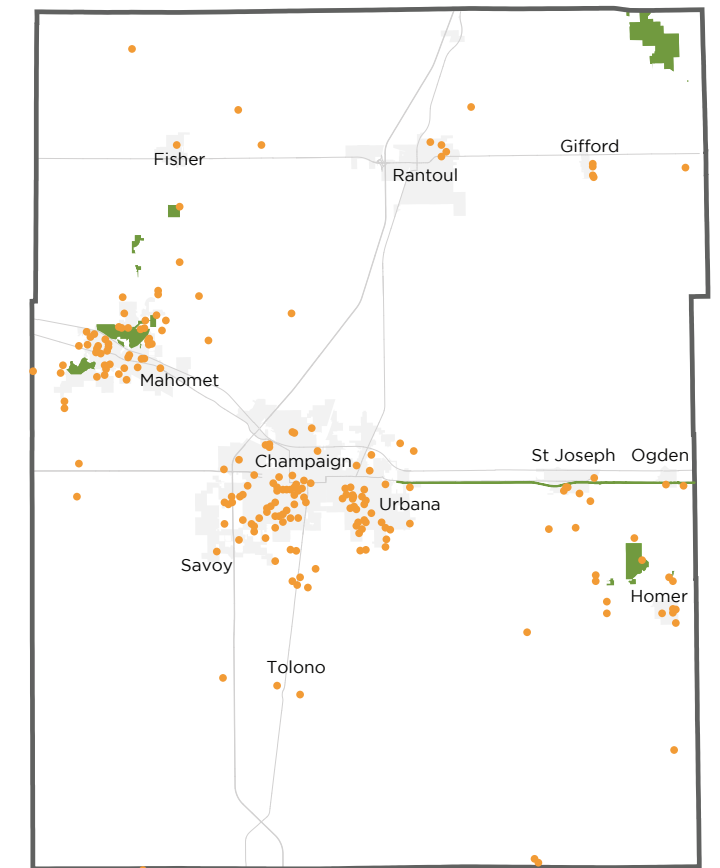
INTERNAL STAKEHOLDER SURVEYS

Staff gathered input internally through a SWOT analysis and two-part visioning activity. SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) is a tool commonly used by organizations to assess and plan for the future. The visioning activity asked participants to imagine up to three lofty 50-year goals for the Forest Preserves, then explain any steps that could be taken in the next 10-years to make progress toward each 50-year goal. As the Forest Preserves' most invested members, the Board of Commissioners, staff, the Forest Preserve Friends Foundation (Foundation), and the Citizens Engagement Committee (formerly Citizens Advisory Committee, or CAC - now CEC) were all offered this survey as an opportunity to provide detailed feedback to help guide the Forest Preserves.

COUNTY-WIDE NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY

As a taxpayer-funded agency, the Forest Preserves strive to represent the desires of residents. Needs assessment surveys are standard practice for agencies to understand public opinion. aQity Research and Insights, Inc. surveyed 469 Champaign County residents to understand their views of the Forest Preserves. Because of the demographics of survey respondents, the survey results are mostly representative of the county, although responses are slightly biased toward users. This survey provides an important update as the Forest Preserves last conducted a needs assessment survey in 2014.

Distribution of Responses to County-wide Survey



The survey conducted by aQity Research and Insights, Inc. sampled from throughout the county and weighted the results to match Census data.

Community Input Results

IN-PERSON INPUT AT COMMUNITY EVENTS

When asked in which of fifteen areas they would allocate their tax dollars, participants' top five responses were more natural areas restoration, new and improved trails, acquiring new land and preserves, extending the Kickapoo Rail Trail, and adding new kids' play areas. Adding natural areas, trails, and lands are consistent responses across all the input gathered for this plan.

'Trails' was the most mentioned topic among free-responses, and adding or improving trails ranked third of fifteen improvements participants could choose from. This feedback aligns with other public feedback from the needs assessment survey, where residents expressed trails were the number one reason they visit. Outdoor Recreation was the most-mentioned category with many comments relating to water activities. Land Preservation and Stewardship were the second and third most common categories. Comments on these top categories were overwhelmingly positive. There are several barriers which keep residents from visiting preserves, including lack of awareness and transportation issues. These issues were also reflected in the needs assessment survey results.

Staff gather feedback at Rantoul Freedom Fridays in July 2021. Photo by Forest Preserve staff.

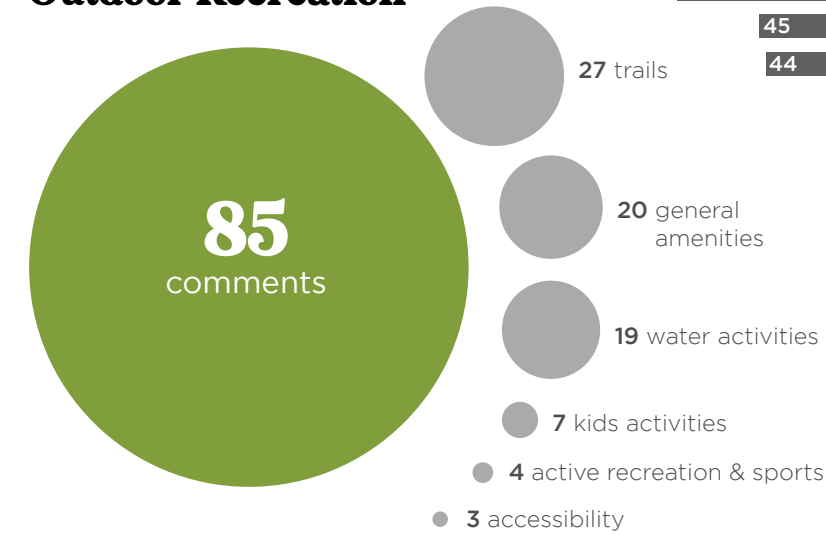


For a colorblind-friendly version of this graphic, see [Appendix P](#).

"Why do (or don't) you visit?"

Free-response comments by category and sentiment
Single comments removed

Outdoor Recreation



"How would you spend your tax dollars?"

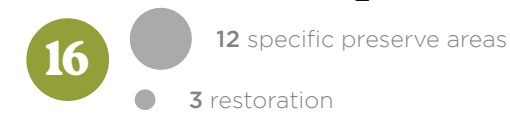
Total votes from all events



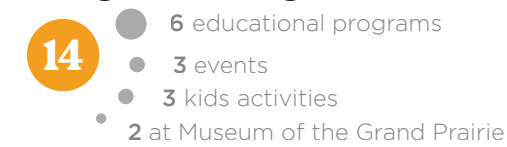
Land Preservation



Land Stewardship



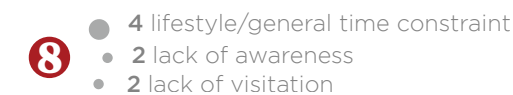
Programming



Facilities & Infrastructure



Barriers to Visitation



Source: Community events input

Community Input Results

INTERNAL STAKEHOLDER SURVEYS

SWOT ANALYSIS

Finances and Land Preservation, or the Forest Preserves' ability to manage land, were the top two categories overall and top-five for each group – Board, staff, and CEC/Foundation. Within the Finance category, comments leaned negative; the majority of respondents were concerned about the impacts of market forces on revenues and expenses (although it is worth noting this survey took place during a period of rapid inflation). Land Stewardship, or the way the Preserves manage land, was also a top-five category for Board and staff responses, which applauded that the Preserves protect land and offer a variety of natural areas. Comments about the land categories were mostly positive. In the community events input, these were also the second and third most commonly mentioned categories.

Outside the top categories, the most commonly mentioned narrower topics were concerns over a difficulty prioritizing efforts as an organization (Weakness: Mission & Vision; mentioned almost exclusively by staff); that there is a lack of public awareness (Weakness: Outreach); that the preserves are too sparsely distributed (Weakness: Accessibility); and that there are opportunities to expand partnerships with other organizations (Opportunity: Outreach).

VISIONING

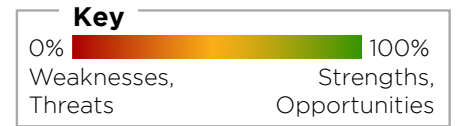
There was no consensus on a 50-year goal among all groups. Survey respondents from the Board of Commissioners and staff both reported they would like to see the Forest Preserves eliminate their carbon footprint in the next 50 years. Staff and CEC/Foundation members said they would like to see the Preserves expand their acreage – most commonly they stated it should double. Board members also said they would like to see the nature center established. Nearly half of staff reported they would like the Forest Preserves to be recognized as a regional leader in conservation.

Among proposed 10-year steps to achieve these goals, the Facilities & Infrastructure category was the most commonly mentioned, mostly as it related to carbon footprint goals. Several Board and staff members stated the Preserves should develop carbon footprint reduction plans. Facilities & Infrastructure was a top-3 category for all groups. Several staff said the Preserves should increase the scale of their ecosystem restoration in order to be recognized as a conservation leader.

For a colorblind-friendly version of this graphic, see [Appendix Q](#).

"Evaluate the Forest Preserves' Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats."

Comments by category and sentiment. Comments with 1-2 occurrences removed.



Source: Internal stakeholder surveys

Community Input Results

COUNTY-WIDE NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY

Nearly two-thirds of survey respondents expressed high satisfaction with the Forest Preserves. Esteem ratings were higher than all other local government agencies and exceeded other counties' ratings of their own forest preserve and conservation districts from previous aQity surveys. Over half of respondents expressed complete satisfaction with the overall experience, upkeep, accessibility, and safety when visiting a Forest Preserve location. 84% of respondents said they had visited a preserve in the last two years, with Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve the most-visited location (70%) followed by Homer Lake Forest Preserve (49%). Almost three-quarters of respondents believed the Forest Preserves provide good value for the taxes they collect (half said 'excellent value'). People said they most liked that properties were well-maintained, that the Forest Preserves provide access to nature, and that they provide trails for walking and biking.

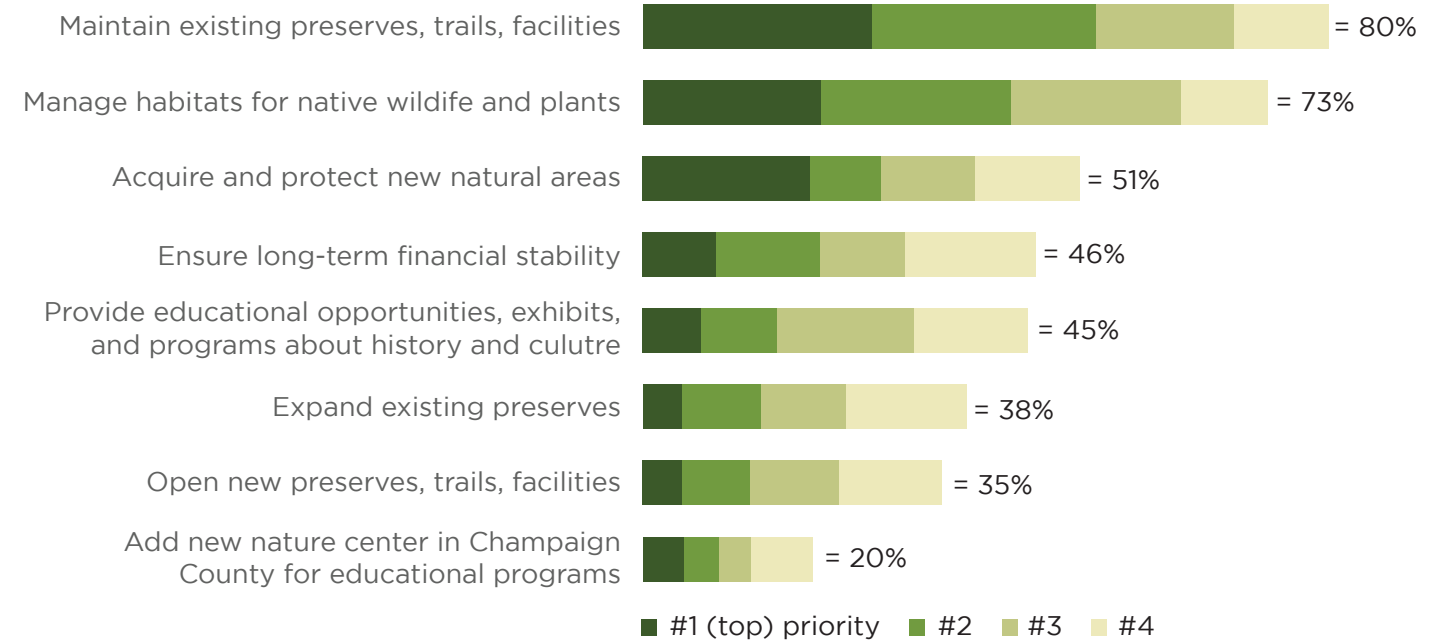
Top suggestions for improvement among open-ended responses included trail maintenance and wayfinding improvements, as well as the Forest Preserves providing more information about their offerings. Regarding specific prospective improvements, respondents placed the most importance on the further development of trails: enhancing them, expanding them, and improving their accessibility. Trails are the main draw to the preserves, as more than four out of five reported they walk or hike during their visits. Likewise, four in five residents wanted it to be a top priority for the Forest Preserves to maintain their existing preserves, trails, and facilities. About three in four said managing habitats should be a top priority, and more than half ranked acquiring and protecting new natural areas in their top four.

Weaknesses/Improvements Sought for the Forest Preserves



Above: County-wide survey (2023) results show most respondents had no suggestions for improvement, but among those offered, better trails and outreach were the top concerns.

Top Priorities/Opportunities for the Forest Preserves



Above: Respondents to the county-wide survey (2023) indicate their top priorities among a list of eight strategic objectives.

Just under half of county-wide survey respondents wanted the Forest Preserves to prioritize ensuring long-term financial stability (46%) and providing educational opportunities (45%). Regarding education, three in five who attended Forest Preserves programming and exhibits were highly satisfied, but two-thirds of respondents were uninterested in participating and over half were unaware or had not participated. In the past two years, 28% of survey respondents reported they had visited Homer Lake Interpretive Center, with 29% having visited at least once every three months. Among this small core of frequent visitors representing about 8% of respondents, 90% were highly satisfied with the programs at the Interpretive Center.

Due to limited staff and program space at the Homer Lake Interpretive Center,^{viii} this survey included a series of questions to evaluate attitudes toward a potential new facility. One in five residents felt adding a new nature center should be a top-four priority, but this ranked last among the eight strategic objectives tested.^{ix} In another question, updating the Interpretive Center or adding a new nature center ranked in the middle of eleven prospective improvements, behind outdoor recreation amenities but ahead of improvements to other facilities.

viii Residents were not informed of the existing facility's limitations in the survey.

ix African Americans were the most likely group to rank "Add new nature center" as their #1 priority (15% vs. 5% overall), a top-four priority (45% vs. 20%), and rate it as important (7.2/10 versus 6.3/10).

Community Input Results

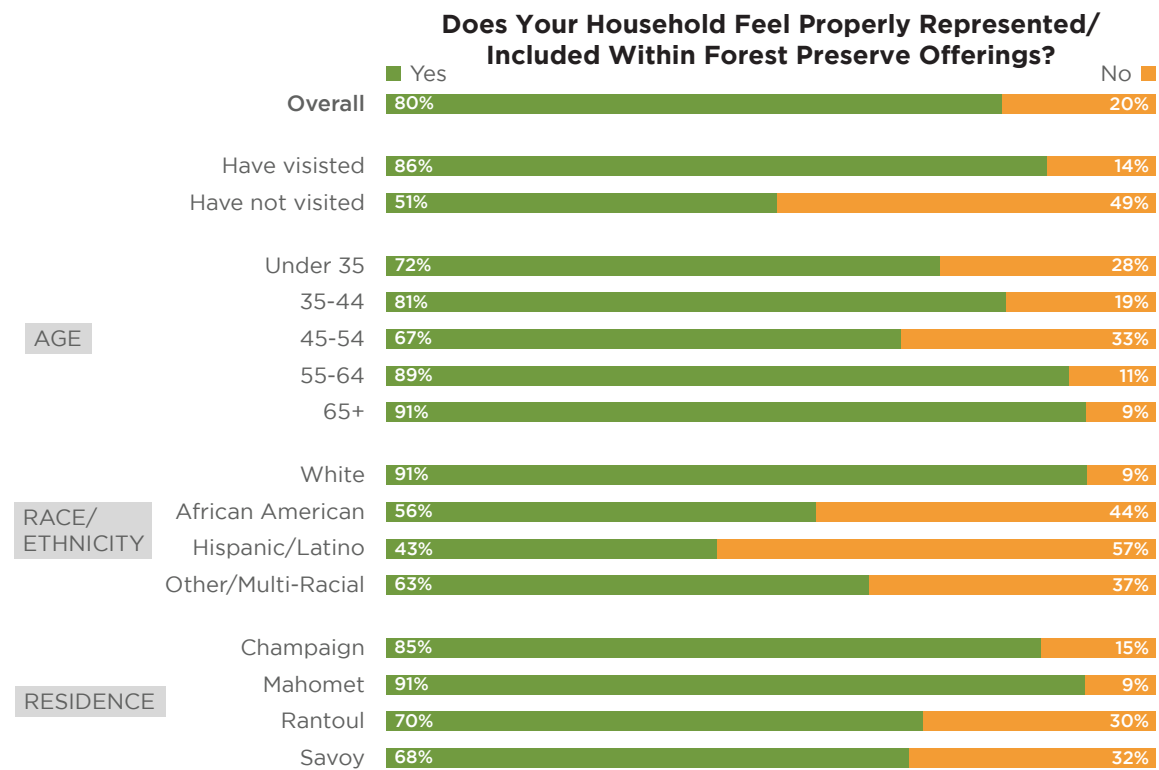
COUNTY-WIDE SURVEY CONTINUED

Conservation and environmental topics (19%) were the most suggested for programs at a potential new nature center, followed by a variety of other nature education ideas. People were most interested in a new facility offering program and activity space, especially outdoors (62% interested and the top priority for 26%). Live animal exhibits were the #2 priority overall (the top priority for 13%). Spaces for adults, children, and teens all drew interest from at least one-third of respondents.

Among locations for a new nature center, residents preferred renovating the existing facility (42%) to building a new facility (37% – with 18%, especially younger residents, preferring Homer Lake, and 19% preferring a location elsewhere). Two in five believed the Forest Preserves should not build a new nature center at all. Residents reported they rarely traveled to nature centers in other counties. Nearly two-thirds of residents said they would

be willing to travel up to a half hour to visit a new Forest Preserve nature center, but 11% reported they would not visit regardless of travel time.

Despite the Forest Preserves' high esteem ratings, one in five respondents felt unrepresented according to a wide range of reasons, including a lack of outreach or a lack of culturally appropriate programming. Groups who rated the Forest Preserves less favorably included Hispanics/Latinos, African Americans, and lower-income residents. These groups also tended to visit less often; 39% of African Americans and 30% of those making under \$35,000 per year said they had not visited in the past two years, both well above the 16% county average. The top reasons county-wide for someone not having visited the Forest Preserves were lack of interest (38%), lack of time (35%), and unfamiliarity (30%).



Left: The results of a question from the 2023 county-wide survey illustrate demographic disparities in whether people feel the Forest Preserves represent them.

Reasons for Not Using/Visiting Forest Preserve Sites



Right: Responses to the 2023 county-wide survey indicate the variety of barriers to visitation.

While lack of interest or time are largely insurmountable barriers, the Forest Preserves have an opportunity to reach the nearly one-third of residents who are unfamiliar. Among those who said they were familiar with the Forest Preserves, most received their information from the website (59%, with 33% stating it was their preferred source), followed by social media (41%; 22% preferred), then word-of-mouth (32%; 8%). Those under 35 received information via social media (57%) and word-of-mouth (44%) significantly more than average. They also visited the Forest Preserves significantly less often than the county average (31% reported not having visited in the last two years vs. the 16%

average), presenting an opportunity to reach them via their preferred methods. Older adults said they used the Leaflet more often (46% vs. 23% average), suggesting the Forest Preserves develop different strategies to engage younger versus older audiences. Additional outreach strategies could be developed to address the disparities of representation among non-white residents, as well as to promote awareness of offerings, such as programming, and the excellent value and stewardship the Forest Preserves represent.

See [Recommendations](#) for more implications of these findings and [Appendix AJ](#) for the full report from aQity Research and Insights, Inc.

Inventory of Facilities

Evaluating facility conditions throughout the preserves

Looking west from the Botanical Garden to the Museum. Photo by R. Gupta, 2019.

Inventory of Facilities

Introduction

With 7 preserves on over 4,000 acres of land and an abundance of built, bought, and natural assets, the Forest Preserves must balance resources for ongoing maintenance and new improvements along with those needed to provide educational opportunities and outdoor recreation. In this section, a summary of each preserve outlining its history, character, and recent improvements sets the stage for considering the improvements and plans needed over the next 25 years.

As a part of the annual budget process, the Forest Preserves update their 5-year capital plan to prioritize spending needs. While the capital plan is a crucial document in balancing the budget and short-term planning, it is not an effective tool in capturing projects that are on the horizon but not currently funded or fully planned. This chapter identifies long-term needs through an examination of each preserve, including its defining characteristics and the state of its facilities and structures.

Facility Report Cards

This chapter contains facility report cards following an introduction to each preserve. These help illustrate the overall state of facilities and structures throughout the preserves, including their use, size, age, and condition. The “score” was calculated by considering accessibility concerns highlighted in the Forest Preserves’ ADA Transition Plan, how well the facility maximizes occupancy, the age of the roof, and the average age of heating and cooling systems.

40

acres of roads & parking

46

miles of trails
14 paved

577

acres of waters

55

miles of shoreline

40 buildings on 138,760 sq ft
26 shelters on 14,050 sq ft
16 restrooms on 6,540 sq ft
79 roofs covering 166,756 sq ft



107 HVAC units

11 passenger vehicles
16 utility vehicles
27 boats

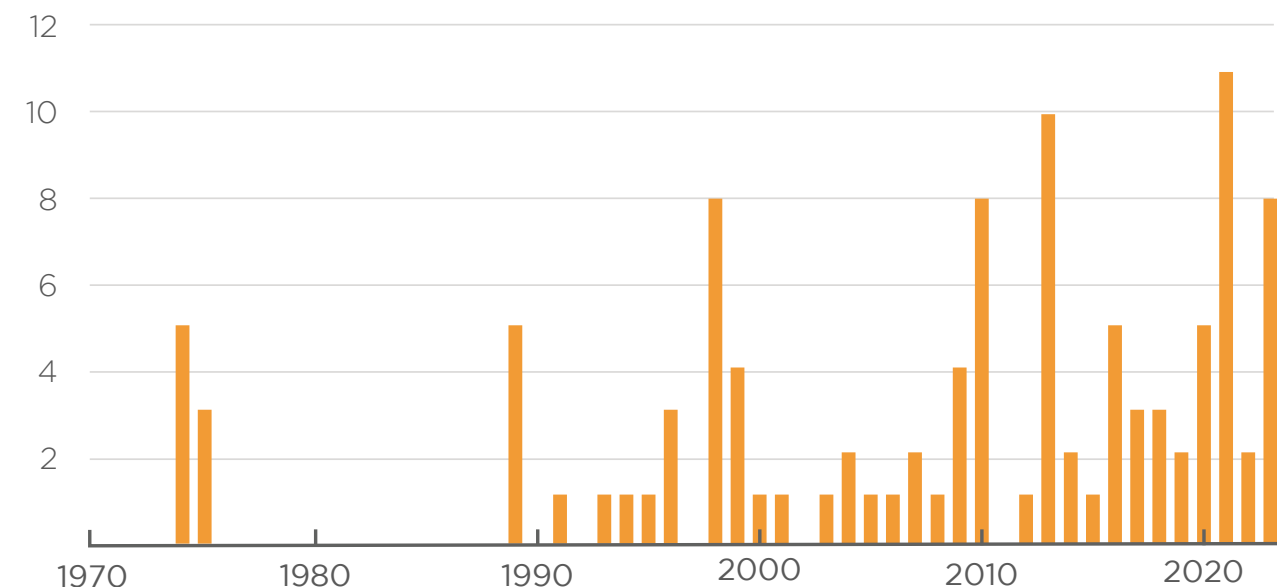
65 golf carts
77 pieces of small equipment
141 pieces of large equipment

HVAC & ROOF INVENTORY

HVAC & Roof Counts and Replacement Costs

	Heating & Cooling Units	Roofs
Count	107 <i>70 at Lake of the Woods 23 at Middle Fork River 12 at Homer Lake 2 at Sangamon River</i>	166,756 sq. ft. <i>103,456 at Lake of the Woods 30,010 at Middle Fork River 18,770 at Homer Lake 9,830 at Sangamon River 4,690 at River Bend</i>
Median Installation Date	2010 <i>Ranges from 1970s to 2022</i>	2003 <i>Ranges from 1960s to 2022</i>
Median Replacement Date	2028 <i>Average lifespan 18 years</i>	2032 <i>Average lifespan 40 years for steel 40 years for composite 20 years for asphalt 15 years for flat</i>
Cost to Replace All	\$855,500	\$1,719,254
Cost to Replace All Due Over the Next 10 Years	\$59,000/year <i>for 10 years, accounting for projected inflation</i>	\$73,000/year <i>for 10 years, accounting for projected inflation</i>

HVAC Units Installed by Year



Heron View

Located near Mahomet, Heron View Forest Preserve is the most recent addition to the Forest Preserves. The first acquisition was in 2020 with a small addition in 2022. Currently 104 acres, the preserve was second-growth floodplain forest prior to its establishment. Development at Heron View is limited; there is access for hiking, but no facilities. The Hazen Bridge, listed on the State Historic Register, spans the Sangamon River but is currently inaccessible to visitors. The preserve is home to diverse natural areas, including floodplain forests with abundant spring ephemeral species, a major draw to the site.

Recent improvements include the construction of a rustic trail and parking area.

PROPOSED STUDIES & IMPROVEMENTS

- Improved river access
- Improved parking



0.1

acres of parking

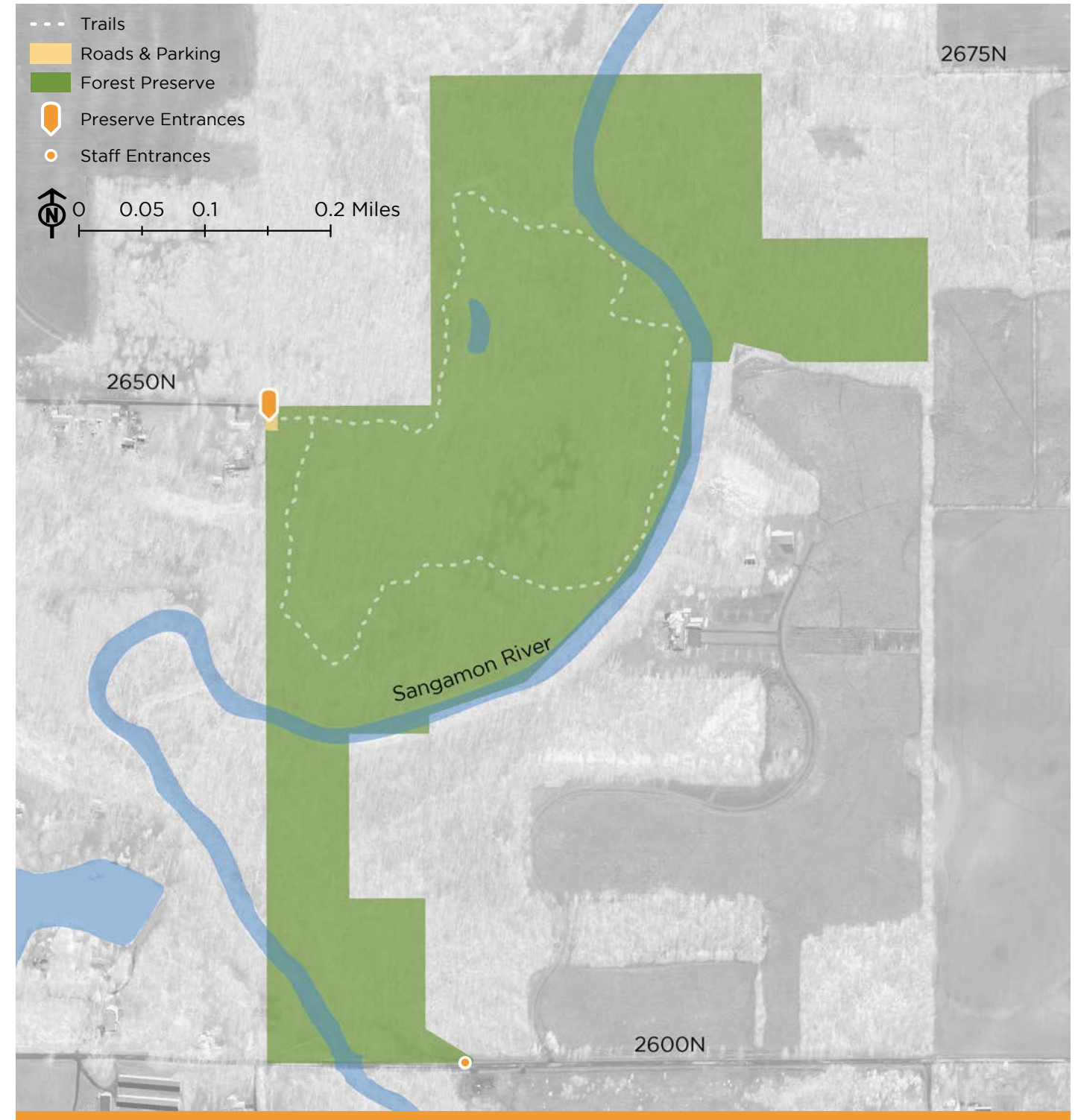
1.3 miles of trails

0 paved

6 acres of waters

2 miles of shoreline

0 buildings
0 shelters
0 restrooms



Homer Lake

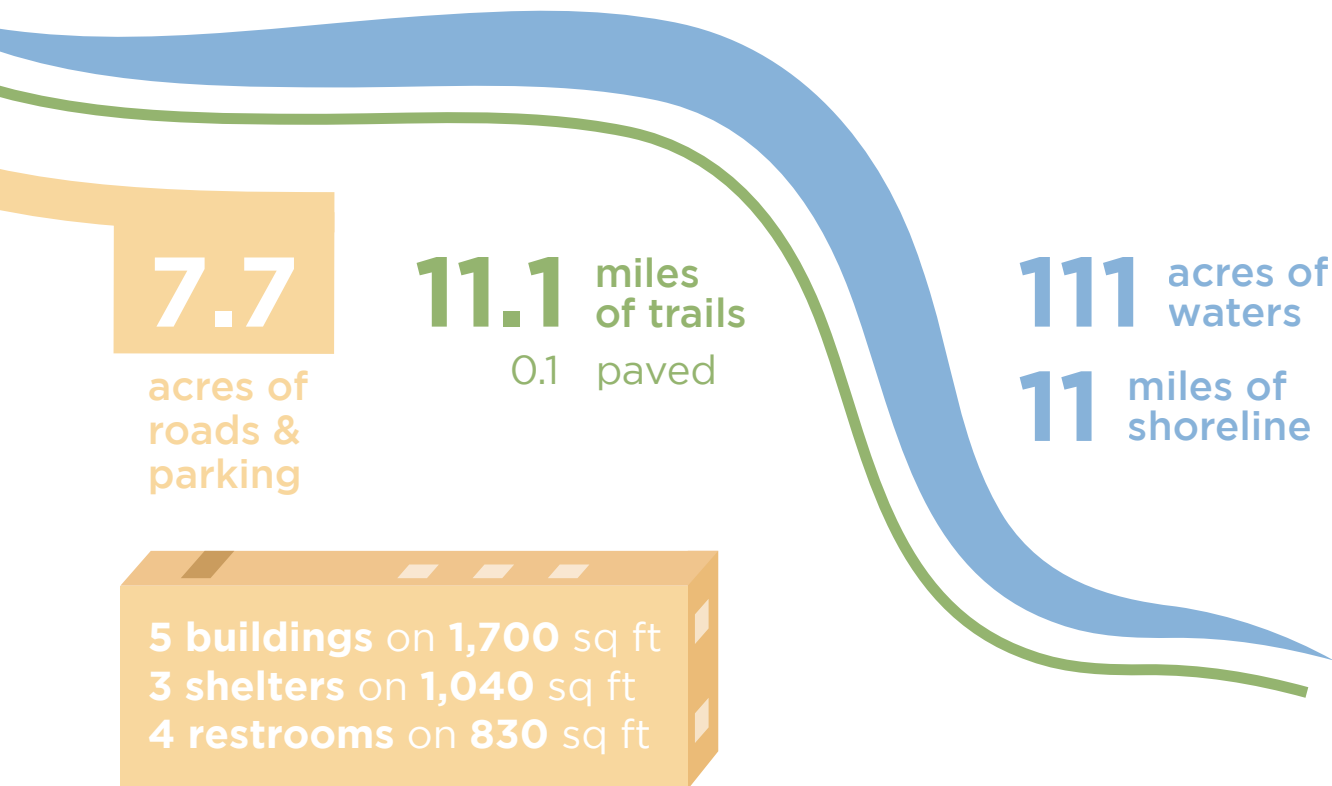
Located near Homer, Homer Lake Forest Preserve was the second preserve to open to the public in the county. First acquired by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) in 1971, the preserve was operated by the Forest Preserves and subsequently acquired in 1992. Currently 764 acres, the preserve was primarily an agricultural site prior to its establishment. The IDNR constructed the now iconic lake and planted hundreds of trees in rows with the intention of using the site as a state tree nursery. The preserve straddles 2.3 miles of the Salt Fork River. Homer Lake offers amenities such as the Homer Lake Interpretive Center, nature playscape, and the Salt Fork Center rental facility. The scenic lake views and paddling activities are popular draws. The preserve is home to diverse natural areas, including prairie restorations, wetlands, and higher-quality woodlands.

Recent improvements include replacement of the observation tower with an open-air shelter, construction of a maintenance cold storage facility, and upgrades to the Salt Fork Center. Current projects include the addition of an accessible kayak launch near the existing North Boat Launch.

See [p. 75-76](#) for facility report cards.

PROPOSED STUDIES & IMPROVEMENTS

- Homer Lake shoreline stabilization and water depth improvements
- Consideration of the Homer Lake Interpretive Center in context of holistic planning of education space
- Improved pedestrian connections near South Homer Lake Road



Kickapoo Rail Trail

Starting in Urbana and terminating west of Danville, the Kickapoo Rail Trail (KRT) is a linear preserve owned by the Forest Preserves, Vermilion County Conservation District, and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. The Champaign County Design and Conservation Foundation (CCDC) acquired the land from CSX Rail in 2013 and coordinated with local leaders to preserve the rail right-of-way for natural areas and outdoor recreation. Currently 144 acres, the preserve was primarily rail line and natural area prior to its establishment. The site comprises a 10-foot multi-use trail with rest nodes, linear stretches of prairie, and localized tree cover.

Recent improvements include the construction of trail in the Village of Ogden. Current projects include the design and construction of the remaining sections of trail in Vermilion and Champaign counties and a trailhead in Urbana.

PROPOSED STUDIES & IMPROVEMENTS

- Kickapoo Rail Trail master plan



0.2

acres of parking

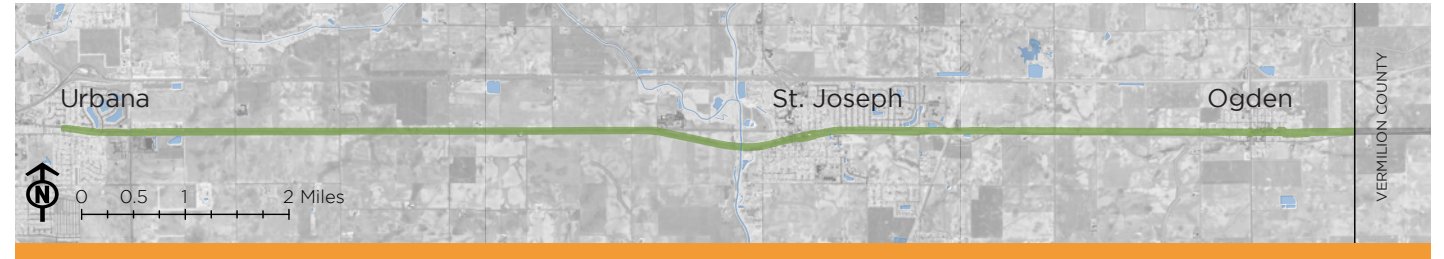
8.5 miles of trails

all paved

0.2 acres of waters

0.1 miles of shoreline

0 buildings
0 shelters
0 restrooms



Below: The Kickapoo Rail Trail meanders to its terminus in St. Joseph. The remaining sections of the originally planned trail, including from St. Joseph eastward to Ogden are expected to be completed by 2026.



Lake of the Woods



Located in Mahomet, Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve was the first preserve to be established, with its initial acquisition dating back to 1948. Currently 874 acres, the preserve was primarily an agricultural site prior to its establishment. The preserve straddles 1.7 miles of the Sangamon River. Although natural areas have expanded over the years, in comparison to other preserves, Lake of the Woods is the most park-like with several rental facilities, a paved bike path, staff offices, the Audubon-certified Hartwell C. Howard Lake of the Woods Golf Course, Mabery Gelvin Botanical Garden, and two man-made lakes. The preserve is home to diverse natural areas, including a few pre-settlement open woodlands, the Buffalo Trace Prairie restoration, and forested floodplains.

Recent improvements include replacement of small shelters throughout the preserve, accessibility improvements at the Peninsula, construction of an artifact storage wing at the Museum of the Grand Prairie, and several facility roof and HVAC replacements. Current projects include renovating the Lake of the Woods Bike Path and reconstruction of the greenhouse at the Discovery Garden.

See [p. 69-73](#) for facility report cards.

Lake of the Woods Golf Course

The Golf Course spans 160 acres and features four buildings and one shelter covering 22,000 square feet. The Forest Preserves have replaced a lot of aging infrastructure at the Golf Course since 2020, but more is nearing the end of its useful lifespan, including the Maintenance Building. See [p. 13](#) for more information on the Golf Course.

20.7

acres of roads & parking

9.7 miles of trails

3.6 paved

60 acres of waters

10 miles of shoreline

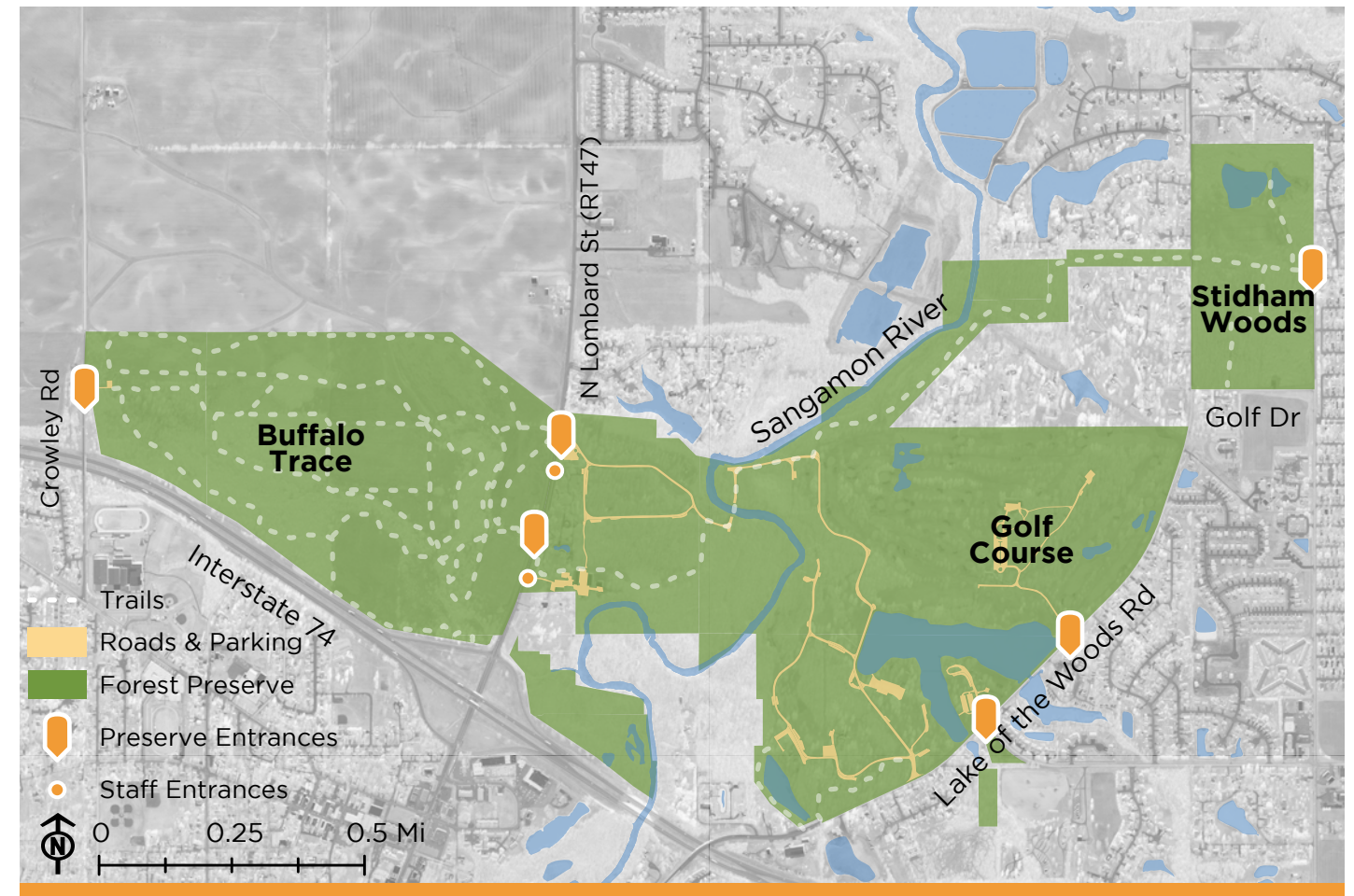
24 buildings on 86,810 sq ft
11 shelters on 7,350 sq ft
6 restrooms on 4,490 sq ft

PROPOSED STUDIES & IMPROVEMENTS

- Connection of the Lake of the Woods Bike Trail to the Mahomet Bike Trail via Lake of the Woods Rd
- Separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic along Trillium Rd
- Sustainability and accessibility improvements at the Museum of the Grand Prairie
- Increased trail connectivity on the west side of the preserve
- Water line and septic system upgrades
- Lake of the Woods and Elks Lake shoreline stabilization
- Study of rental facility utilization and potential upgrades
- Botanical Gardens design improvements
- Continued modernization and renewal of Golf Course facilities and infrastructure



1.5 Mi ▲





Middle Fork River

Located near Penfield, Middle Fork River Forest Preserve is the largest preserve in the county. The first acquisition was in 1974 but several large tracts were purchased in subsequent decades. Currently 1,712 acres, the preserve was a mix of agricultural production and wooded areas prior to its establishment. There are three constructed ponds at Middle Fork River - two primarily for fishing activities, and one for public swimming, the only public beach in the county. The preserve straddles 4.7 miles of the Middle Fork of the Vermilion River. Middle Fork River offers amenities such as the Harry L. Swartz Campground, Willow Pond swimming beach, and Activity Center rental facility. Middle Fork River is the first International Dark Sky Park and has become a regional draw for stargazing. The preserve is home to diverse natural areas, including

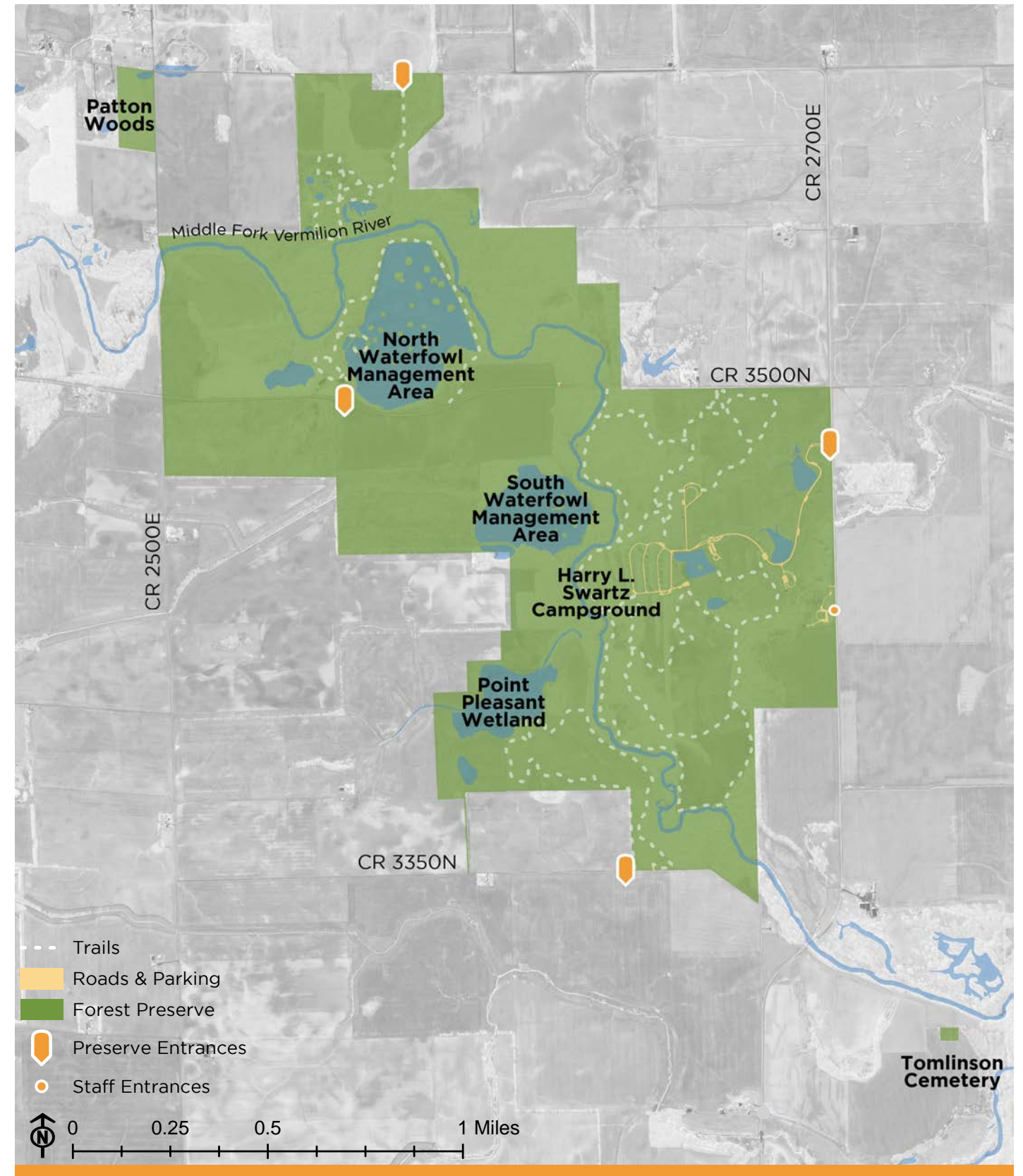
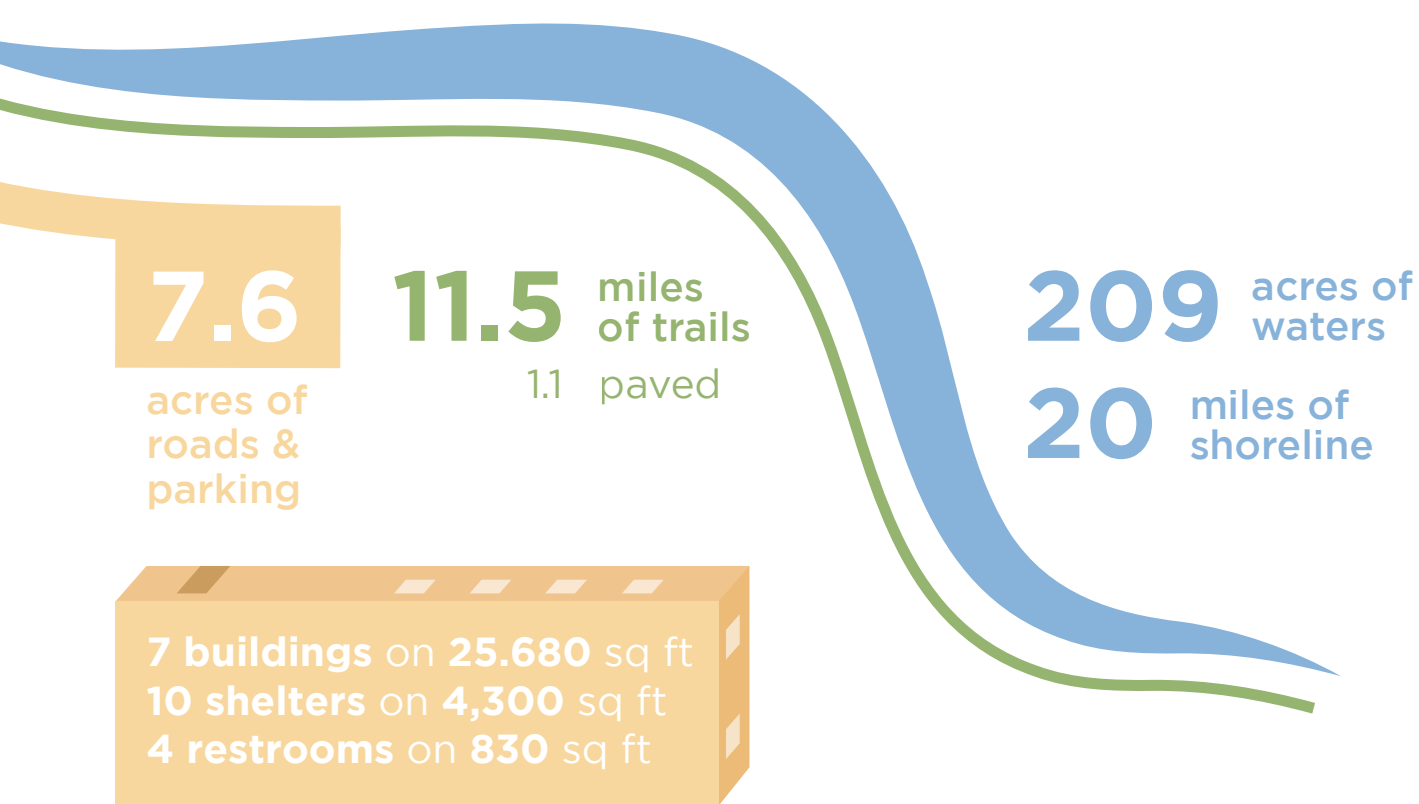
floodplain forests, prairie restorations, and waterfowl management areas.

Recent improvements include renovation of the Activity Center kitchen, reconstruction of Willow Pond, and replacement of several open-air shelters. Current projects include the construction of a new trail for dark sky viewing, a new play area, and campground expansion.

See [p. 74](#) for facility report cards.

PROPOSED STUDIES & IMPROVEMENTS

- Trail utilization and master planning
- Septic system studies
- Waterfowl Management Area water control structure studies



River Bend

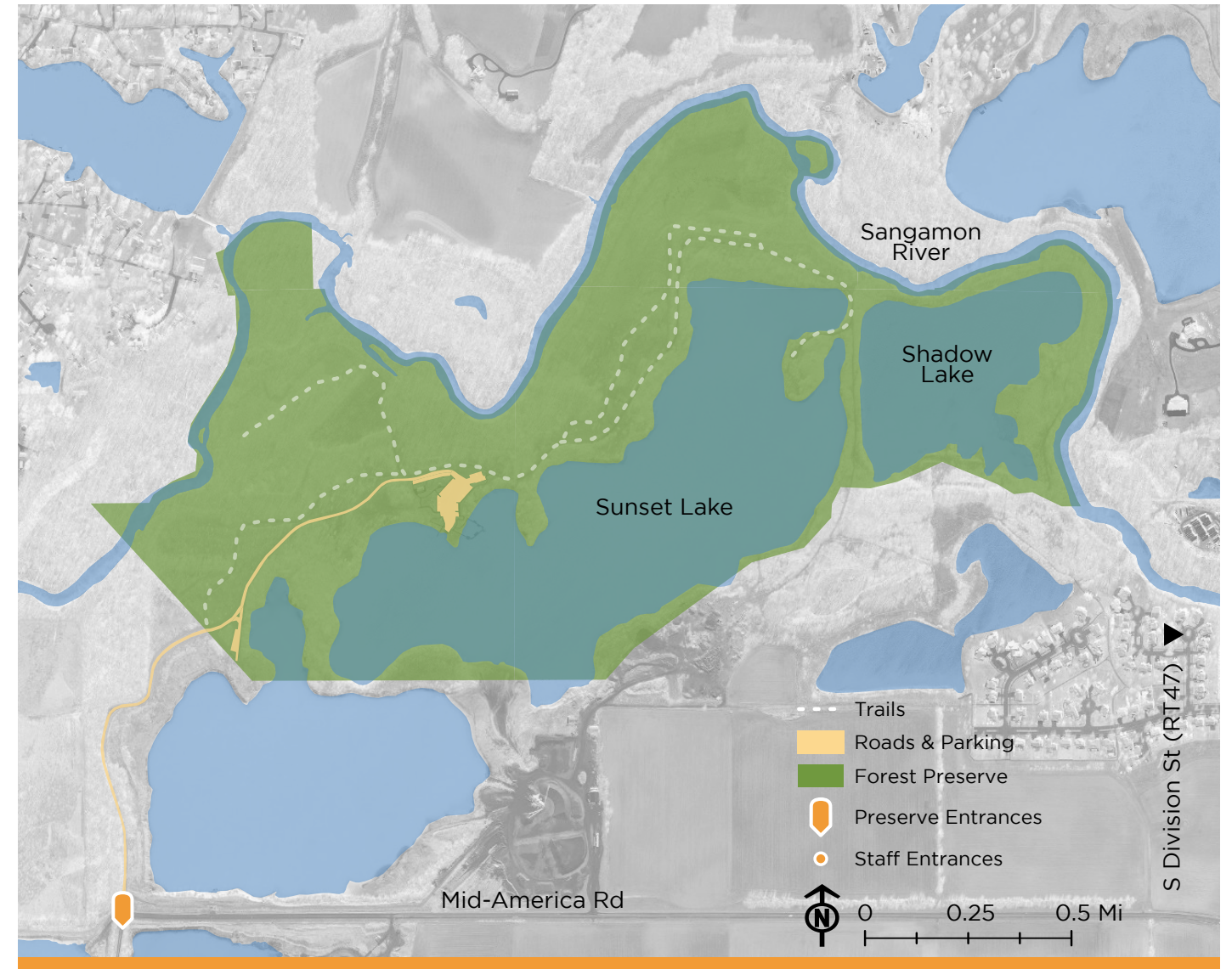
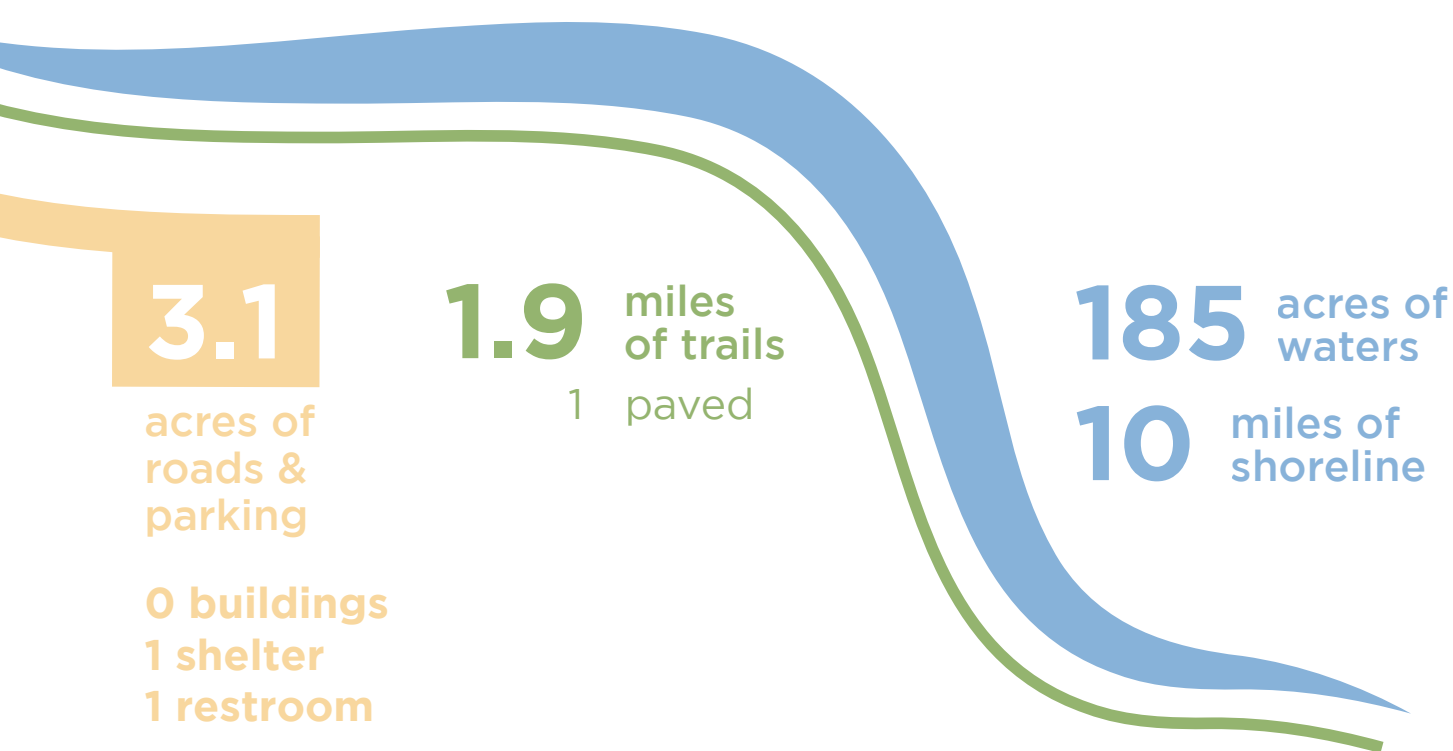


Located near Mahomet, River Bend Forest Preserve is well known for its deep-water lakes and opportunities for paddling and fishing. The first acquisition was in 2001. Currently 284 acres, the preserve was a sand and gravel mining operation prior to its establishment. Amenities at River Bend include an accessible fishing dock, boat launch, restrooms, gravel and rustic trails, and an open-air pavilion. Land use at River Bend is restricted by a conservation easement. Natural areas at River Bend are primarily wooded.

Recent improvements include the construction of an accessible fishing dock.

PROPOSED STUDIES & IMPROVEMENTS

- Improved river access
- Expanded acreage



Sangamon River



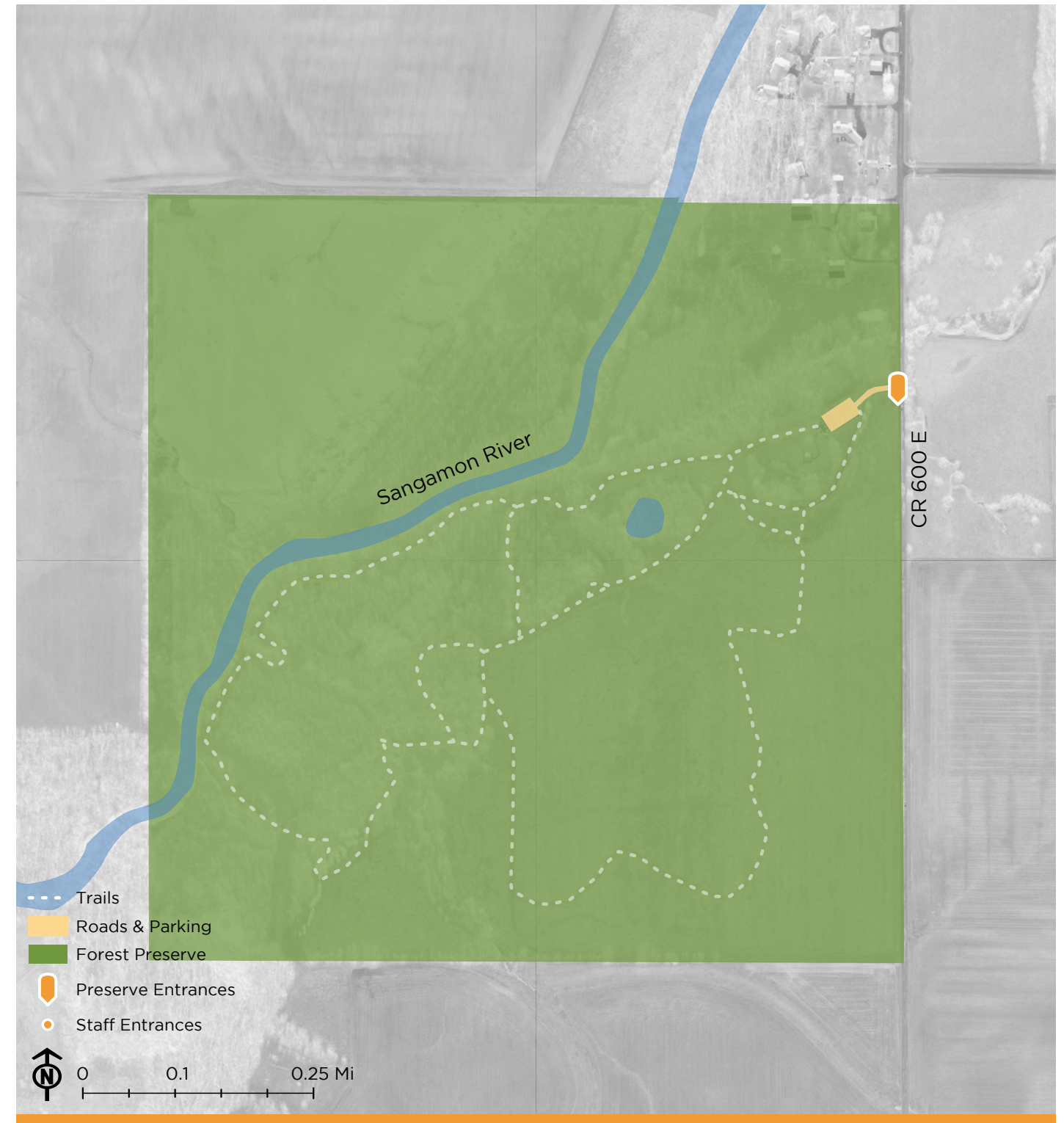
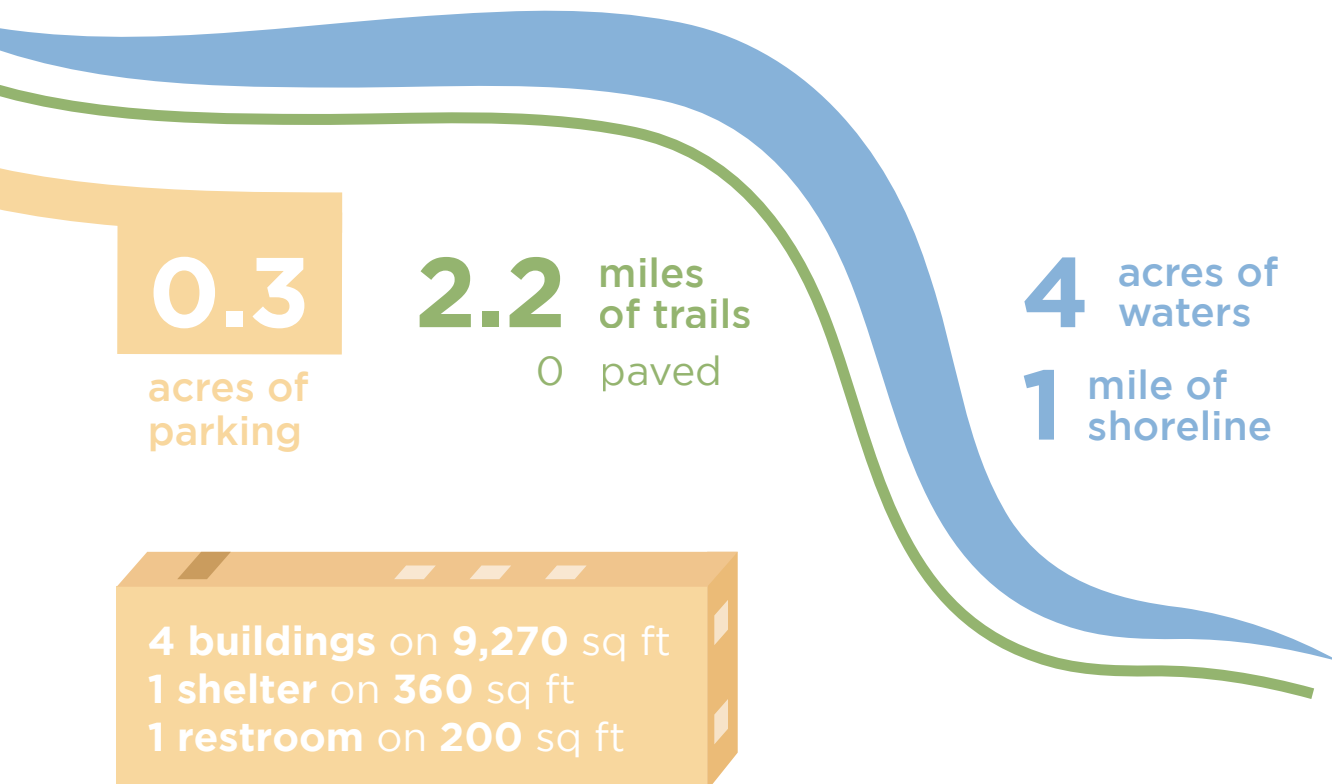
Located near Fisher, Sangamon River Forest Preserve is well known for its oak savanna ecosystem. The preserve was acquired in 2008 and straddles 0.6 miles of the Sangamon River. Currently 160 acres, the preserve was primarily agricultural production prior to its establishment. Over one-third of its acreage is enrolled in the USDA's Conservation Reserve Program to create a riparian forest buffer along the Sangamon River that enhances water quality and wildlife habitat. While the preserve is primarily natural areas restoration, there is a small developed area with parking, an

open-air shelter, and restrooms. The rustic trail which winds through the preserve is a popular draw during summer months with peak prairie blooms. Despite its small size, the preserve is home to diverse natural areas, including floodplain forests and prairie restorations.

See [p. 74](#) for facility report cards.

PROPOSED STUDIES & IMPROVEMENTS

Development of this preserve is limited and there are no current plans to expand amenities.



Facility Report Cards

LAKE OF THE WOODS

“HI” TOWER

870 square feet 1966

Bell tower with a publicly accessible observation deck

D Accessibility

A Occupancy

D Roof

N/A Heating and Cooling

Updates needed include roof replacement and handrail repairs. ADA improvements study needed.

D



HEADQUARTERS

5,560 square feet 1966

Administrative staff offices, significant addition constructed in 1999

B Accessibility

B Occupancy

A Roof

C Heating and Cooling

Several HVAC units in need of replacement. Smaller updates such as carpet replacement and deck replacement needed.

B



ELKS LAKE PAVILION

5,700 square feet 1953

Enclosed rental facility overlooking Elks Lake

A Accessibility

C Occupancy

A Roof

B Heating and Cooling

Recent updates include kitchen expansion, flooring refinishing, and bathroom renovations.

B



COVERED BRIDGE

5,400 square feet 1965

Wooden vehicular and pedestrian bridge crossing the Sangamon River

A Accessibility

A Occupancy

A Roof

N/A Heating and Cooling

No significant updates anticipated as roof and sheathing were recently replaced and the exterior and structure were recently painted.

A



CHAPTER 4: INVENTORY OF FACILITIES

LAKE OF THE WOODS

GOLF COURSE CLUBHOUSE

4,800 square feet 1975

Public facility with rental space, restrooms, and snack bar for golfers

B Accessibility

B Occupancy

D Roof

A Heating and Cooling

Roof in need of replacement. Cosmetic updates should be considered for more dated areas of building.

C



GOLF COURSE MAINTENANCE

5,700 square feet 1960

Staff offices, fleet parking, and interior workspace

B Accessibility

B Occupancy

F Roof

F Heating and Cooling

Given age and condition of facility, demolition and replacement should be considered to better suit operational needs.

F



GOLF COURSE PROSHOP

5,000 square feet 1965

Public storefront, staff offices, and residence

A Accessibility

B Occupancy

B Roof

B Heating and Cooling

Carpet and some windows recently replaced. Generally good condition, some cosmetic updates should be considered.

B



GOLF COURSE CART BARN

5,800 square feet 2007

Storage facility for rental golf carts

A Accessibility

B Occupancy

A Roof

N/A Heating and Cooling

No major updates planned or recommended for this structure.

A



LAKE OF THE WOODS

HENSLEY TOWN HALL

640 square feet 1892

One room schoolhouse relocated to Lake of the Woods in 1983

B Accessibility

D Occupancy

A Roof

N/A Heating and Cooling

Entrance ramps and stairs in need of replacement.

C



IZAAK WALTON CABIN

1,900 square feet 1964

Small rental space overlooking the Sangamon River

C Accessibility

D Occupancy

A Roof

A Heating and Cooling

Exterior deck in need of replacement. Interior updates and cosmetic improvements should be considered.

C



LAKE OF THE WOODS PAVILION

5,850 square feet 1951

Enclosed rental facility overlooking the main lake at Lake of the Woods

B Accessibility

C Occupancy

B Roof

B Heating and Cooling

Cosmetic interior updates and significant restroom renovation needed. Additions such as kitchen space should be considered.

C



SYCAMORE SHELTER

950 square feet 1975

Public rental facility

C Accessibility

F Occupancy

B Roof

N/A Heating and Cooling

Due to low utilization of space, proximity to floodplain, and need of deferred maintenance, demolition should be considered.

F



FACILITY REPORT CARDS

LAKE OF THE WOODS

MUSEUM OF THE GRAND PRAIRIE

7,500 square feet 1968

Public museum with extensive exhibits and a gift shop

B Accessibility

C Occupancy

A Roof

C Heating and Cooling

Several HVAC units and both ADA lifts in need of replacement. Exterior siding in need of repair or replacement.

C



MUSEUM ANNEX

2,400 square feet 1963

Former residence converted to office space

C Accessibility

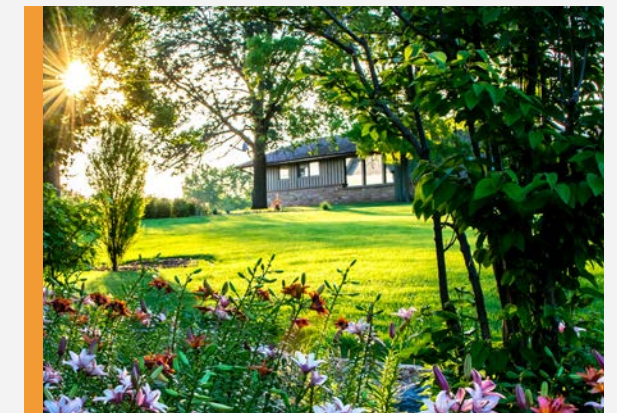
B Occupancy

A Roof

C Heating and Cooling

Interior cosmetic upgrades needed. Consideration of more significant renovation to better fit staff usage should be considered.

C



MUSEUM EDUCATION CENTER

4,160 square feet 2013

Classroom space and small artifact storage

A Accessibility

F Occupancy

B Roof

B Heating and Cooling

No significant physical improvements needed. Opportunities to increase usage of space should be considered.

C



MUSEUM RANKIN CENTER

2,300 square feet 2020

Large artifact storage and processing area

A Accessibility

B Occupancy

A Roof

A Heating and Cooling

No major updates planned or recommended for this structure.

A



LAKE OF THE WOODS

RIVERVIEW RETREAT CENTER

1,800 square feet 1953

Cabin like rental facility located at a satellite property north of Lake of the Woods

C Accessibility

F Occupancy

F Roof

D Heating and Cooling

Due to low utilization of space and need of deferred maintenance, demolition should be considered.

F



ROTARY HILL PAVILION

2,700 square feet 1977

Partially enclosed rental facility within the Golf Course, often used for golf outings

B Accessibility

F Occupancy

D Roof

N/A Heating and Cooling

With recent cosmetic upgrades, facility generally suitable for its usage. Roof in need of replacement.

F



NATURAL RESOURCES OFFICES & STORAGE

3,000 square feet 1980

Staff offices, fleet parking, and interior workspace

B Accessibility

B Occupancy

D Roof

B Heating and Cooling

Facility in need of a new roof and renovations. Long term use should be further studied.

C



WEST MAINTENANCE OFFICES & SHOP

9,000 square feet 1989

Staff offices, fleet parking, and interior workspace

B Accessibility

B Occupancy

B Roof

D Heating and Cooling

Roof scheduled to be replaced. Other renovations should be considered.

C



FACILITY REPORT CARDS

MIDDLE FORK RIVER

SHOWER HOUSE

1,850 square feet 1981

Public restroom and shower facility for campers

A Accessibility

A Occupancy

A Roof

N/A Heating and Cooling

Cosmetic and plumbing upgrades recently completed.

A



RESIDENCE

3,000 square feet 2008

Single-family housing for staff

B Accessibility

A Occupancy

B Roof

C Heating and Cooling

Bathroom recently renovated. Mechanical units aging.

B



ACTIVITY CENTER

3,400 square feet 1985

Staff offices, fleet parking, and interior workspace

B Accessibility

F Occupancy

B Roof

A Heating and Cooling

Kitchen recently expanded, upgraded, and brought to ADA standards.

C



SANGAMON RIVER

RESIDENCE

1,800 square feet 1919

Single-family housing for staff

D Accessibility

A Occupancy

B Roof

A Heating and Cooling

Recent upgrades include new carpeting, attic insulation, bathroom renovations, and interior painting.

B



HOMER LAKE

INTERPRETIVE CENTER

2,500 square feet 1975
Public nature center and staff offices

- B** Accessibility
- B** Occupancy
- A** Roof
- D** Heating and Cooling

C

Facility being studied to determine its long term usage in relation to programming and staff needs.



SALT FORK CENTER

2,900 square feet 1997
Indoor rental facility overlooking Homer Lake

- B** Accessibility
- C** Occupancy
- F** Roof
- C** Heating and Cooling

F

Roof and mechanical units in need of replacement. Cosmetic upgrades should be considered.



WALNUT HILL SHELTER

5,700 square feet 1975
Semi-enclosed rental facility overlooking Homer Lake

- A** Accessibility
- C** Occupancy
- A** Roof
- B** Heating and Cooling

B

Recent moderate updates include kitchen expansion and flooring replacement. Bathrooms in need of significant renovation.



MAINTENANCE FACILITY

6,800 square feet 1975
Staff offices, fleet parking, and interior workspace

- B** Accessibility
- B** Occupancy
- A** Roof
- C** Heating and Cooling

B

Mechanical upgrades needed, but facility overall in good condition.



HOMER LAKE

RESIDENCE

3,000 square feet 1975
Single-family housing for staff

- B** Accessibility
- A** Occupancy
- D** Roof
- F** Heating and Cooling

D

Some mechanical units recently replaced, but others aging. Roof in need of replacement.



*A Great Blue Heron hunting on Homer Lake.
Photo by J. Bobbitt, 2022.*



Finances

Contextualizing the Forest Preserves' financial performance through key indicators & comparisons to other districts

A gray treefrog at Point Pleasant, Middle Fork River Forest Preserve. Photo by D. Mills, 2019.

Finances

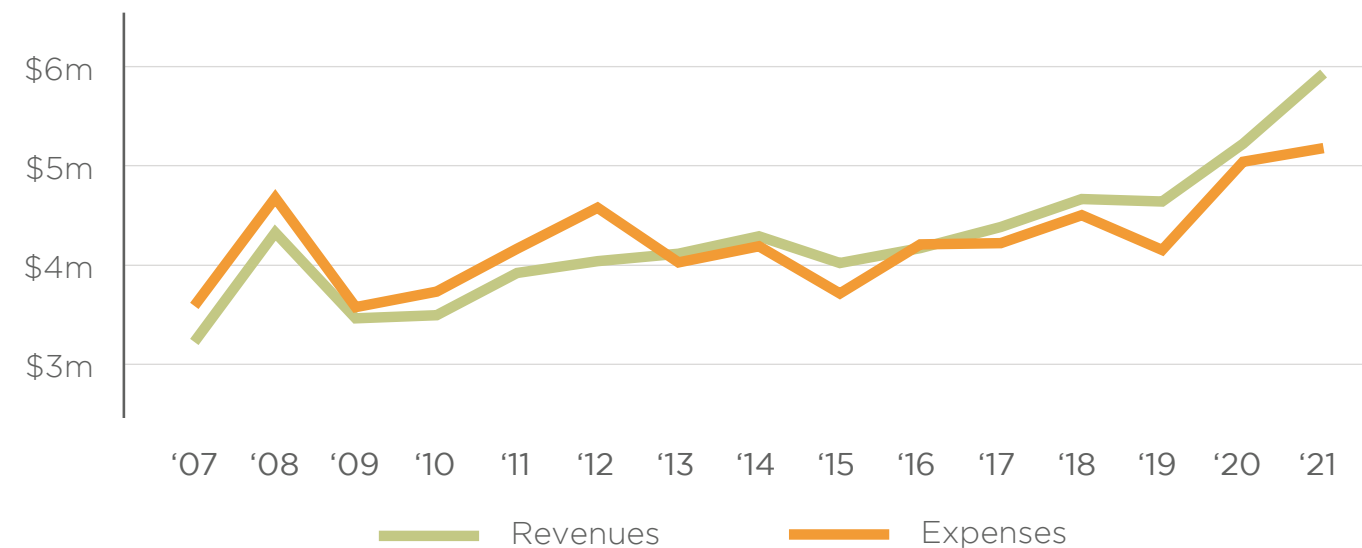
Positive financial performance is crucial to the Forest Preserves' ability to provide public services and operate as an employer. The Comprehensive Plan analyzes performance across key financial indicators and compares the Champaign County Forest Preserves to similar forest preserve districts to contextualize their long-term financial outlook.

OVERVIEW OF REVENUES AND EXPENSES

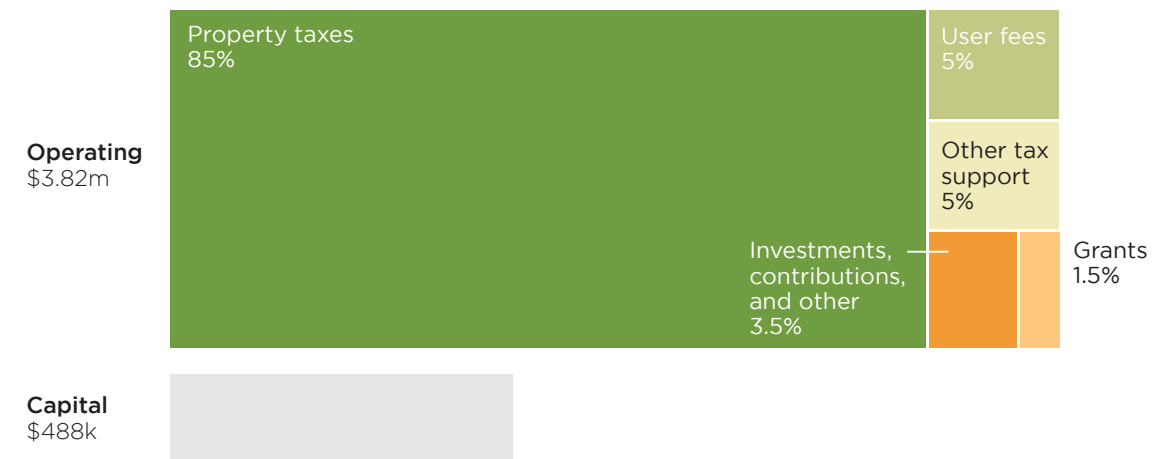
The Forest Preserves are primarily supported by property tax revenues, receiving about \$1 for every \$100 in property taxes paid by Champaign County residents. A 2020 referendum increased the amount of property tax revenue the Forest Preserves receive. From 2007 to 2021, property taxes comprised an average of 85% of annual operating revenues. Over that period, combined capital and operating expenses averaged about \$4.3 million per year.

The Forest Preserves are also supported by the Forest Preserve Friends Foundation, a non-profit that generates grant support through charitable contributions and fosters relationships with other agencies to make Forest Preserves projects possible.

Total Revenues and Expenses



Revenues Average Annual Value 2007-2021



Expenses Average Annual Value 2007-2021



In addition to general revenues and expenses, operating and capital expenses are useful metrics for evaluating trends in financial performance over time. Operating expenses refers to costs to keep the business running, like salaries, wages, employee benefits, supplies, legal fees, contracted services, and utility payments. Capital expenses are long-term investments important to the organization's growth, such as land acquisition, replacing vehicles and other capital equipment, restoring prairies and woodlands, and rehabilitating aging buildings. The following sections evaluate the Forest Preserves' performance as an organization and alongside similar districts.



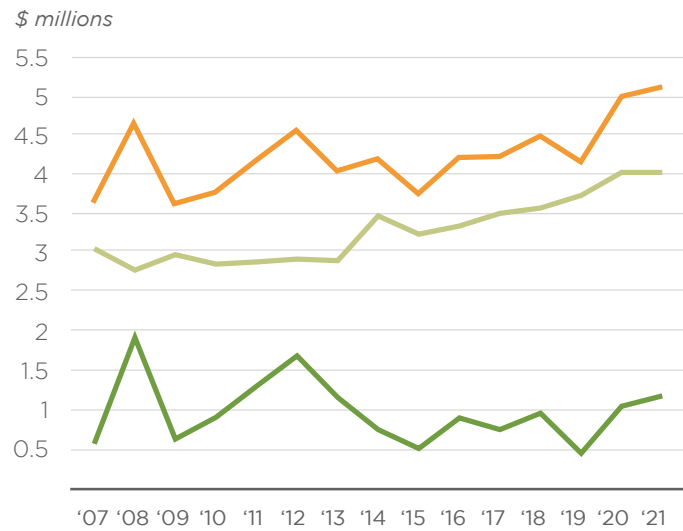
BENCHMARKING FINANCE TRENDS WITH SIMILAR FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICTS

Since most states (and most counties in Illinois) do not have forest preserve districts, the data for comparison are hard to come by. Staff gathered key budget reporting metrics from the three forest preserve districts most like the Forest Preserves based on county population, county size, and acres managed. The performance of districts with similar capacities helps contextualize the Forest Preserves' finances. DeKalb, Kendall, and Rock Island Forest Preserve Districts all manage within 1.3 acres per 1,000 residents and 4.2 acres per square mile of county land, relatively small differences given the variation among districts in Illinois.

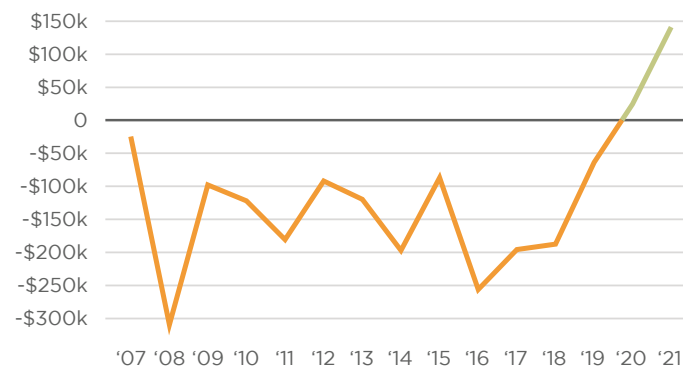
METRICS GIVE A SNAPSHOT OF FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

Staff measured the Forest Preserves' operating and capital expenses before comparing these metrics to similar districts. The Forest Preserves' operating expenses have risen steadily over the better part of the last decade, largely due to the growth in full-time staff and efforts to establish more competitive wages. Capital expenses have been more volatile - it is common for capital to fluctuate year-to-year - but rose from 2019 to 2021.

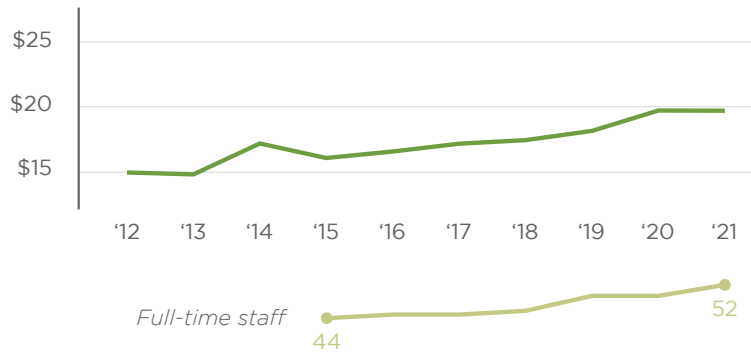
Operating, Capital, and Total Expenses



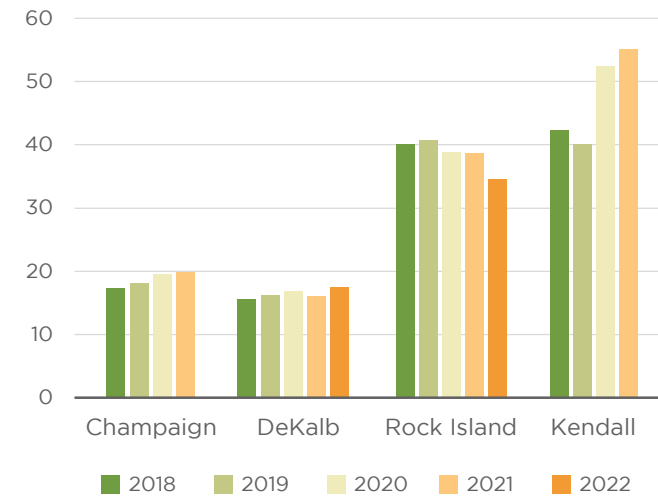
Golf Course Net Profits



Operating Expenses Per Capita



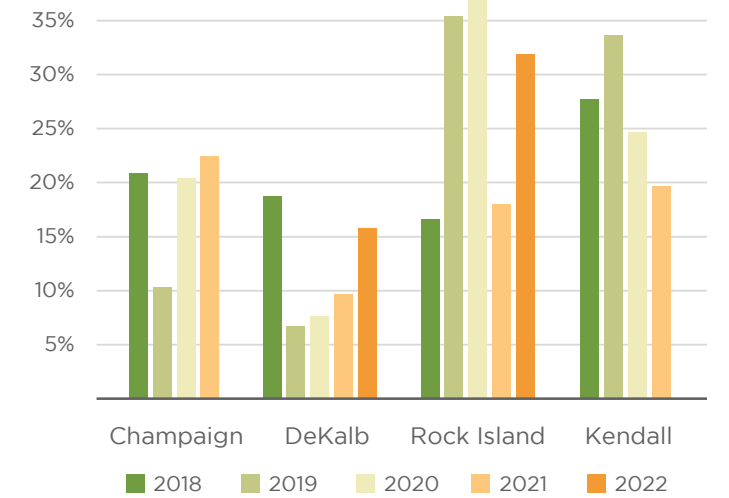
Operating Expenses Per Capita Comparison



Relative to similar districts, the Forest Preserves' operating expenses per capita are low, similar to DeKalb's but about half the annual spending per capita of Rock Island and Kendall. Champaign's pattern shows steady slight annual growth, a trend that has continued since 2013 which reflects continued additions of staff and increases in median wages. Kendall County Forest Preserve District's costs rose dramatically, while Rock Island is the only county whose operating expenses per capita fell from 2018 to 2022.

The Forest Preserves' capital expenses show a general upward trend as increased property tax revenue from the 2020 referendum has

Capital as % of Total Expenses Comparison



allowed the Forest Preserves to invest in infrastructure improvements as well as new projects. This trend continued in 2022 and 2023. Capital expenses are more variable year-to-year due to the relative size of projects by year and the availability of grant funding.

The Forest Preserves' use of grant funding has minimized the overall costs of these infrastructure improvements, as referendum funds have helped provide matching funds. Since 2000, the Forest Preserves have added four new preserves with grants and donations covering 88% of acquisition costs. The Kickapoo Rail Trail has been nearly fully funded through grants and donations.

GOLF COURSE FINANCES

The Lake of the Woods Golf Course operates with its own proprietary fund that is intended to be self-supporting. The Golf Course has increased its annual net profits every year since 2016. As a result, the course has become more self-sustaining by covering operating and capital expenses.

FINANCES SUMMARY

The Forest Preserves' performance is typical for a district its size given the results from a small sample of comparison districts. Operating expenses continue a slow rise reflecting continued investment in staffing, while the increase in capital expenses relative to operating expenses reflects the Forest Preserves' expanded capacity to provide services and maintain facilities due to the 2020 referendum.

6

 2040

Recommendations

Well-supported, strategic directions to guide the Forest Preserves through 2040

*Bluebells in springtime at Heron View Forest Preserve.
Photo by M. Nguyen, 2023*

Recommendations

INTRODUCTION: A PATH TO 2040

The implications of all the context laid out in this plan are encompassed in the recommendations that follow. Recommendations are broad directions for the Forest Preserves to pursue in order to better meet the needs of the public. They are flexible and adaptive goals with objectives that provide guidance without being overly prescriptive. More specific objectives follow in strategic plans, which then inform annual budgets. There is a through-line from these recommendations to staff's daily work, ensuring the Forest Preserves are always moving forward in a direction the public supports. This section lays a path for the Forest Preserves to continue connecting Champaign County residents more and more to the nature around them for the next decade-plus.

These recommendations emerged from the background sections' robust research and input, then were refined and verified by staff and the Board of Commissioners. Staff conducted input at several community events in 2021, used that input to inform a community-wide survey in 2022, then solicited input from internal stakeholders including staff and Board members. Staff analyzed this input alongside analysis of existing conditions and trends and determined several potential directions for the Forest Preserves. Staff presented these directions and their supporting evidence (see [Appendix B-M](#)) to the Board of Commissioners, which expressed its support.

Achieving these objectives will help the Forest Preserves fulfill their mission and expand their impact by providing public services better and to more people.

By 2040, the Forest Preserves will:

- Create a plan to improve and expand programming and provide staff and visitors a better space;
- Offer an increasing variety of enriching, comfortable, adventurous, and accessible experiences with nature to the whole county;
- Ensure these and other existing and future investments are worthwhile and do not spread their resources too thinly
- Increase engagement among new and existing audiences;
- Continue their conservation efforts and explore new ways to lead the county in stemming the causes and dampening the effects of climate change; and
- Buy and restore more land to provide more benefits to people and planet.



IMPLEMENTATION

Recommendations will be enacted through several 3- to 5-year strategic plans. The recommendations themselves are intentionally broad to create a flexible platform for defining ways to achieve the recommendations in forthcoming strategic planning processes. Each recommendation contains "guidelines for implementation," which are ideas to help address each recommendation by responding to the plan's feedback and analysis. These ideas are a starting point for implementation and should be considered during strategic planning processes. Because the 2040 Comprehensive Plan's recommendations are not overly prescriptive, the initiatives in each strategic plan will reflect present, context-sensitive interpretations of the recommendations and their supporting data.

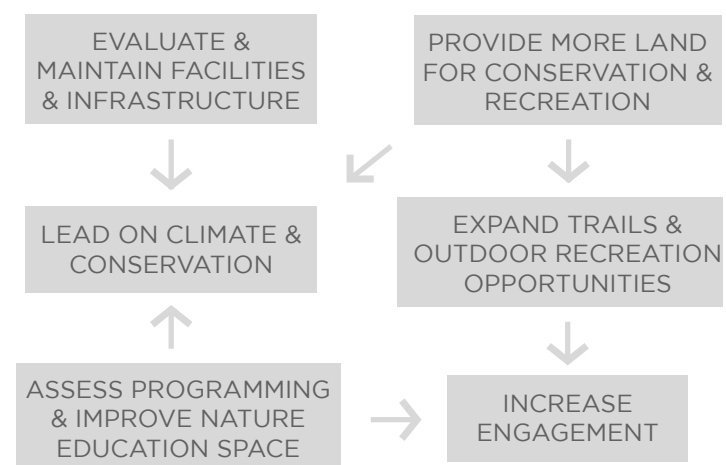
The Board of Commissioners expressed support for all six recommendations, but their individual rankings of the recommendations indicated no consensus. Therefore, the recommendations are not ranked in the Comprehensive Plan and will be prioritized in strategic plans to follow according to pressing needs and the availability of resources.

To ensure the Forest Preserves make progress toward this plan's recommendations, each strategic plan will include implementation tables. As shown below, the tables will include strategies for each recommendation, actions to achieve the strategy, the department(s) responsible, the timeline for completion, and metrics to measure whether the action was successful.

Moving from plan (to Plan) to Action



Synergies Among 2040 Recommendations



Department

Who is responsible?

Timeline

When will it be done?

Measurement

How will we know it was successful?

Recommendation

Create a programming plan & improve the nature education space

Nature-related education is in demand throughout Champaign County and across the state. High satisfaction ratings of Forest Preserve programs but participation by only a small core of users indicates an opportunity to engage new users through programs. While in-person program participation at the Forest Preserves has increased each year since the pandemic, it has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Comparisons with other districts suggest the Forest Preserves could expand their reach by providing more offsite programming, particularly at schools (see [p. 91](#)). Further assessment of programming is needed. This assessment will provide the basis for a programming plan – also recommended by the Museum and Education Strategic Institutional Plan (2021) - to help the Forest Preserves provide high-quality programs to as many people as possible.

The Forest Preserves are uniquely positioned to offer high-quality nature-related programming, which is otherwise somewhat limited in Champaign County. However, the Forest Preserves' primary environmental education facility, the Homer Lake Interpretive Center, is not optimal for daily staff operations, programs, animal exhibits and care, or the experience of walk-in visitors. Walk-in visitation to the Interpretive Center continues a long, slow decline, and the use of the Interpretive Center for programming remains well below its pre-pandemic average. The Forest Preserves should evaluate the impact of the current state of the Interpretive Center on programming and visitation. In the context of lower overall visitation post-pandemic, diversified programming locations, and the Interpretive Center's decline in visitation, the Forest Preserves should assess the specific needs for a new facility and how this facility can best support the department's ability to offer high-quality, in-demand programming and connect people with nature.

For context, see [p. 15-16, 29, 31, 48-49](#), & [Appendix C-D](#).

GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

CREATE A PROGRAMMING PLAN & IMPROVE THE NATURE EDUCATION SPACE

Explore low-cost ways to increase programming reach.

Assess program attendance trends, including:

- Demographic patterns or disproportionate participation by certain audiences;
- Programs, times, and locations that are particularly well or poorly attended.

Assess local programming context for opportunities to offer in-demand programs.

- Survey East-Central Illinois agencies' offerings;
- Survey Illinois forest preserve and conservation districts' offerings.

Create a programming plan that reflects the findings of the above assessments:

- Leverage core programs, or offerings no one else in the county can provide at the same level;
- Leverage or develop in-demand programs based on local programming context;
- Develop and promote programs for audiences underrepresented in program attendance;
- Collaborate with Marketing to promote programs and maximize messaging opportunities in programming.

Establish standard methods and metrics for data collection and analysis, including program attendance, satisfaction, and program participants per staff-person.

Update the Museum and Education Strategic Institutional Plan (2021) upon the upcoming completion of the new strategic plan to incorporate the programming plan and analysis.

Secure grant funding for improving the nature education space to increase the Museum and Education Department's ability to provide high-quality programs.



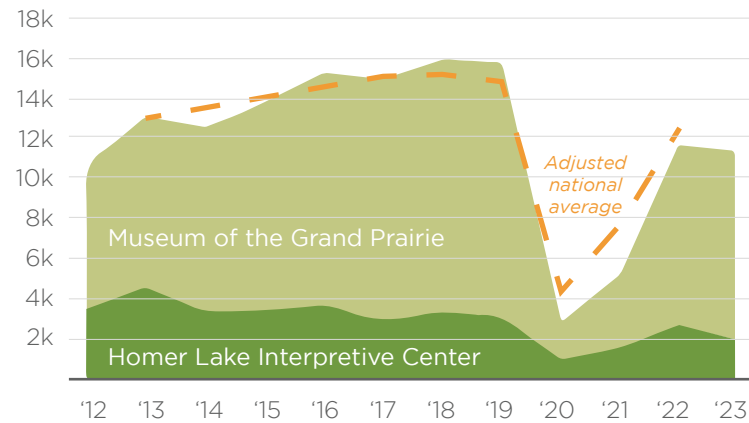
CREATE A PROGRAMMING PLAN & IMPROVE THE NATURE EDUCATION SPACE

ADDITIONAL CONTEXT: PROGRAMMING TRENDS

VISITATION AND PROGRAM PARTICIPATION: PANDEMIC IMPACTS

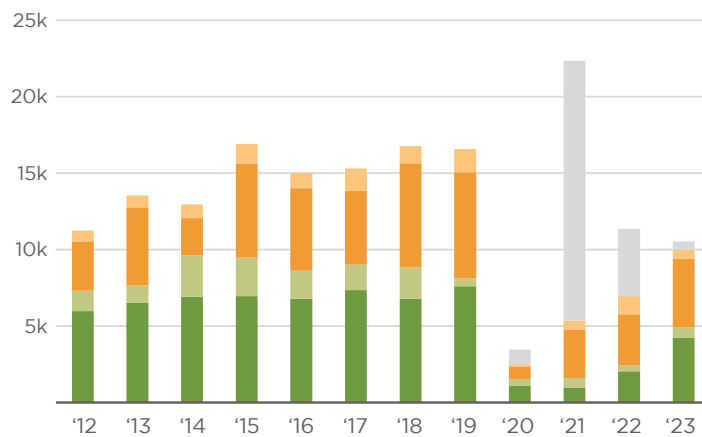
Walk-in visitation to Forest Preserve education facilities has followed national average trends both before and after the pandemic.⁵⁷ However, Museum visitation was growing through 2019 while Interpretive Center visitation has been falling since 2013. From 2020 to 2022, walk-in visitation to the Interpretive Center and the Museum quadrupled, but they seem to have plateaued. In 2023, the Interpretive Center lost about one-third of walk-ins from 2022, while Museum visitation remained the same. In '22 and '23, walk-in visitation to education facilities sat just below three-quarters of its '17-'19 average.

Walk-in Visitation to Education Facilities

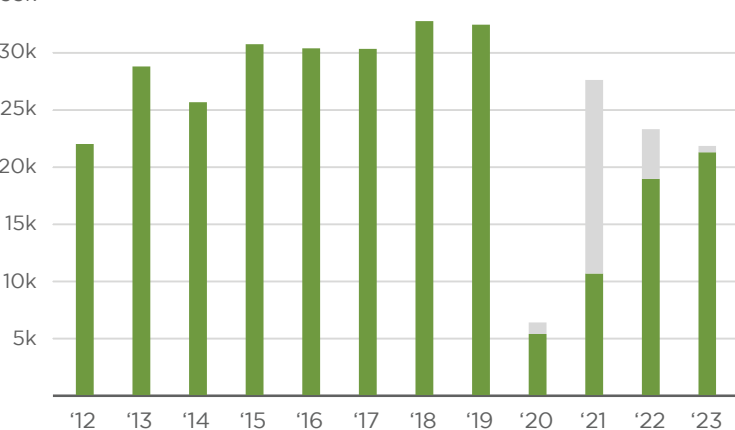


Program participation in 2023 was only 62% of its 2017-2019 average but it more than doubled from '20 to '21, then grew by 30% in '22 and another 44% in '23.

Participants by Program Type



People Reached (All Dept. Activities)

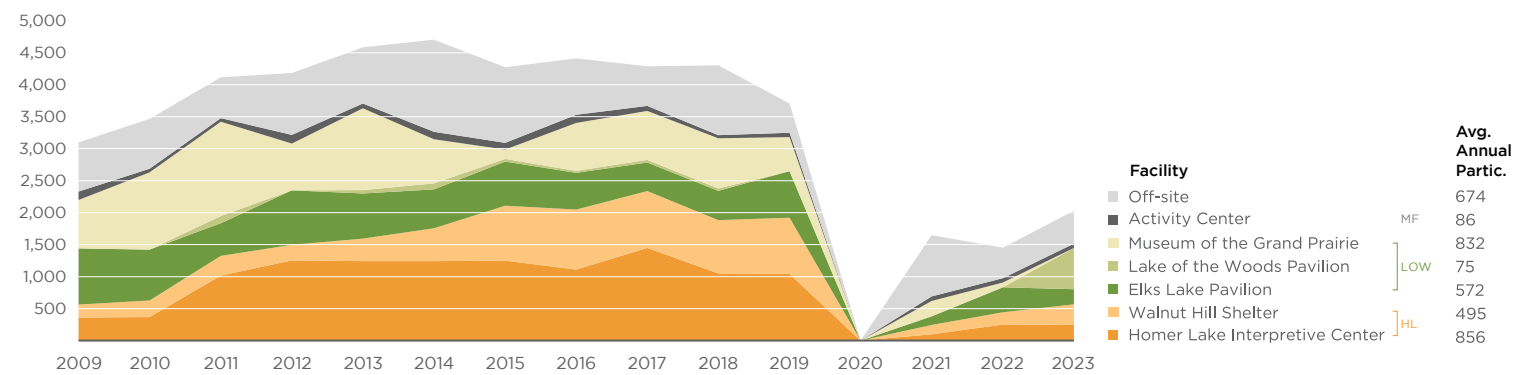


Programming's growth since the pandemic crash has helped the Museum and Education Department continue to grow its post-pandemic reach. During the pandemic (mostly in 2021), the department supplemented by providing virtual programs, take-home kits, and a higher proportion of offsite programming. The department has mostly tapered these activities back to pre-pandemic levels in favor of returning to in-person programs.

INTERNAL TRENDS IN PROGRAM TYPES AND LOCATIONS

Environmental education school programs are offered throughout the year at several locations. The Homer Lake Interpretive Center has hosted the most annual programs and participants since 2009, but the Interpretive Center's proportion of programming has dropped to less than half of its pre-pandemic average of 28%. Post-pandemic, environmental education school programming locations are relatively evenly split among Elks Lake Pavilion (15%), Lake of the Woods Pavilion (13%), Walnut Hill Shelter (13%), and the Interpretive Center (12%).

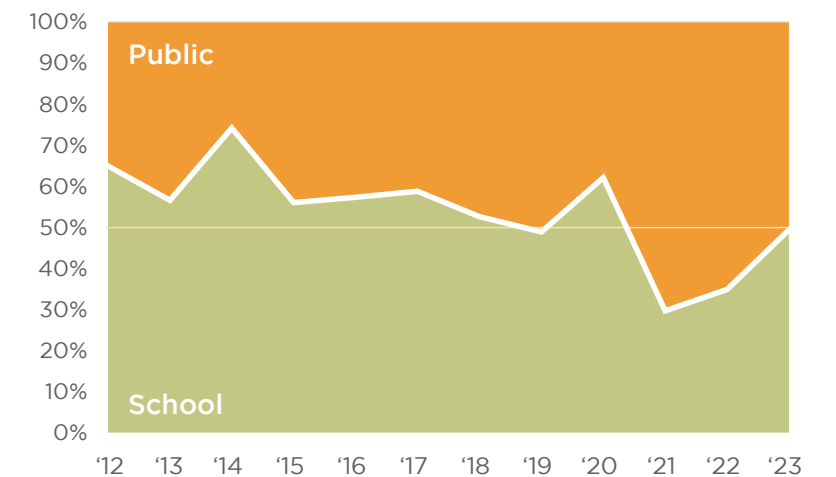
Environmental Education Program Participants by Facility



From 2021 to 2023 the Forest Preserves also offered programs at Homer Lake's Salt Fork Center, the Lake of the Woods Golf Course, and Rayburn-Purnell Woods at Lake of the Woods.

The Forest Preserves have offered a relatively consistent ratio of onsite-to-offsite and public-to-school programs. In general, the Forest Preserves have offered more school programming than public programming. The proportion of programs that are public programs spiked during the pandemic but is trending toward its pre-pandemic balance. Offsite programming represented between 12% and 28% of all programs each year from 2012 to 2023.^{ix} In 2023, 13% of programs were offsite, the lowest number since 2019.

Proportion of Public and School Programs



^{ix} Since 2021, 38% of environmental programming has taken place offsite, although the proportion offsite has decreased each year and returned to its pre-pandemic average in 2023.

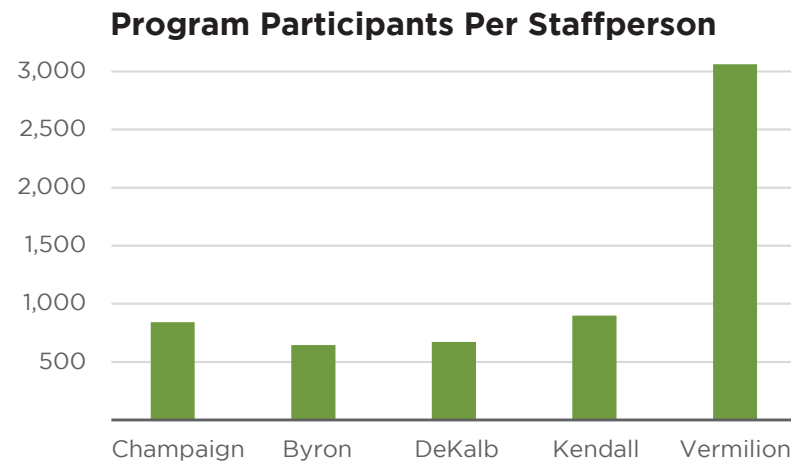
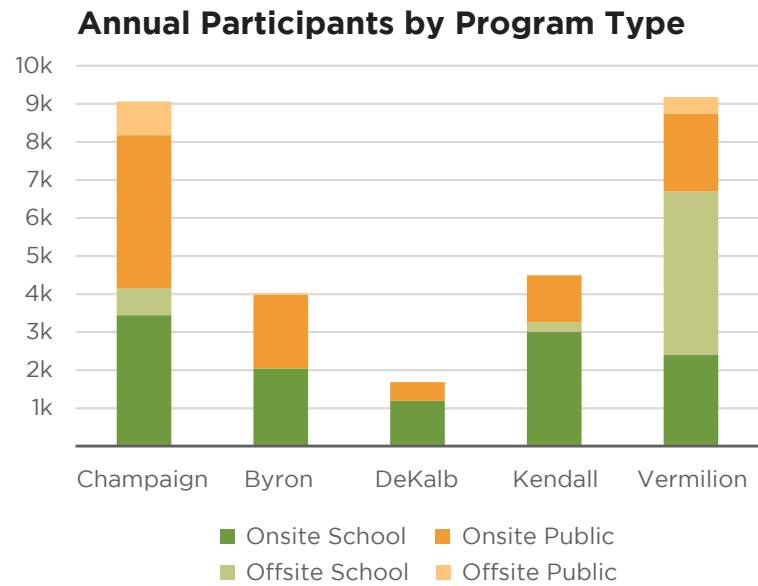
CREATE A PROGRAMMING PLAN & IMPROVE NATURE EDUCATION SPACE

ADDITIONAL CONTEXT: PROGRAMMING TRENDS
CONTINUED

COMPARISONS WITH OTHER FOREST PRESERVE AND CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

Among the comparison districts,^x the Forest Preserves and the Vermilion County Conservation District (VCCD) receive the most annual program participants, but VCCD operates with fewer staff. VCCD is the outlier in terms of participants per staff person, and the main difference appears to be that VCCD offers the highest proportion of offsite school programming among the districts. At VCCD, a traveling naturalist visits multiple schools per week, reaching 4,000 students per year.

Increasing the proportion of offsite school programming may help expand the Forest Preserves' reach. Increasing offsite programming in general may help reach new communities as well. Further assessment is needed to understand how the Forest Preserves can expand the reach of programming and how these actions will affect staffing and space needs. To assess themselves, the Forest Preserves can evaluate the efforts of Vermilion County Conservation District.



^x To create a benchmark for program provision, staff contacted the comparison districts discussed in the Finance chapter and some additional forest preserve and conservation districts, which self-reported their most recent annual data. Champaign County's data is the average of 2017-2023 except 2020 to correct for COVID.



SELECTED COUNTY-WIDE SURVEY COMMENTS:
PROGRAMMING

I WOULD LOVE TO SEE MORE PROGRAMS FOR KIDS SPECIFICALLY AT LAKE OF THE WOODS. WAYS TO GET KIDS OUTSIDE!

- COMMUNITY MEMBER



A child shows off her catch at a Take Me Fishing event. Photo by Forest Preserve staff.

I WOULD REALLY LOVE TO SEE MORE EDUCATIONAL OUTDOOR EVENTS FOR ADULTS LIKE TREE WALKS. ALSO, SOCIAL ACTIVITIES AROUND MUSEUM EVENTS FOR ADULTS.

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

PROVIDE PROGRAMMING AND RESOURCES THAT ARE ACCESSIBLE AND RESPONSIVE TO DIVERSE CULTURES AND COMMUNITIES IN THE DISTRICT (E.G., A LOT OF THE PROGRAMMING HAPPENS IN PRIMARILY WHITE, WEALTHY COMMUNITIES). HOW CAN PROGRAMMING BE RESPONSIVE TO THE FULL CHAMPAIGN COUNTY DISTRICT?

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

THERE NEEDS TO BE MORE AWARENESS IN SCHOOLS AND OFFERINGS FOR SCHOOLS TO ATTEND SPECIAL EVENTS.

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

I WISH CCFPD WOULD COORDINATE AND WORK MORE CLOSELY WITH OTHER TAXING BODIES... I WOULD LOVE TO SEE SHARED USE AND USING THE PARKS AS LEARNING AS A KEY PART OF THE MISSION OF THOSE ORGANIZATIONS.

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

THE FOREST PRESERVE NEEDS TO DO A BETTER JOB OF PROMOTING AWARENESS OF ECOLOGY AND IMPORTANCE OF OUR NATURAL AREAS IN REVERSING CLIMATE CHANGE, STOPPING THE POLLUTION OF OUR WATERWAYS, THE DELIVERY OF ECOSYSTEM SERVICES, AND THE PRESERVATION OF WILDLIFE... THE FOREST PRESERVE ALSO HAS THE RESPONSIBILITY TO EDUCATE PEOPLE ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR OWN NATIVE ECOSYSTEMS.

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

Recommendation

Expand trails & outdoor recreation opportunities

Trails – from accessible paved trails, to walking and hiking paths, to the Kickapoo Rail Trail – are the main draw to the preserves. Maintaining trails, adding more, connecting them, and making them more accessible are all extremely important to the public. Other outdoor amenities also attract visitors to the preserves. Visitors want to see the Forest Preserves maintain their amenities and add more opportunities to connect with nature, including kids’ play areas and water activities. Expanding recreation also means making these opportunities available to everyone through inclusive and ADA-accessible spaces and activities.

Recreation in nature provides potent health benefits in addition to the benefits of physical activity.⁶⁰ By providing more and better outdoor recreation opportunities, the Forest Preserves support the wellbeing of residents.

For context, see p. [11-14](#), [23](#), [27-31](#), [43-44](#), [47](#), & [Appendix E-F](#).

“ **I WOULD APPRECIATE A MORE COMPREHENSIVE RESOURCE THAT OUTLINES THE HIKING TRAILS, THAT INCLUDES MAPS, DISTANCES, AND LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY.**

- COMMUNITY MEMBER



“ **I THINK HANDICAP ACCESSIBLE AREAS SHOULD INCREASE SO THAT MORE PEOPLE COULD ENJOY OUR BEAUTIFUL PARKS.**

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

“ **I'D LIKE FOR THERE TO BE MORE SPACES WHERE TODDLERS CAN SAFELY PLAY IN NATURE. I'D LIKE FOR THERE TO BE MORE LOCATIONS OFFERING THE (WILD-ISH) NATURE PLAY AREA LIKE ANITAS PURVES OFFERS, WITH TREE SHADE FOR THE SUMMER DAYS. I'D ALSO LIKE FOR THERE TO BE MORE TODDLER ACTIVITIES LATER IN THE DAY, FOR WORKING PARENTS TO BE ABLE TO BRING THEIR KIDS FOR AFTER-WORK PLAY.**

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

THE PRESERVES OFFER

46 miles of trails

&

577 acres of public waters



GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

EXPAND TRAILS & OUTDOOR RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES

Promote existing trail system and other outdoor recreation opportunities to encourage their use and increase usability by:

- Publishing information on existing trails and outdoor recreation opportunities;
 - Add trails to the Hike App;
- Developing and implementing wayfinding standards;
- Evaluating and promoting the health benefits of outdoor recreation.

Create new opportunities for trails and other nature-compatible outdoor recreation:

- Survey residents, including visitors and non-visitors, to identify unmet needs;
- Allocate an appropriate portion of newly acquired land to recreation.

Plan for regional trail and outdoor recreation opportunities:

- Develop a Forest Preserve trails master plan;
 - Coordinate with partners such as the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission, municipalities, and non-profit groups such as the Trails of the Grand Prairie;
- Develop a Kickapoo Rail Trail master plan;
- Develop a Forest Preserve waterways plan;
- Develop an iterative plan for gradual design improvements to the Botanical Garden that minimizes impacts to visitation.



Recommendation Evaluate & maintain facilities & infrastructure

The upkeep of facilities and preserves is fundamental to the visitor experience. Due to financial limitations, the Forest Preserves' approach to maintenance has been somewhat reactive, which created a decades-long backlog in maintenance and replacement schedules. Increased funding from the 2020 referendum has allowed the Forest Preserves to catch up on past-due maintenance and begin to approach it more proactively. Visitors today are highly satisfied with the upkeep of facilities and preserves and four in five survey respondents would like maintenance to continue to be a top priority. A parallel focus on maintaining financial stability, a top priority for nearly half of respondents, will allow the Forest Preserves to grow sustainably while maintaining their properties and facilities. The Forest Preserves should continually refocus on their long-term financial outlook as they grow to ensure they can keep pace with maintenance obligations while providing excellent services to the public.

For context, see p. [31](#), [45](#), [47-48](#), [53-76](#), [79-82](#), & [Appendix G](#).

The Forest Preserves own or manage...

577 acres of waters

55 miles of shoreline

46 miles of trails

40 buildings covering **138,760** sq ft

26 shelters covering **14,050** sq ft

16 restrooms covering **6,540** sq ft

79 roofs covering **166,756** sq ft



1 mobile home

11 passenger vehicles

17 utility vehicles

20 trucks

27 boats

35 mowers

65 golf carts

77 pieces of small equipment

plows, attachments, & hand equipment

121 pieces of large equipment

tractors, trailers, & machinery

40 acres of roads & parking

107 HVAC units

“ **IT WOULD BE NICE TO HAVE UPGRADED FACILITIES (RESTROOMS) ON SOME OF THE OLDER PAVILIONS.** ”

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

EVALUATE & MAINTAIN FACILITIES & INFRASTRUCTURE

Continually evaluate costs, revenues, conditions, and use of facilities.

- Evaluate existing facilities to determine capital investment needed, revenue generation potential, and benefit to operations or the public;
- Consider ways to increase use of underutilized facilities;
- Include sustainability improvements as feasible for facilities during renovations or upgrades.

Create a working inventory of sites, facility, and fleet conditions to aid in day-to-day and long-term decision-making.

- Critically review fleet needs on an ongoing basis to ensure staff are able to operate efficiently;
- Modernize existing facility and fleet documents to an editable format.

Establish a benchmark levels of developed and undeveloped land.

- Study existing balance of developed (areas with amenities, facilities, and infrastructure) and undeveloped land (natural areas and water bodies);
- Identify areas that may be developed but underused, as well as areas that are in high demand by visitors but may lack necessary infrastructure.
 - Consider conducting observational occupancy studies and collecting site-specific input.

Assess non-routine infrastructure needs.

- Identify and set aside funds for high-cost, non-routine infrastructure failures (e.g. dredging, shoreline stabilization, parking lot milling);
- Explore options to remove non-critical, aging infrastructure.

Explore ways to diversify funding sources, including grants, funding partnerships, private donations, and other creative mechanisms to address future maintenance obligations and high demand for services.



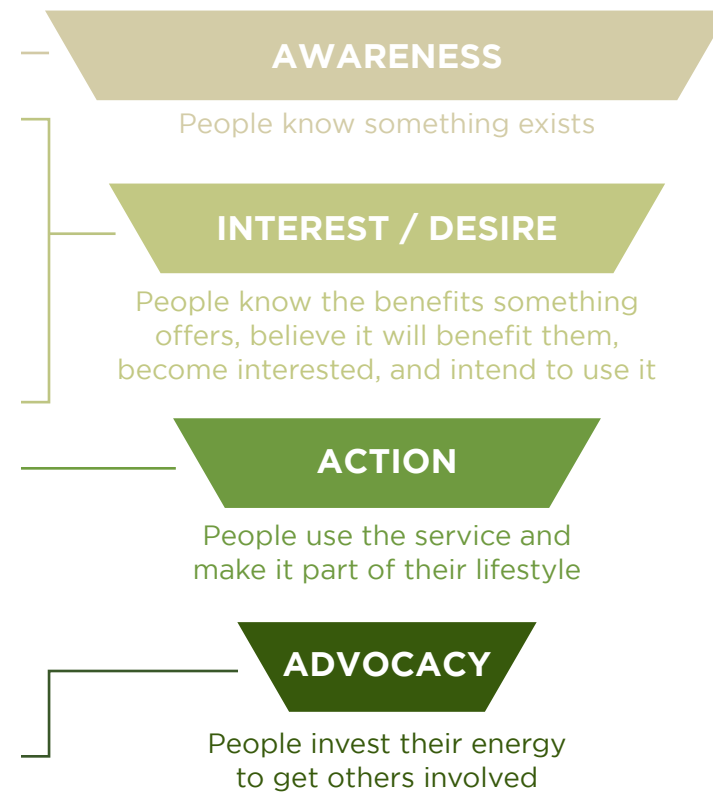
Recommendation

Increase engagement

Stakeholders and the general public agree that expanding public awareness is a major opportunity. Residents hold the Forest Preserves in high esteem, and most are aware of the existence of the Forest Preserves, but many remain unaware of specific Forest Preserves offerings. Low familiarity with the Forest Preserves' programs, which receive high satisfaction ratings, indicates the need to promote them more broadly. Suggested improvements and free-response comments from the stakeholder and county-wide surveys echo that people know about the Preserves but want to know more about what the Forest Preserves do and how they can be more involved. County-wide survey results show demographic disparities in visitation, satisfaction, and feelings of representation. Together, these themes indicate the need for the Forest Preserves to develop outreach strategies tailored to different audiences – including non-users – designed to meet them where they are, deliver information relevant to them, and move them through the next levels of engagement with the Forest Preserves.

For context, see p. [17](#), [29](#), [31-32](#), [43](#), [45](#), [48-50](#), & [Appendix H-I](#).

Engagement Funnel



Adapted from the commonly used sales funnel, the engagement funnel above shows how the Forest Preserves can move patrons through sequential tiers of engagement with marketing.

GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

INCREASE ENGAGEMENT

Assess target audiences:

- Current users (e.g. frequent visitors, once-in-a-while visitors, online followers, online advocates);
- Non-users (especially those unfamiliar with the Forest Preserves).
- Establish baseline visitation statistics.

Assess current communications:

- Brand identity elements – use of voice, messaging, visuals, online presence, and other marketing materials;
- Outreach elements – use of media, events/programs, and personnel.

Update the Forest Preserves' vision to an aspirational statement describing what specifically the mission will achieve.

Based on the above assessments, create a marketing & branding strategy to (a) establish a uniform look and messaging across media and materials, and (b) increase and maintain engagement with target audiences:

- Establish outreach methods and messaging to move target audiences to the next tiers of engagement;
- Maximize non-Marketing (e.g. education, events, volunteer, recreation) activities for delivering messaging and moving patrons to the next tiers of engagement;
- Communicate Forest Preserves' mission, vision, and values.

IT IS HARD TO FIND INFORMATION ABOUT THEIR PROGRAMS.

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

I DO NOT KNOW WHERE MOST OF THE PARKS ARE OR WHAT THEY OFFER.

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

NEED TO BLOW [THEIR] OWN HORN MORE - PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ALL OF THE ACTIVITIES, PROGRAMS AND FAMILY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES THAT CCFPD OFFERS.

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

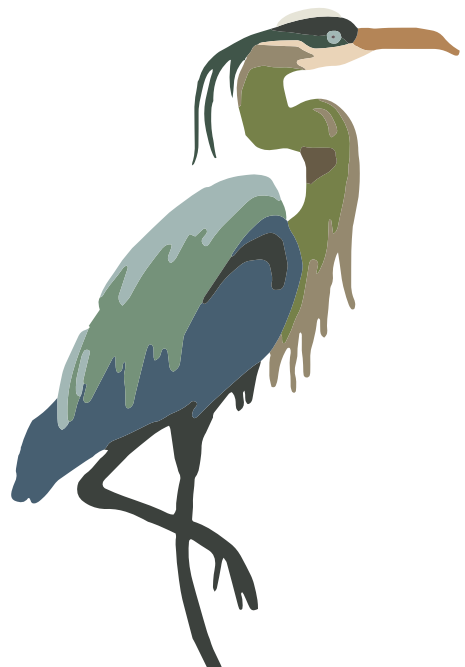
INCREASE ENGAGEMENT

**ADDITIONAL CONTEXT:
THE NEED FOR A CLEAR,
LONG-TERM ‘VISION’**

In the stakeholder SWOT survey, the Forest Preserves’ “mission/vision” was the most commonly mentioned weakness. Respondents expressed that resources were spread too thinly among diverse missions and that a lack of prioritization exacerbated this issue. While the mission describes the Forest Preserves’ work with conservation, recreation, and education, the vision of “Protecting Nature. Creating Connections.” does not clearly express what the mission is meant to achieve. Without a long-term vision, the scope of the organization’s goals is limited. A more detailed and focused vision statement would help the Forest Preserves balance and unify their three pillars, prioritize their work, and enable more ambitious goal-setting to achieve greater impact. This statement would guide the marketing strategy and the implementation of all other recommendations.

In addition to a vision statement, it may be useful to draft a more detailed document describing the roles of conservation, recreation, and education and how these pillars support one another.

See [p. 9](#) for mission, vision, & values.



MISSION
What an organization does

Protect Champaign County’s natural and cultural resources and inspire people to care for, enjoy, and explore their natural world.

VISION
What the mission achieves

Protecting Nature.
Creating Connections.

**ADDITIONAL CONTEXT:
VOLUNTEERS’ ROLE IN
OUTREACH**

Volunteering acquaints people with the Preserves and can turn them into advocates. Partnerships with outside organizations such as the Upper Sangamon River Conservancy and Master Naturalists help create advocates for the Preserves and should be considered part of the strategy for increasing engagement. Additionally, as the number of volunteers has increased, the demand on staff has increased. The Forest Preserves should explore how to best leverage their strong volunteer base as an arm of their outreach strategy.

“VERY HARD TO VOLUNTEER DURING THE WEEK. COULD USE SOME FAMILY-ORIENTED VOLUNTEER WORK.

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

“MORE OPTIONS FOR VOLUNTEERS? COULD VOLUNTEERS ‘ADOPT A PARK’ OF THEIR OWN?”

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

“I’VE BEEN A VOLUNTEER AT SEVERAL EVENTS [AND] MANY CHILDREN AND FAMILIES DO NOT KNOW ABOUT OUR PRESERVES, HOW TO GET INVOLVED, AND HOW TO GET THERE. WHEN WE SHOW PICTURES, EXPLAIN EVENTS, AND TALK ABOUT OUR PROGRAMS THE CHILDREN AND PARENTS ARE EXCITED BUT DON’T KNOW WHERE THEY FIT IN.

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

A volunteer welcomes paddle boat users back to the dock. Photo by Forest Preserve staff, 2023.



INCREASE ENGAGEMENT

ADDITIONAL CONTEXT: RACIAL DISPARITIES IN VISITATION & SELF-REPORTED REPRESENTATION

The Forest Preserves must ensure all residents are provided the opportunity to connect with nature. According to the county-wide survey, a significantly lower proportion of Black and Hispanic/Latino residents had visited the preserves and reported feeling represented by Forest Preserve offerings compared to White residents (see table below). These results indicate opportunities for the Forest Preserves to increase engagement by addressing racial equity concerns.

Suggestions for Increasing BIPOC Engagement
Third-party Assessments of DEI at the Forest Preserves (2022)

- Improved transportation to/from the preserves
- More relevant programming, including for:
 - People with limited experience in nature
 - Families and large groups
 - Identity-specific (e.g. multilingual, women of color birdwatchers, BIPOC teens, etc.)
- Improved information-sharing, including:
 - Brochures in other languages
 - Partnerships with community organizations
- Explicitly inclusive spaces, materials, and services

“ WE ENJOY NATURAL SPACES WHEN POSSIBLE, BUT SOMETIMES FEEL UNSAFE AND THREATENED BY OTHER PATRONS AS A POC. ”
 - COMMUNITY MEMBER

“ IT STRUGGLES TO SERVE THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY/ALL RESIDENTS ”
 - COMMUNITY MEMBER

“ OTHER THAN [THE COUNTY-WIDE SURVEY], THERE IS LITTLE INPUT THAT HAS EVER BEEN ASKED IN MY 18 YEARS LIVING HERE. ”
 - COMMUNITY MEMBER

Two third-party reports on diversity, equity, & inclusion at the Forest Preserves explored reasons for low engagement among non-White residents and offer potential avenues for increased engagement (see [Appendix V-W](#)). In the third-party reports as well as the county-wide needs assessment survey, the top barriers to visitation included lack of familiarity and lack of proximity or transportation. Suggestions for improvement are summarized above right.

The Forest Preserves must make an intentional effort to address historical inequities and engage non-White residents. The Forest Preserves can use the findings of these reports and collaborate with community members to develop and refine outreach efforts that welcome a more diverse user base.

Racial Disparities in Visitation and Feelings of Representation

% of Respondents by Race/Ethnicity

County-wide Needs Assessment Survey (2023)	White	Black	Hispanic/Latino
Visited Preserve or Facility from 2020 to 2022	90	59	68
Feels Represented by Forest Preserve Offerings	91	56	43

SELECTED COUNTY-WIDE SURVEY COMMENTS: BARRIERS TO ACCESSING THE PRESERVES

“ THE MAJORITY OF FUN AND ENGROSSING NATURAL AREAS ARE FAR AWAY FROM CHAMPAIGN URBANA CITY CENTERS. ”
 - COMMUNITY MEMBER

“ I HAVE MOBILITY ISSUES AND DON'T DRIVE MYSELF, SO I CAN'T USE THE AREAS SUCCESSFULLY. ”
 - COMMUNITY MEMBER



Volunteers receive training during an Indigenous Peoples' Day event at Lake of the Woods' Buffalo Trace Prairie. Photo by Forest Preserve staff, 2023.

“ THERE IS NOT MUCH NEAR CAMPUS FOR STUDENTS. ”
 - COMMUNITY MEMBER

“ CHILDREN WHO DO NOT HAVE TRANSPORTATION TO CFP SITES ARE NOT ABLE TO TAKE ADVANTAGE. PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION TO CCFPD LOCATIONS WOULD BE MORE INCLUSIVE. ”
 - COMMUNITY MEMBER

“ THE PRESERVES ARE VERY FAR APART. THIS IS NOT A PROBLEM IN ITSELF, BUT AS FAR AS I CAN TELL THEY ARE NOT REACHABLE BY ANY MEANS OF PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION. IN SHORT, IF YOU DON'T HAVE A CAR, YOU'RE SUNK. ”
 - COMMUNITY MEMBER

Recommendation Lead on climate & conservation

Responses across several sources show people view the Forest Preserves and forest preserve districts in general as leaders in conservation. Within the Forest Preserves, across Champaign County, and across the nation, people want their local districts to continue doing what they are best known for: protecting lands, restoring natural areas, and managing habitats. An overwhelming majority of US residents also believes their local park and recreation agency should use their land to protect against climate change. Finally, there is significant county- and state-level demand for conservation and sustainability programming.

Navigating the challenges posed by climate change and the nature-depleted environment requires a multifaceted approach that may also include adapting Forest Preserves operations to changing conditions. Entrusted with the stewardship of public lands and seen as an authority on sustainability, the Forest Preserves are naturally positioned to help lead the county's climate and conservation efforts.

For context, see p. [23-24](#), [29-32](#), [45](#), & [Appendix J-L](#).

WE WANT CONTINUED COMMITMENT TO MAINTAINING OUR NATURAL RESOURCES IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY!

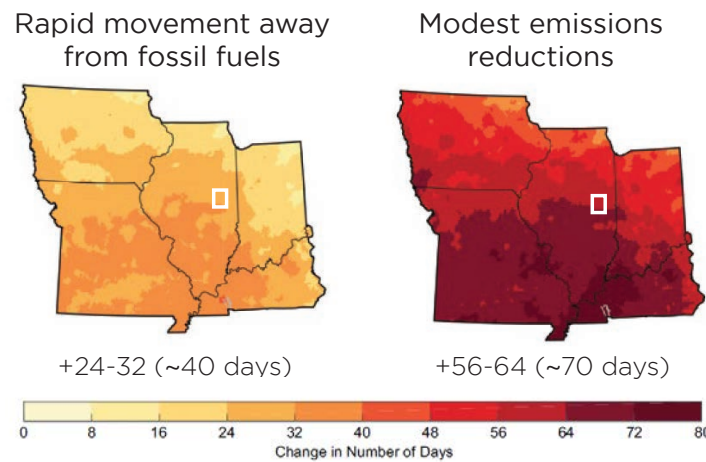
- COMMUNITY MEMBER



“ I WOULD LOVE TO SEE CONTINUED/ INCREASED PUBLIC EDUCATION ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS OF RESTORING AND MAINTAINING NATURAL AREAS AND WAYS THEY CAN HELP.

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

Changes in “Very Hot” Days by 2100



The Nature Conservancy's Assessment of the Impacts of Climate Change in Illinois (2021) used data from 32 global models to predict changes by 2100. Its two emissions scenarios predict one to two more months of 95+ degree days. Well-managed natural areas would help mitigate these changes.

GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

LEAD ON CLIMATE & CONSERVATION

Evaluate operations, improvements, programs, the visitor experience, and natural areas to adapt to changing climate conditions.

Include natural areas plans in site plans for each preserve.

Measure the impacts of Forest Preserve operations (e.g. contributions from commuting, fleet vehicles, buildings, etc.) and natural areas (e.g. reduction of carbon, flooding, heat, and pollution) to aid in emissions reduction and related communications.

- Identify external funding and expertise.

Continually evaluate and operationalize the Climate Commitment by:

- Enhancing ecosystem services in the forest preserves;
- Reducing carbon footprint.

Expand education related to sustainability, conservation, and environmentalism.

Advocate for the expansion of natural areas throughout Champaign County:

- Coordinate with local agencies to incorporate expanding natural areas into plans;
- Contribute to county-level plans for strategically expanding natural areas;
- Identify projects, partners, and funding opportunities for green infrastructure throughout county;
- Explore opportunities to acquire land close to population centers.

LEAD ON CLIMATE & CONSERVATION

ADDITIONAL CONTEXT: EVALUATING THE FOREST PRESERVES' ROLE IN EXPANDING NATURE THROUGHOUT THE COUNTY

Climate change is expected to continue to bring hotter average temperatures, longer droughts, and more heavy rain events to Illinois. Natural landscapes and ecosystems support wellbeing and resilience, including helping address climate change causes and effects, but the past two centuries of development have stripped humans of this tool by relegating nature to the fringes. Less than 1% of Champaign County today is protected natural area.

Illinois law states forest preserve districts can acquire, protect, preserve, and restore lands “in their natural state and condition, for the purpose of education, pleasure, and recreation of the public.” This law, written in 1914, did not anticipate the critical role nature would play in protecting residents from climate change. However, the Climate Commitment passed by Board resolution in 2022 acknowledges the role nature and the Forest Preserves can play in addressing climate change causes and effects.

Enduring climate change solutions address the underlying causes of climate change. Reestablishing nature is an infrastructural solution that would help maximize the built environment’s ability to weather climate changes and to stem future human-induced change. This solution would have the added benefit of restoring biodiversity, which is inextricably tied to human wellbeing. Should the Preserves take a more active role in balancing the built environment, and what does that look like?

Given the expected impacts of climate change, nature’s ability to address them, the relative lack of nature in Champaign County, and the Forest Preserves’ authority to provide nature for the public good, the Forest Preserves should evaluate their role in buffering the community from the effects of climate change and rebalancing the landscape through conservation. The Forest Preserves should establish a path forward that acknowledges their capacity while maximizing their impact. This evaluation may dovetail with updating the Forest Preserves’ vision and developing the land acquisition guidance.

“**THE FOREST PRESERVE NEEDS TO DO A BETTER JOB OF PROMOTING AWARENESS OF ECOLOGY AND IMPORTANCE OF OUR NATURAL AREAS IN REVERSING CLIMATE CHANGE, STOPPING THE POLLUTION OF OUR WATERWAYS, THE DELIVERY OF ECOSYSTEM SERVICES, AND THE PRESERVATION OF WILDLIFE: INSECTS, FISH, BIRDS, ETC.**

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

CLIMATE COMMITMENT (2022)

The Forest Preserves’ commitment is to enhance ecosystems and acquire land for maximum sequestration and resilience to climate changes, reduce its own emissions to near-zero by 2050, and help improve public understanding of climate change.



*A dragonfly atop curled dock.
Photo by C. Hendrickson, 2023.*

Recommendation

Provide more land for conservation & recreation

Residents agree land acquisition should be a top priority for Illinois park agencies and the Champaign County Forest Preserves in particular. Land acquisition also supports achieving several other recommendations, such as leading on climate and conservation, expanding trails and outdoor recreation, and increasing engagement.

“**THERE HAS NOT BEEN THE STRONG PROACTIVE POLICY OF LAND ACQUISITION THAT IS NEEDED TO MEET CONSERVATION GOALS.**

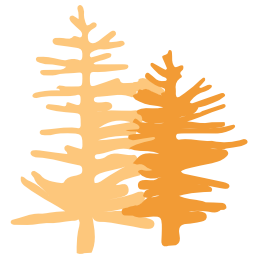
- COMMUNITY MEMBER

“**MORE PRESERVES ARE WARRANTED IN THE SOUTHERN HALF OF CHAMPAIGN COUNTY.**

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

As of 2024, Champaign County ranks in the bottom third of nineteen Illinois forest preserve and conservation districts in acreage relative to both county population and county size. Most Champaign County residents surveyed ranked acquiring and protecting new natural areas among their top priorities. Three-quarters of Illinois residents surveyed said they supported land acquisition for the purposes of protecting nature and for outdoor recreation. Further support for land acquisition comes from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources' *Illinois Wildlife Action Plan* (2005), the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission's *Regional Environmental Framework* (2020), and The Nature Conservancy's *Assessment of the Impacts of Climate Change in Illinois*,⁵⁸ and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency's *State of Illinois Priority Climate Action Plan* (2024). There is also national direction from the White House initiative to protect 30% of US lands and waters by 2030. Just over 4% of Illinois is protected natural area.

For context, see p. [19-24](#), [28-32](#), [43-45](#), [48](#), & [Appendix M](#).



GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

PROVIDE MORE LAND FOR CONSERVATION & RECREATION

Complete and operationalize guidance for making decisions regarding land acquisition opportunities.

Evaluate land acquisition scenarios; determine the most appropriate long-term goal for strategic land acquisition.

- Consider public demand; contributions to climate change adaptation and mitigation; performance alongside other forest preserve and conservation districts; state and national goals; and balancing funding and resources with other recommendations.
- Seek out relationships with landowners, nonprofit agencies, and other potential partners to avail the Forest Preserves of future acquisition opportunities.

Identify and set aside funds in annual budgets and 5-year capital plans for acquisition opportunities and associated operational costs.

Maximize grant opportunities such as Land and Water Conservation Fund and Open Space Land Acquisition and Development to minimize the cost of acquisitions to Champaign County taxpayers.

DEVELOPING A LAND ACQUISITION STRATEGY

Proactively planning for land acquisition will prepare the Forest Preserves to act when suitable opportunities arise to expand existing preserves or add new ones. To navigate the competitive market, the Forest Preserves must be prepared to evaluate opportunities and make decisions quickly. In 2022, the Forest Preserves began drafting a land acquisition strategy to establish a standard process of review and direction to guide decision-making on potential future acquisitions. By acquiring land for preserves, the Forest Preserves can support ecosystems, improve residents' health and access to nature, and bolster climate change adaptation and mitigation. A formal land acquisition strategy will help guide and expedite the Forest Preserves' decision-making and ensure public funds are invested wisely for the greatest possible impact.



PROVIDE MORE LAND FOR CONSERVATION & RECREATION

LAND ACQUISITION SCENARIOS

Existing (2024)

Acres: **4,041**
 Acres Per 1,000: **19.3**
 % County Land: **0.63%**

SCENARIOS

This plan presents three scenarios to help inform the Forest Preserves' approach to land acquisition, using the metrics of Acres Per 1,000 Residents and the Percentage of County Land Owned.

ASSUMPTIONS

- Champaign County population grows by 9.4% (IDPH⁵⁹ projected rate)
- Other districts grow at their historical average rates

DISCUSSION

The Forest Preserves grew more slowly than their average in the past 25 years. Resuming a pace closer to their historical average would help the Preserves gain ground among other districts, although they will likely still rank low in 2050. The Forest Preserves must grow to bring their Acres Per 1,000 Residents closer to the statewide average. With higher growth, the Preserves could approach 1% of County Land Owned. Of 19 districts, 11 own 1% or more of their county's land, with an average of 3.4%.

Maintenance (+9.4%): 152 acres per decade

Acres by 2050: **4,421**
 Acres Per 1,000: **19.3**
 % County Land: **0.69%**

In the **Maintenance Scenario**, the Forest Preserves expands acreage by 9.4% to maintain pace with projected population growth and reach a total of 4,421 acres by 2050.

Advantages

- Low cost and staff time requirement

Disadvantages

- Does not address public demand
- Makes minimal progress toward conservation goals and climate change mitigation
- Likely drops Champaign County further below statewide averages

Historical Rate (+32.5%): 525 acres per decade

Acres by 2050: **5,353**
 Acres Per 1,000: **23.3**
 % County Land: **0.84%**

In the **Historical Rate Scenario**, the Forest Preserves expands acreage by 32.5%, equivalent to their historical average rate, to a total of 5,353 acres by 2050.

Advantages

- Addresses public demand
- Contributes to conservation goals and climate change mitigation

Disadvantages

- Requires increased funds for acquisition, development, and maintenance
- Maintains below state average rate of expansion

Higher Growth (+50%): 808 acres per decade

Acres by 2050: **6,062**
 Acres Per 1,000: **26.4**
 % County Land: **0.95%**

In the **Higher Growth Scenario**, the Forest Preserves expands acreage by 50%, an ambitious but not unprecedented rate, to a total of 6,062 acres by 2050. In the 1970s and 1990s, the Preserves expanded at a faster rate than 50% when it added Homer Lake and Middle Fork River Forest Preserves.

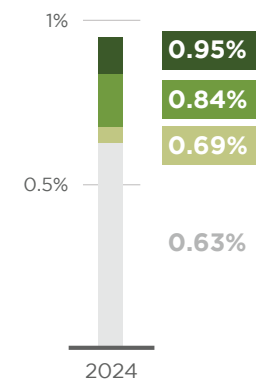
Advantages

- Addresses public demand
- Most significantly contributes to conservation goals and climate change mitigation
- Brings Champaign County's Acres Per 1,000 Residents closer to statewide average, even assuming other districts grow significantly

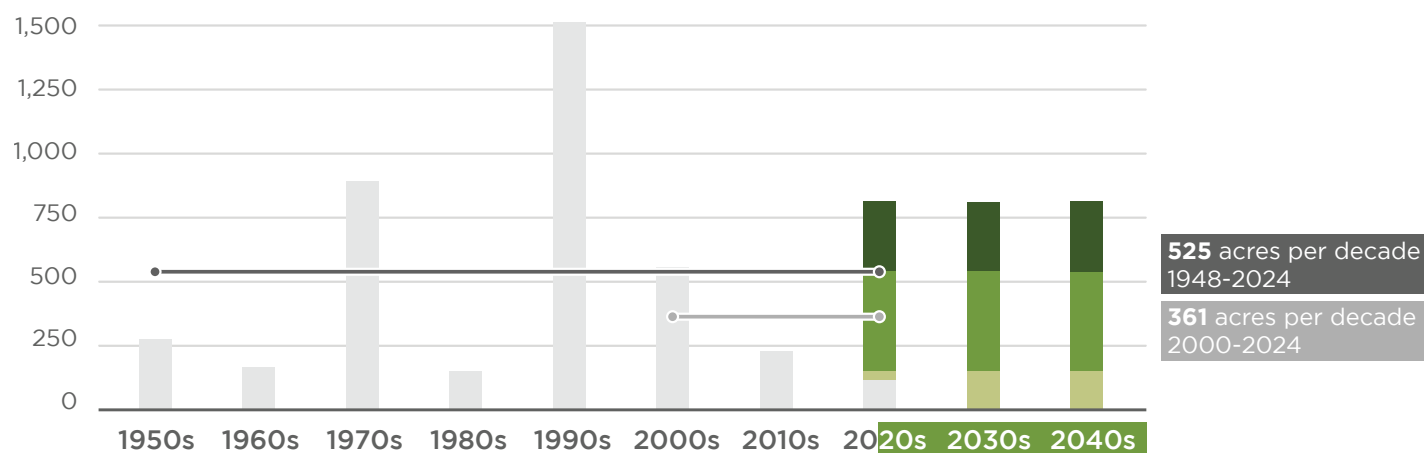
Disadvantages

- May be difficult to identify acquisition opportunities
- Requires increased funds for acquisition, development, and maintenance

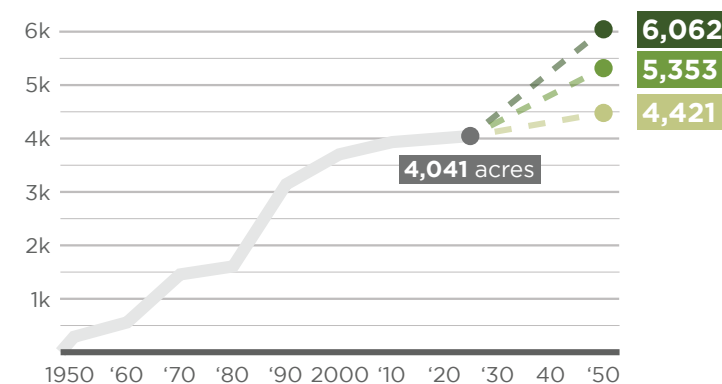
County Land Owned



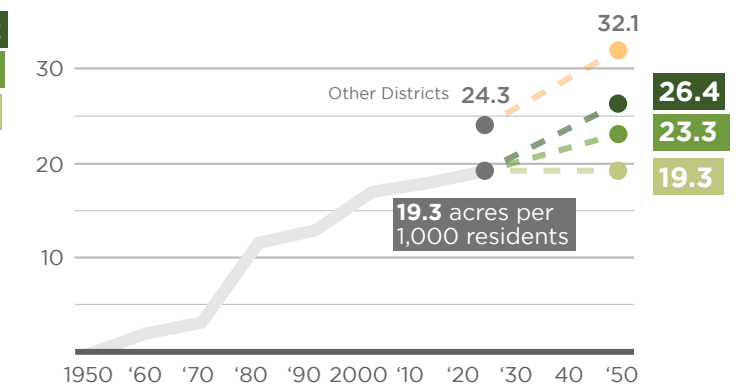
Acres Acquired by Decade with Three Future Growth Scenarios



Acres Over Time



Acres Per 1,000 Residents Over Time



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