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October 17, 2022

CIVIC FEDERATION SUPPORTS PASSAGE OF FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT OF COOK COUNTY PROPERTY TAX REFERENDUM

The Civic Federation **supports passage** of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County's (FPDCC) property tax extension limitation law (PTELL) referendum. The referendum asks the voters of Cook County whether the District's property tax limiting rate should be increased by 0.025% in property tax levy year 2022, which would generate approximately \$40 million in additional property tax revenue for the District annually, or about \$20 more annually for the owner of a \$300,000 home.

Over the last decade, the Forest Preserve District's finances have improved significantly, thanks to strong management from its leadership team headed by General Superintendent Arnold Randall with support from Cook County Forest Preserve District Board President Toni Preckwinkle and the Board of Commissioners. The District prioritized right-sizing its workforce, cut expenditures where possible, raised non-property tax revenues and grew its budgetary reserves. However, as a non-home rule unit of government separate from Cook County, the FPDCC does not have access to many sources of revenue and is limited in what it can contribute to its declining pension fund, which is projected to go insolvent in 2044 if its state-imposed funding formula is not changed. Additionally, its limited resources mean the District has a growing backlog of capital and restoration needs.

The Federation holds that the District has both demonstrated its need for an infusion of revenue and has a history of responsibly managing its existing funds. The amount of the request is also not excessive in the context of the billions of property taxes paid countywide annually.

However, in addition to demonstrating need and ability to effectively manage increased revenues, a government asking voters to increase their own taxes must also have a strong plan for how they will use the funds. The Federation takes the position that the District's plans for a \$40 million boost in funding are sound. The majority of the increased revenues will be dedicated to the following priorities:

- Funding the District's pensions at an actuarially sound level;
- Addressing deferred maintenance;
- Funding capital needs, including at the Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden;
- Expanding restoration work; and
- Acquiring more natural lands.

The funding will help the District advance the goals outlined in its Next Century Conservation Plan and will benefit from the additional layer of citizen accountability provided by the Conservation and Policy Council, which advises the President, Board of Commissioners and General Superintendent and engages in annual strategic planning around the Plan's implementation.

The Federation continues to hold the position that the Forest Preserve would do better with a separately elected Board of Commissioners instead of sharing a double-duty board with Cook County. However, for all of the reasons outlined above, the Federation believes the Forest Preserve District of Cook County has made a convincing case that it both needs and deserves additional funds from taxpayers.

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