



2024

Annual Report



A Letter from Debra Walker Johnson, President & Executive Director



Dear Friends,

I am proud to share the progress the Forest Preserve Foundation made in 2024, thanks to your unwavering support. Our mission to protect and restore the Forest Preserves of Cook County has never been more vital, and your generosity continues to help us achieve remarkable milestones.

We continued our critical restoration efforts, for a total of over 1,179 acres of natural habitat successfully restored. These efforts improve biodiversity and strengthen the resilience of our ecosystems against climate change. Additionally, Conservation Corps programs provided meaningful employment opportunities for 144 young environmental leaders, equipping them with skills to become the next generation of stewards for our natural spaces. We also secured funding to install native seed beds and a wild seed garden that will grow region-specific plants to increase the seed stock needed for successful restoration projects.

Through generous contributions and dedicated partnerships, we deepened our impact. Our annual Conservation Cup raised significant funds to continue supporting vital restoration initiatives. This year's introduction of our inaugural Jazz in the Preserves event served as both a celebration of nature and a vital fundraiser. It reinforced the importance of deepening community engagement with our natural spaces through cultural programming.

As we enter 2025, we face several funding challenges, including funding freezes, political shifts, and increased competition for resources. Nevertheless, we remain committed to our core goals: protecting and restoring natural spaces, engaging communities, and fostering environmental leadership. Together, we can work toward a sustainable future where the Forest Preserves continue to be a valued resource for everyone.

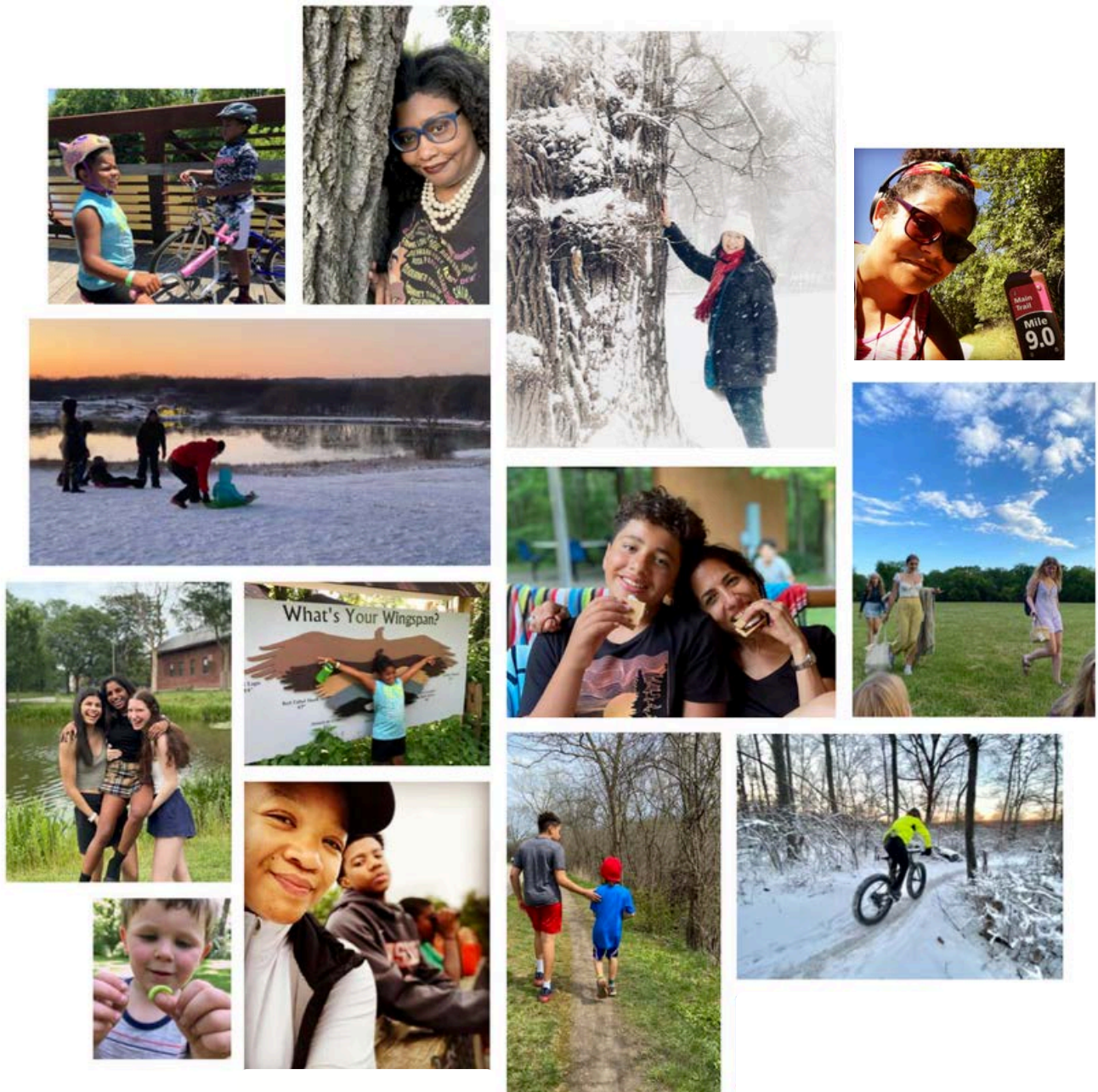
Thank you for your partnership and dedication. We invite you to stay engaged by following us on social media and visiting our website to witness the lasting impact of your generosity.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Debra Walker Johnson". The signature is fluid and cursive.



You help us keep the preserves healthy,
welcoming and accessible for everyone to enjoy.



65,000-100,000

visits to the Forest Preserves each year

Invigorating exercise, a quiet walk, learning, exploring, friends or family time...

We are so fortunate that over **70,000 acres** of public land and natural habitats have been preserved in this urban area.

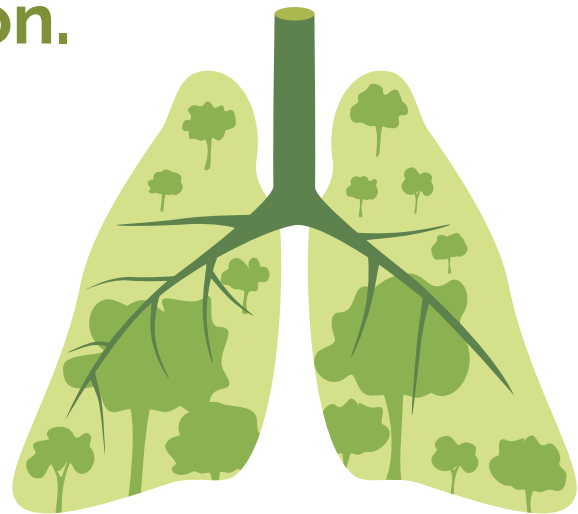
The Forest Preserves serves as the lungs of the region.

Restored native ecosystems help filter air and water, making Cook County a better place to live.

And each year, the Forest Preserves has the capacity to absorb more than

1.5 million metric tons of CO₂ from the atmosphere -

as much greenhouse gas as driving more than 330,000 cars for a year—and help **prevent extreme flooding** after heavy rainfall.



Without these preserved natural areas, our health, air quality, water, wildlife, plants, and communities would be at greater risk.

Ongoing restoration is essential to keep us all healthy.

RESTORATION

The key here is **RESTORED native ecosystems**. While we may think nature can manage itself, the forest preserves require our assistance.



Invasive species like European Buckthorn were brought here as an ornamental plant. Unfortunately, it forms dense thickets, choking out native plants, with ripple effects on wildlife and humans. Restored landscapes provide better sightlines for people too,

Sometimes when we clear the invasive brush, we need to give mother nature another hand via prescribed burns, seeding, etc.

Once restored:

There's lush vegetation – grasses, sedges, beautiful flowers.

Once those come, the insects come – butterflies, bees.

And once those come, the birds come.

And nature can do it's magic.



We first give mother nature a hand when we remove the invasive species and we give her a hand again to bring back the biodiversity.

One way we accomplish restoration is by investing in the Conservation Corps. These programs also help ensure that the Forest Preserves continue to be cared for by future generations.

GRANTS AWARDED **FOREST PRESERVES OF COOK COUNTY** *for* CONSERVATION CORPS PROGRAMS

2024 granting contributed to the vitality of the youth programs:

- **Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps**
- **Forest Preserve Experience**

Youth Conservation Corps programs are paid experiences that mobilize youth ages 14-19 from across Cook County's diverse communities to heal and nurture the land. Focus is on teamwork, basic job skills, restoration work, and environmental education.

You help us nurture the next generation of environmental leaders, enrich the conservation field, and restore our treasured Preserves.

Meet Arianna Telles, an Effervescent Example of the Next Generation of Environmental Leaders

Arianna Telles exudes enthusiasm about nature and the young people she led as Assistant Crew Leader in the Conservation Corps. When she needed to take a gap year in her Environmental Sciences program at UIC she didn't want to stop learning and moving toward her goals. The Gap Year Program of the Conservation Corps turned out even better than she expected. The hands-on, real-life experience in the field helped her learn in ways that lectures did not. [Enjoy the speech she gave at the Conservation Cup.](#)



Ever since I can remember, I loved being surrounded by trees ...



You can watch Arianna's full speech [HERE](#)

Now with the help of this program, I know my purpose is to ensure natural spaces are restored and inspire others to do the same.

CONSERVATION CORPS

Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps

“CCLC has increased my interest in nature. It really inspires [me], and I want to do this work more. I would like to see progress in the work that we are doing and to teach people about conservation work.”

Anais

Sagawau Learning Center Crew

Crew activity examples

- Remove invasive plants
- Plant native species
- Build and repair trails
- Restore and build fences
- Nature play area construction
- Learn leadership skills
- Expand environmental education
- Explore green careers
- Recreation in nature



“I'd recommend this program to a friend because I think being outside and off your phone is good for your mental and physical health.”

DeAnthony

Sand Ridge Nature Center Crew

“One thing I learned since CCLC is teamwork. I wasn't a fan of talking and working with others but working here has changed that. I've been communicating more and handling anxiety better.”

Denise

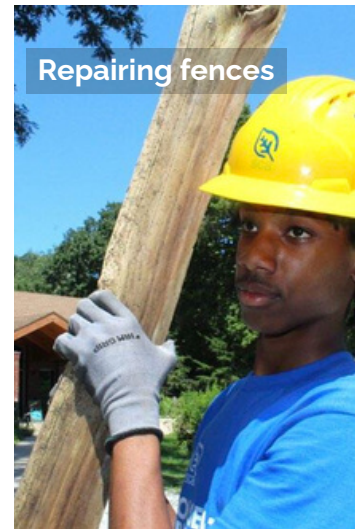
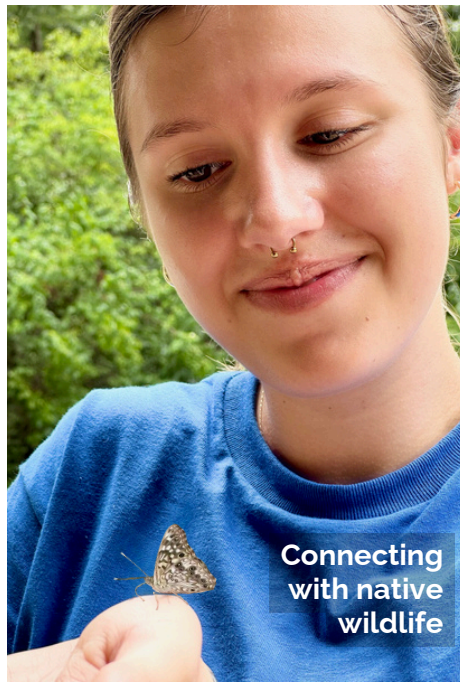
Trailside Museum Crew



The Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps is a partnership program coordinated by the Student Conservation Association (SCA), Friends of the Forest Preserves, and the Forest Preserves of Cook County, with generous support from the Forest Preserve Foundation, and others.

Conserve. Educate. Enjoy.

Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps

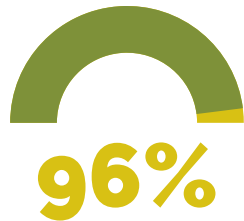


Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps

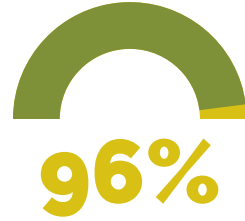
By the Numbers 2024



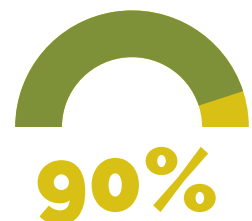
Would recommend this program to a friend



Feel knowledgeable about the forest preserves, nature, and the local environment



Believe we should protect the Forest Preserves and nature for future generations



Feel confident that they have the knowledge to be a successful employee

*38 youth crew members • 8 crew leaders
6 assistant crew leaders*

African American/Black
31%

Hispani/Latine
9%

White (Not Hispanic/Latine)
43%

Multi-Racial
11%

Asian/Pacific Islander
4%

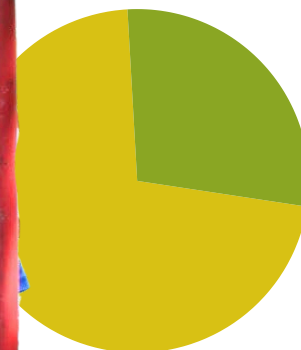
Chose not to identify
4%



HOURS COMPLETED

Environmental Education
1,520

Conservation Work
3,800



CONSERVATION CORPS

Forest Preserve Experience

Crew activity examples

- Remove invasive plants
- Gain nature knowledge
- Learn leadership skills
- Career readiness coaching
- Recreation in nature
- Improve wildlife habitat
- Explore green careers

“My experience with FPE was the experience of a lifetime. I’ve made new bonds and learned so much to teach others. I’ve gotten closer to nature and more at peace. This is something I’d definitely love to see through and go to college for.

... I was scared when I joined, but I’m glad I took that leap of faith because it pushed me beyond my limits and taught me about what I loved and who I am. I couldn’t be happier with FPE.”

Mia Alicea,

Calumet Woods, 18, Dolton



“Just stay focused and work hard. I learned about plant ID, invasives, toxic waste, and history I’ve never learned about like the Pullman Company.”

Torian Jones

North Creek Meadows, 15, Dolton

“I will take my work with other people with me. I enjoyed getting to work with people and working outside. My favorite part was getting to see different animals, field trips, and getting paid of course.”

Tristan Davis

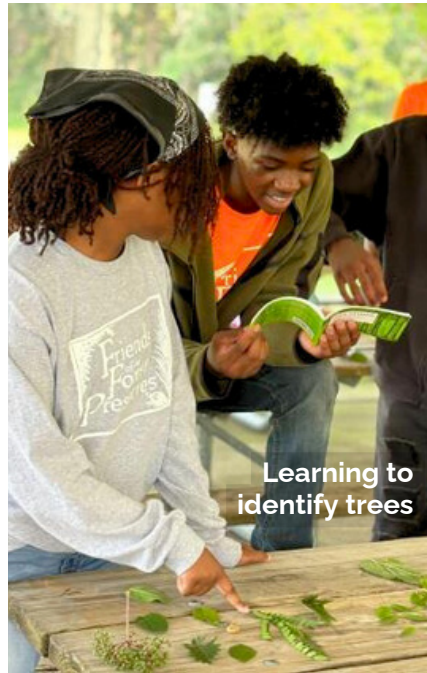
Kings Grove, 14, Glenwood



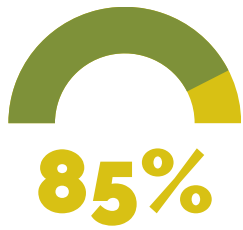
The Forest Preserve Experience is a collaborative program coordinated by Friends of the Forest Preserves (FOTFP) and the Forest Preserves of Cook County (FPCC), with generous support from the Cook County Bureau of Economic Development, the Housing Authority of Cook County (HACC), the Forest Preserve Foundation, and others.

Conserve. Educate. Enjoy.

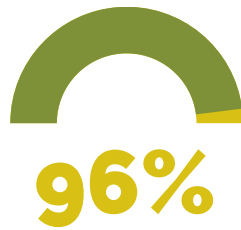
Forest Preserve Experience



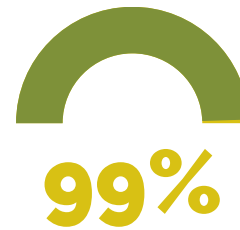
Forest Preserve Experience By the Numbers 2024



Members wanting to continue their education in a green-related field



Graduation Rate



Feel confident that they can be a leader when needed.

*74 high school crew members • 13 crew leaders
5 assistant crew leaders*

African American/ Black
88%

Multi-Racial
9%

Hispanic/ Latine
3%

Chose not to identify
4%

CREW MEMBER DEMOGRAPHICS

HOURS CREWS CONTRIBUTED AND EXPERIENCED

Experiential, nature-based activities to create a love and understanding of the forest preserves' land, wildlife, and other natural resources
4,282

Career readiness training to help prepare the members for future careers
3,790

Team building activities
2,978

Field trip or engagement - exposure to conservation or green careers
2,693

Conservation Work
2,336



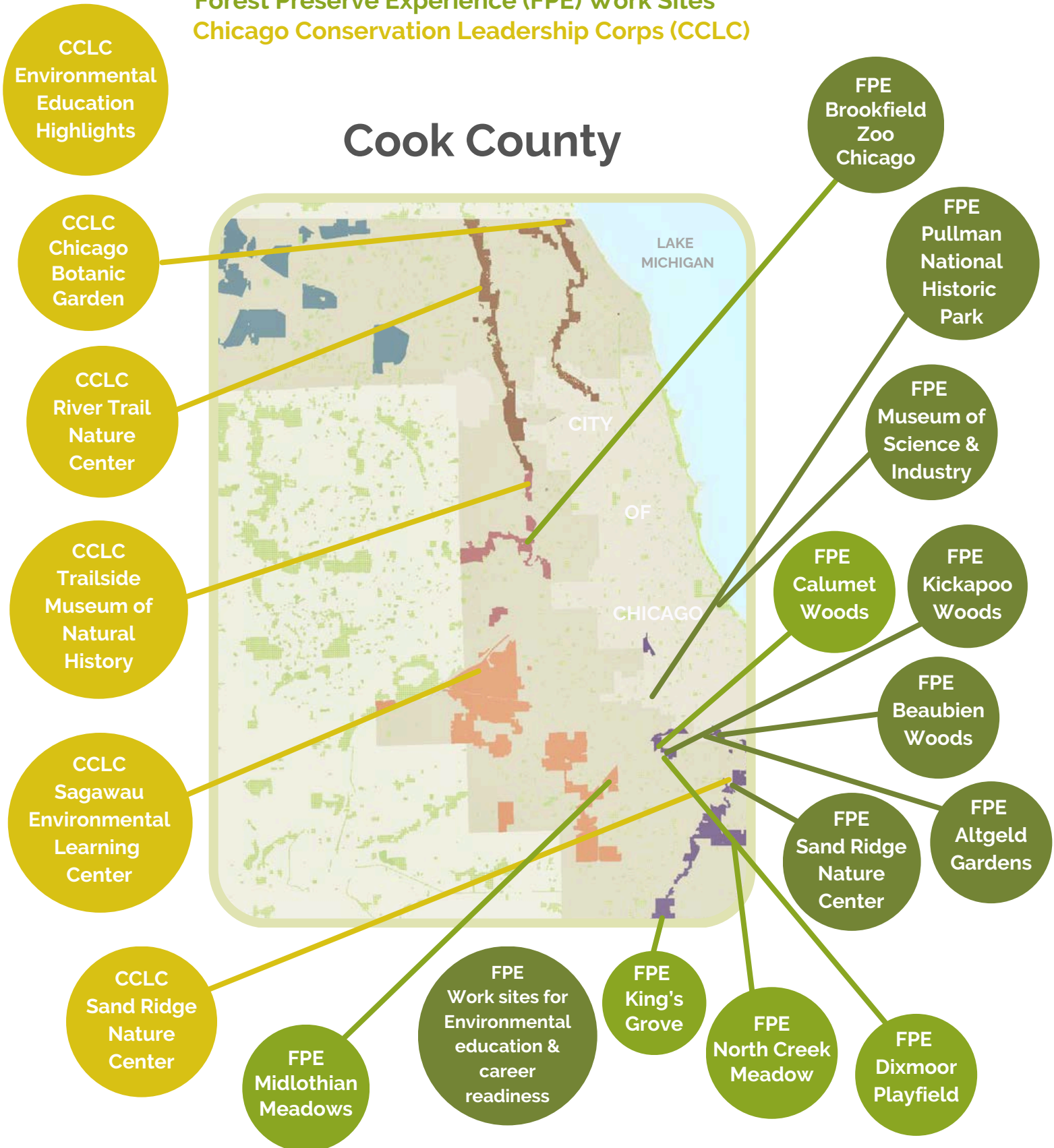
Work & Education areas for grants

FOREST PRESERVES OF COOK COUNTY

Forest Preserve Experience (FPE) Education Sites

Forest Preserve Experience (FPE) Work Sites

Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps (CCLC)



GRANTS AWARDED

FOREST PRESERVES OF COOK COUNTY

for VOLUNTEER RESOURCES

Motorola Solutions and Parker Hannifin each partnered with the Forest Preserve Foundation for a day of satisfying work and team building.

Thank you for your service and your donations!



EVENTS

Connecting, Supporting, Having Fun!

Hundreds of you came out to our fundraising events, supporting impactful programs while connecting with others who value the Preserves

13TH ANNUAL CONSERVATION CUP

George W. Dunne National Golf Course

Fundraising & Raising Fun

September 5th, 2024

[See the Story.](#)



INAUGURAL JAZZ IN THE PRESERVES

Thatcher Woods Pavillion

Relax & Restore

July 18th, 2024

[See the Story.](#)



SAVE THE DATES:

Conservation Cup 2025 • Thursday, Sept. 4, 2025

Jazz in the Preserves 2025 • Thursday, July 24, 2025

Thank you event top sponsors!



Tom Lanctot



FOUNDATION LEADERSHIP

THE FOREST PRESERVE FOUNDATION WELCOMED NEW OFFICERS TO ITS BOARD OF DIRECTORS.



Theresa Salus, Chair
National Field Service Manager
Co-op Experiences, REI Co-op



LeeAnn Tomas-Foster, Vice Chair
Chicago City Executive
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In Gratitude

\$30,000 +

Anonymous Fund of Central Indiana Community Foundation.
CSX
Forest Preserve District of Cook County
Troon Partners/Indigo Sports

\$20,000 - \$29,999

Bass Pro Shops & Cabela's Outdoor Fund
BlackRock Gives
People's Gas
Union Pacific Foundation

\$10,000 - \$19,999

Anonymous
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ComEd/Openlands

\$5,000 - \$9,999

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Ankur Udani
United Way of Metropolitan Chicago

\$1,000 - \$2,499

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Ray Wallace
Cassandra West
Cheryl Wisniewski

*Thank
you!*



Acknowledgements

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Conservation Cup Committee

Julie Conenna (Co-Chair)
Anngie Richter (Co-Chair)
Kristin Adams
Kathleen M. Gallagher
Joshua Geppi
Eric Rockhold
Mika Ann Stambaugh
LeeAnn Tomas-Foster

Conservation Cup Event Management

Indigo Sports, a Troon Company
Tailored Events
Troon Partners

Conservation Cup Volunteers

LaVae Johnson
DeAntre Lloyd
Germaine Long
Michelle Racine
Kyle Young
Alex Zibarov

Jazz in the Preserves Committee

LeeAnn Tomas-Foster (co-chair)
Theresa Salus (co-chair)
Peter Volpe

Jazz in the Preserves Volunteers

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LaVae Johnson
Leslie Kasten
DeAntre Lloyd
Germaine Long
Aman Malik
Tim Scully-Granzeier
Bruce Stewart
David van Velden
Kimberly Wojcik

Office of the Cook County Board President

Toni Preckwinkle, President

Forest Preserves of Cook County

Interim General Superintendent Eileen Figel
Office of the General Superintendent
Office of the Deputy Superintendent
Department of Conservation and Experiential Programming
Department of Permits, Rentals & Concessions
Department of Resource Management

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Brookfield Zoo Chicago
Chicago Cubs
Chicago Fire
Chicago Red Stars
Forest Preserves of Cook County
Indigo Sports, a Troon Company
Olé & Obrigado
Troon
Wines for Humanity
White Sox



*Thank
you!*

LIFETIME INVESTMENT

\$3.5 million

lifetime investment in our mission

935

next generation environmental leaders supported

1,179

acres restored via ecological restoration



Thank you for
partnering with us