

2026 Strategic Plan

Forest Preserve District of DuPage County



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About This Plan

This strategic plan sets the direction for the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County and identifies the priorities that will guide our decisions, investments, and work.
To develop the plan, we looked at where we are today, the challenges and opportunities ahead, and the long-term needs of the District. We also gathered ideas and feedback from staff, volunteers, executive leadership, the Board of Commissioners, and other stakeholders.

The planning process highlighted important strengths, including our organizational culture, infrastructure, programs, and public support. It also identified challenges and opportunities related to workforce and organizational capacity, increasing operational demands, partnerships, advances in technology and research, environmental risks, economic uncertainty, and changing public expectations.

These findings helped shape the strategic priorities in this plan and identify where we need to focus our efforts to advance our conservation mission, use our resources responsibly, and continue serving DuPage County residents.

The plan provides a framework for making decisions and setting priorities while allowing us to respond to changing needs and opportunities.



Our Foundation

Our mission, vision, and purpose provide the foundation for our work and guide the decisions we make.

Our mission, established by the Downstate Forest Preserve District Act, defines our core responsibility. Our vision describes the future we want to help create, and our purpose explains why our work matters to DuPage County.

Together, they keep us focused on conservation and the long-term value our work provides to the community.

Mission

Our mission, as mandated by the Downstate Forest Preserve District Act (70 ILCS 805), is "to acquire and hold lands containing forests, prairies, wetlands, and associated plant communities or lands capable of being restored to such natural conditions for the purpose of protecting and preserving the flora, fauna, and scenic beauty for the education, pleasure, and recreation of its citizens."

Vision

We will build a future where thriving habitats, resilient ecosystems, and welcoming places connect people to nature.

Purpose

We preserve, protect, and restore natural areas to improve and sustain the quality of life for the plants, animals, and residents of DuPage County.



Guiding Principles

Our guiding principles define the values and standards that shape how the Forest Preserve District carries out our work. They establish expectations for collaboration, accountability, service, stewardship, and decision-making. They support consistent behavior across our organization and reinforce public trust by ensuring we work thoughtfully, professionally, and responsibly.

Collaboration

We foster strong relationships and value diverse perspectives, insights, and expertise because we know we can achieve more and be more effective as a group than as individuals.

Innovation and Continuous Improvement

We boldly explore new methods, strategies, and ideas and continuously evaluate, learn, and improve. Innovation strengthens our organization and ensures we can move our mission forward in a changing world.

Trust

We build trust by being open and honest, holding ourselves and one another accountable, and creating welcoming environments where we treat ourselves and others with respect. Confidence in how we steward public lands and resources is essential.

Community-Centered Service

We serve thoughtfully and apply best practices in all our fields of expertise to increase engagement and trust through excellent community-centered service.

Safety and Well-Being

We prioritize safety and well-being in everything we do by providing secure, well-maintained, accessible, and inviting environments for all.

Stewardship and Sustainability

We pursue excellence, promote environmentally responsible practices, manage our finances, and invest in our employees so we can better care for the natural resources entrusted to us — now and for future generations.

Creating Connections

We promote programs, projects, and services that link people, nature, places, history, and stewardship to deepen everyone's understanding of the importance of conservation. These meaningful connections foster belonging, strengthen relationships, and enhance the quality of life.



Strategic Priorities

Our five strategic priorities identify where we will focus our efforts and resources in the years ahead. They reflect the needs and opportunities identified through the planning process and work together to advance our conservation mission and strengthen the District for the future.

Each priority is equally important and includes a goal and strategies to guide our work.



Mission Focus and Public Value

Goal

Maintain strong public support by ensuring activities and investments in resources consistently deliver meaningful, positive mission-related outcomes.

Why This Matters

Public value is created when conservation-, education-, and recreation-driven efforts and strategic resource management combine to connect residents to the landscape and its history. We will ensure activities and investments reinforce our mission of conservation and support long-term ecological health while providing safe, high-quality opportunities for education, recreation, and meaningful connections to nature. When making decisions, we will place ecological protections, responsible stewardship, and measurable outcomes (improvements in biodiversity, water quality, habitat health, etc.) over activities driven by convenience or routine practice. By aligning investments with our mission, maintaining disciplined management, and demonstrating clear conservation-driven outcomes, we will sustain public trust and long-term community support.

Strategy 1

Focus resources on conservation and ecological protections including habitat health, biodiversity, ecological connectivity, and protection of high-quality natural areas rather than development pressures, trend-driven programs, or partnerships that do not directly advance conservation priorities.

Strategy 2

Maintain and optimize existing land, habitats, and facilities before expanding infrastructure or investing in underused assets.

Strategy 3

Demonstrate measurable conservation outcomes by communicating and engaging openly with the public and using education, interpretation, and storytelling to build understanding, trust, and support.

Strategy 4

Prioritize the acquisition of high-quality lands that promote ecological connectivity, biodiversity, and long-term stewardship over opportunistic or nonstrategic acquisitions.

Governance and Institutional Credibility

Goal

Ensure disciplined governance, clear policy direction, and transparent community engagement to strengthen institutional credibility and public trust.

Why This Matters

Strong, disciplined governance and transparency efforts reinforce public trust and ensure effective operations over time. We will continue to use consistent practices and up-to-date policies to guide decision-making. Decisions will rely on professional expertise, adopted plans, and long-term priorities rather than reactive responses.

Strategy 1

Prioritize actions and decisions grounded in professional expertise, adopted strategic and master plans, and planning cycles over immediate or reactive choices.

Strategy 2

Align Board of Commissioners policies, ordinances, and planning frameworks to reduce fragmented or inconsistent governance.

Strategy 3

Promote long-term institutional credibility and organizational performance rather than short-term outcomes.

Strategy 4

Prioritize transparent, proactive public engagement and long-term public value over decisions driven by short-term preferences or limited interests.

Financial Capacity and Resource Management

Goal

Protect the Forest Preserve District's financial capacity by responsibly managing resources, modernizing procurement operations, and ensuring expenditures support strategic priorities.

Why This Matters

Careful planning, responsible procurement, and diversified funding protect financial stability and maintain flexibility to meet future needs. We will manage financial resources with discipline and align spending with long-term priorities. Investments will focus on efficiency, sustainability, and measurable values while limiting programs and assets that weaken our financial capacity.

Strategy 1

Prioritize long-term financial sustainability, disciplined financial planning, and adherence to adopted financial policies over short-term spending pressures or reactive financial decisions.

Strategy 2

Intentionally limit marginal programs, nonessential asset investments, and subsidies that do not align with strategic priorities or strengthen our financial capacity.

Strategy 3

Prioritize competitive procurement practices, shared services, and a commitment to best practices over convenience-based purchasing decisions or a reliance on past approaches.

Strategy 4

Align investments with external funding opportunities and strategic partnerships before increasing reliance on internal financial resources.



Workforce and Organizational Resilience

Goal

Invest in employees, attract mission-driven talent, engage volunteers, and cultivate leadership and workforce practices that strengthen performance and connections to the Forest Preserve District's broader conservation efforts.

Why This Matters

Investing in workforce development and meaningful volunteer engagement will strengthen our organizational capabilities. We will align staffing, program commitments, and operational expectations with available capacity rather than demand-driven expansion. Clear connections between individual contributions and conservation-related outcomes will strengthen shared purpose, accountability, and long-term organizational resilience.

Strategy 1

Prioritize professional development, succession planning, competitive compensation, meaningful volunteer engagement, and a supportive culture over short-term staffing fixes or past norms.

Strategy 2

Strengthen a culture of collaboration and integrity, ensuring employees and volunteers know how their contributions support our conservation efforts and affect the community. Limit unnecessary procedures, complacency, and organizational inertia that weaken performance.

Strategy 3

Align staff and volunteer activities, programs, and commitments with capacity instead of demand.



Conservation, Sustainability, and Environmental Impact

Goal

Strengthen ecosystem resilience and capacity to adapt to an evolving environment through conservation, restoration, species rehabilitation and recovery, and sustainable operations.

Why This Matters

We will direct investments toward conservation, restoration, species recovery, and practices that strengthen ecological resilience. Decisions will prioritize biodiversity, habitat health, and environmental responsibility over short-term pressures. By adopting emerging technologies and strengthening partnerships, we will be able to adapt to changing conditions and sustain healthy ecosystems.

Strategy 1

Prioritize biodiversity improvement, habitat restoration, species rehabilitation and recovery efforts, and air and water quality enhancements over infrastructure expansion or recreational convenience.

Strategy 2

Prioritize the strategic expansion of green energy, environmentally responsible technologies, and sustainable land management practices over lower-cost or easier-to-implement conventional alternatives. This will reduce our impact on the environment and lessen long-term operational demands.

Strategy 3

Promote collaboration to test, implement, and share emerging practices that deliver measurable conservation outcomes rather than relying solely on isolated approaches.









Strategic Decision Framework

Our strategic priorities help define where we will focus our efforts and resources. This decision framework helps us put those priorities into practice by guiding how we evaluate investments, programs, partnerships, and operational decisions.

By applying these principles consistently, we can keep our decisions aligned with our conservation mission and long-term priorities, use public resources responsibly, and focus on work that delivers meaningful conservation outcomes and public value.

Mission Alignment First

All investments, programs, and partnerships prioritize advancing the Forest Preserve District's conservation mission and ecological stewardship.

Long-Term Outcomes Over Short-Term Pressures

Decisions prioritize long-term ecological health, financial sustainability, and institutional credibility over short-term gains or pressures.

Evidence-Based Decisions

Decisions are guided by science, performance metrics, financial analysis, and verified data.

Responsible Resource Stewardship

Resources are invested thoughtfully by prioritizing maintenance, efficiency, and responsible use of public assets.

Organizational Discipline

The District operates within a realistic capacity, prioritizing safety, efficiency, accountability, and sustainable workloads.

Innovation With Accountability

We encourage testing of new methods, technologies, and partnerships that improve conservation outcomes while maintaining fiscal and operational discipline.



Implementation and Accountability

This strategic plan sets our long-term direction, but its value will come from how we put it into action.

Each year, we will use the plan to help set organizational priorities, make budget and resource decisions, and develop department work plans. We will track our progress through performance measures, regular reporting, and periodic reviews so we can evaluate results and respond to changing needs and opportunities.

We will also share our progress, accomplishments, and conservation outcomes with the public. This will help demonstrate the impact of our work and reinforce our commitment to transparency and responsible stewardship of public lands and resources.

Implementation Stream



Together, these steps will turn our strategic priorities into action, align our work and resources with our conservation mission, and help us deliver meaningful, measurable results for DuPage County.