Forest Preserves of Winnebago County
Strategic Land Conservation Plan
2016-2020
The Forest Preserve District is dedicated to protecting, conserving, enhancing and promoting Winnebago County’s natural heritage for the environmental, educational, and recreational benefit of present and future generations.

Forest Preserves of Winnebago County Board of Commissioners

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Winnebago County Natural Communities

Winnebago County: The Land Before the Settlers Came

When the first settlers to the Rock River valley arrived in Winnebago County they saw a landscape shaped by ice, wind, water and fire. The four rivers that flow through the area had a major role in shaping the landscape, but so did the glacial ice that receded from the area between 10,000 to 12,000 years ago, the wind that reworked the glacial soils and native Americans who used fire to manage game and maintain the grasslands that carpeted most of the land.

West of the Rock River the first settlers found rolling prairie underlain by bedrock covered with a thin layer of glacial soil and wind-blown silt. Springs flowed from the hillsides forming many clear streams and creeks. East of the river the bedrock was covered by thick deposits of glacial till mixed with sand and gravel left behind by the retreating ice sheet that came down from Wisconsin and spread over most of Northern Illinois. As the ice melted, torrents of water carried sand and gravel down the Rock and Kishwaukee rivers filling in the river valleys and forming outwash plains and terraces of this highly porous glacial material.

The glaciers also changed the courses of the Kishwaukee and Rock rivers, and glacial sand and gravel washed down the Rock blocked the mouth of the Pecatonica River forming a vast glacial lake that extended to Freeport, Illinois. When the lake drained it left behind a flat lake plain filled with sand, silt and clay. Westerly winds blew the sand unto the uplands to the north and east.

Before the Wisconsin glacier reached the county, both the Rock River and Kishwaukee River flowed south into the Illinois River. The ice sheet blocked the flow of the Kishwaukee, forcing it to cut a new channel through a bedrock ridge between Cherry Valley and New Milford. This forced the Rock River to cut a new channel to the west, forming the scenic bluffs that extend from Blackhawk Park in Rockford to Dixon. The “gorges” created along the Kishwaukee and Rock rivers sheltered magnificent stands of virgin hardwood forest when the settlers arrived.

The first settlers also found vast stands of bottomland forests, marshes and sloughs in the Pecatonica and Sugar River valleys, and prairie with stands of black oaks and bur oaks growing on the sandy soils north and east of the rivers. Shirland and parts of Rockton townships were known as the “Sand Prairie” and to this day harbor some of the last remnants of natural prairie in the county.

Native Americans used fire to keep the prairies free of trees and brush, and to manage wild game. The annual prairie fires kept the woodlands open and easy to move through. Open groves of oaks and hickories covered the hills north and west of Rockford while scattered oak groves were found east of the Rock River. The fertility of the open prairies was not obvious to the first settlers, so they built their cabins in the groves and along the creeks where there was a source of wood and water.

The rolling hills of grass and wildflowers that greeted the first settlers was unfamiliar to the immigrants from forested regions of New England, Germany and Scandinavia. Bluestem, Indian grass, dropseed, and side-oats grama grew on the drier uplands, while cordgrass, switch grass, blue-joint grass and numerous sedges and bulrushes grew in wetter areas in the river valleys. A profusion of flowering shrubs and wildflowers grew among the grasses and sedges, adding waves of color to the landscape.

Dense forests of oaks, maples, basswood, walnut and honey locust grew in the Pecatonica River bottoms. The early settlers subdivided the forest tracts into lots for use as a source of wood, game and maple sugar for families who took up claims on the open prairie where trees were scarce. These “wood lots” still show up on plat books today.

Wildlife was abundant in the early days of settlement. White tailed deer, elk, black bear, prairie chicken, quail, numerous ducks and other waterfowl, muskrat, squirrel, rabbit, river otter, bobcat, mountain lion, coyote, wolf, fox, raccoon, and beaver were found throughout the region. Beaver populations had already been depleted by French fur trappers by the time the first settlers arrived, and wolves were soon driven out of the area, and died out after the hard winter of 1842-43. Flocks of Passenger pigeons darkened the skies and Sandhill cranes were common enough to hunt for food. Bald eagles, hawks and owls were often shot to reduce...
predation of wild game and livestock, and bounties were paid on wolves and coyotes. Black bear and mountain lions were hunted to extinction, and by the mid-1800s wolves were “very scare and rarely seen.”

There is some debate about bison ever being here. According to The Mammals of Winnebago County¹, bison, white-tailed deer and elk were all found in Winnebago County, but D.D. Alling, writing about the game in the county circa 1885 said:

“Never saw a live buffaloo here but saw two carcasses on spr, 1838, 3 miles west on Kent’s Creek, the other 2 or 3 years after on Kilbuck, bones entire with skull etc. “

By the early 1900s most of the wildlife populations had been reduced to small numbers by trappers, hunters, clearing and plowing. Bears, wolves, mountain lions, bald eagles, elk and white tailed deer were gone from the county, and the last prairie chickens were shot in the 1950s near Shirland.

Today populations of many species of wildlife are making a comeback as natural habitat is being protected and restored throughout the county.

Winnebago County: Natural Communities Today

Today’s local landscape contains only a tiny fragments of Winnebago County’s diverse ecosystems. The tall-grass prairie, short grass prairie, wetland, oak-hickory savanna, and woodland that once dominated our area are now reduced to small fragments of primarily recreated natural communities.

The Forest Preserves of Winnebago County’s 10, 400 acres contain a variety of these remnant and restored ecosystems, from rivers to swamps, to prairies, to floodplain forests and upland forests. This broad range of habitat types support over 1500 species of native plants. Of these plants, over 200 are currently listed by the Illinois State government as being either threatened, or endangered.

While protecting rare plants, we are also protecting the organisms that depend on those plants. These may be anything from insects or herbivorous animals such as rabbits, deer, or even mice that need the seeds of the flower of a particular species to live. Some of these protected and managed ecosystems are the last remaining occurrences in the County and are critical to the survival of the wildlife that depend on them.

Ecosystem services defines the value and impact of protecting nature and the benefits gained. There is a direct correlation with natural systems and their diverse benefits to human economies. This public investment goes well beyond just protecting green space, it safeguards the quality of health and wellness on multiple levels for all residents far into the future.

There are three important truths regarding ecosystem services: natural habitats provide ecosystems benefits to people 24 hours a day, 365 days a year; people receive more ecosystem benefits when there are more natural habitats; and better quality habitats provide more ecosystem benefits than poor quality habitats.

Natural ecosystems are the cheap and low maintenance infrastructure that communities need for essential services. Natural capital does for free what built capital does at great cost. The benefits provided by built capital, such as a water filtration plant, are typically short term because it depreciates over time, eventually needing to be replaced. In contrast, natural capital appreciates in value over time and benefits are realized for, possibly, centuries. And natural capital is constantly being regenerated by living organisms converting energy into growing biomass—the foundation for life on Earth.

By continuing to restore, protect, and manage natural ecosystems, Forest Preserves of Winnebago County is making major contributions to the health and sustainability of our region.

¹ Mullen, Elizabeth, The Mammals of Winnebago County, Illinois (Rockford 1991) P.5
WINNEBAGO COUNTY EARLY 1800s LAND COVER

Figure 1

MAP BY THE ILLINOIS NATURAL HISTORY SURVEY
(OVERLAY OF FOREST PRESERVES AND ROADS BY FOREST PRESERVE)
website: www.inhs.illinois.edu/files/3513/4316/5290/winnebago.pdf
LAND ADVISORY COUNCIL A BRIEF HISTORY

The Land Advisory Council was probably established sometime in the 1960’s, but the earliest date we can verify is 1976. The historical reason to establish a Land Advisory Council was to advise Forest Preserve Commissioners regarding land purchases in such a way as to eliminate political patronage and encourage land donation.

Winnebago County’s Land Advisory Council was modeled after the Land Advisory Council in Cook County. The first councils were comprised of citizens who were legal voters of the District other than Commissioners. The members served for two years and were appointed by the President (County Board Chair). The council was to have at least one member drawn from the fields of conservation, education, recreation, real estate, and finance. Past council accomplishments included a land classification and recreation policy. The land classification policy was established in 1982 and is still active. The recreation policy established in 1981 is semi-active. At times the council was an advocate to protecting preserve property. In 1985 the City of Rockford proposed an extension of Central Avenue South through Klehm Arboretum. The proposed extension was to be an economic development stimulus and also favored by many on the County Board who were also Forest Preserve Commissioners. The Land Advisory Council vigorously opposed the project. The project eventually was rejected. The Land Advisory Council can claim partial credit for the defeat of the schedule.

The Land Advisory Council has been most active when a reserve of land acquisition funds is available. At the end of the old board structure in 2008, funds for land acquisition were limited and the advisory council was less active than in the 1990’s. The election of the new independent board eliminated the existing Land Advisory Council. The new board however, quickly recognized a need and created a new Land Advisory Council.

RESOLUTION
Re-Establishing a Land Advisory Council

WHEREAS, there are 40 individual forest preserves for the purpose of protecting the natural beauty of Winnebago County, as well as for education and recreation; and

WHEREAS, the Winnebago County Forest Preserve District provides over 9,500 acres of property for the use and enjoyment of the general public; and

WHEREAS, the Mission Statement of the District states that the Winnebago County Forest Preserve District is dedicated to protecting, conserving, enhancing and promoting Winnebago County’s natural heritage for the environmental, educational, and recreational benefit of present and future generations; and

WHEREAS, a Core Value of the Winnebago County Forest Preserve District is “Protecting and preserving natural lands and natural communities”; and

WHEREAS, it is in the best interests of the taxpayers and citizens of Winnebago County that the District make informed and educated decisions about the purchase of future lands for the District.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Winnebago County Forest Preserve District Board of Commissioners that the District establish the Land Advisory Council to advise the Board on land acquisition matters; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Council will establish a Land Acquisition Policy and a Strategic Land Conservation Plan, with final approval by the Board of Commissioners; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Board Chairman will appoint a Land Advisory Council Chairman within 30 days of the approval of this Resolution, with the approval of the Board of Commissioners; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Board of Commissioners and the Land Advisory Council Chairman will seek qualified individuals from the community to serve on the council.

LAND ADVISORY COUNCIL MEMBERS

Jerry Paulson - Chairman Land Advisory Council 7 Past Executive Director of Natural Land Institute
Ann Marie Cain - Winnebago-Boone Farm Bureau, Manager
Steve Clark - Commercial Realtor
Pam Cunningham - Realtor
Bill Hoff - Businessman/Farmer
Lee Johnson - Former Director of Burpee & Sand Bluff Bird Banding
James Marshall - Chair, Department of Chemical & Biological Services
Rebecca Olson - Owner of Olson Ecological Solutions
Randy Vogel - Land and Water Resource Inc., Manager
Dan Williams - Former Land Advisory Chair, Past President of Natural Land Institute
Audrey Johnson - Forest Preserve Board of Commissioners
Mike Eickman - Forest Preserve Board of Commissioners
Executive Summary

On March 20, 2013 the Board of Commissioners of the Forest Preserves of Winnebago County passed a resolution re-establishing the Land Advisory Council to advise the Board on acquisition of land by the District, including establishing a land acquisition policy and a Strategic Land Conservation Plan. The first task was to develop priorities and procedures for land acquisition, and a new set of screening questions to evaluate potential land acquisition projects. These guidelines were recommended by the Council and adopted by the Commissioners. They are included in Appendix A of this plan.

Next, the Council began the process of developing a Strategic Land Conservation Plan, starting with a review of the Greenway Plan for Winnebago County, (Figure 1) and the current inventory of lands held by the District (Appendix B). The Council also reviewed State and Federal conservation programs and priorities, including the State Wildlife Action Plan to determine the role that the District has in implementing these priorities.

The Council then developed a list of the internal and external strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (S.W.O.T.) facing the District. The greatest challenge to the District is declining tax revenues to operate the existing forest preserves and the lack of funds to purchase, develop and manage new forest preserves. The Council had to consider this over-riding issue as it developed the land conservation plan.

Seven policy options for acquiring land for the District were developed ranging from no additional land purchases to creation of new forest preserves. (Figure 2) The highest priority was put on acquiring critical inholdings needed to enhance the operations and maintenance of existing preserves, protection of areas with significant natural resource values, and completing the acquisition of land in the Kishwaukee River “gorge” area between Cherry Valley and New Milford. Expansion of existing preserves and the creation of new preserves was a lower priority, and will be considered only if the land is offered for sale to the District.

This land conservation plan recognizes the financial constraints in which the District has to operate. A focus on acquisition of in-holdings makes management and development of the preserves easier, and there are grants available from private foundations to protect natural areas. In October 2016, the District called a meeting of local conservation agencies and groups to discuss a cooperative approach to preservation of the unprotected natural areas in the county. A strategy for protecting these important natural resource areas is presented under Option 3.

Funding the acquisition of land along the Kishwaukee River must be secured to assure the protection of this ecologically sensitive highly valued recreational area. Several funding strategies are suggested for Option 4. Development pressures on the area south of the river along Interstate 39 make protecting the Kishwaukee River gorge area a high priority for the District.

This Strategic Land Conservation Plan should serve as the guiding document for the expansion of the land holdings of the Forest Preserves of Winnebago County for the foreseeable future. As conditions change, the plan should be reviewed and updated.

Respectfully submitted

Jerry Paulson, Chairman
Land Advisory Council
As the first step in the Strategic Planning process, the LAC and District staff developed a S.W.O.T. analysis to identify the internal and external factors that affect the District:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Priority acquisition areas identified in Greenways Plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>District has portfolio of 10,200 acres of large manageable preserves</td>
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<tr>
<td>District has established corridors of land along the Kishwaukee, Sugar and upper Pecatonica Rivers</td>
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<td>District protects good examples of most natural community types of forest, wetlands, savanna and grasslands</td>
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<td>District has established a land classification policy</td>
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<td>District has good partnerships with other groups and agencies</td>
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<td>District has professional staff with good skill sets</td>
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<td>District has a long history of working with private land owners</td>
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<td>District has low debt payment</td>
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<td>County has a large assessed valuation</td>
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<td>District has good public support</td>
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<th>Weaknesses:</th>
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<td>District has limited funds for land acquisition in corporate levy</td>
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<td>District has limited bonding authority without going to public referendum</td>
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<td>There is a lack of state ad federal grants for land acquisition</td>
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<td>District is at its maximum taxing limit for operations (.06/100av)</td>
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<tr>
<td>District at its taxing limit for capital funds (.025/100av)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of new development in county and reduced assessed valuation</td>
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<tr>
<td>District is understaffed for resource management</td>
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<td>Public fears raising taxes</td>
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<td>Farming community opposes acquiring farmland for forest reserves</td>
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<tr>
<th>Opportunities:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Land is available for acquisition from willing sellers</td>
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<td>Private funds and grants are available for acquisition of natural areas</td>
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<td>Development pressure is low except along I-39 corridor</td>
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<td>There is the possibility for new partnerships (FEMA buyouts, economic dev)</td>
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<td>There is the possibility to build corporate and community support for district through Community Foundation of Northern Illinois</td>
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<td>Winnebago Co. is an important wildlife area in Illinois Wildlife Action Plan</td>
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<td>District has a growing volunteer corps</td>
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<td>Grassroots groups like Transform Rockford working to improve region</td>
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<tr>
<td>There is a growing public awareness of forest preserves</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forest Preserves are seen as a community asset</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Threats:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development along I-39 south of the Kishwaukee River</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase in invasive species (EAB, Gypsy moth)</td>
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<td>Increases in farmland property taxes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drainage and clearing of farmland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nuisance wildlife populations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increasing number of TIF districts</td>
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<td>Conversion from small to large farms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increasing impervious surfaces and stormwater runoff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Changes in wildlife populations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase in price of conservation lands</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appreciation of natural world not being instilled in children</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The Forest Preserves of Winnebago County has adopted the Boone and Winnebago County Greenways Plan as its primary guide for the acquisition of land for the District. Areas designated as “Critical/Sensitive Area Priority Acquisition” on the Greenways Plan map will be considered for acquisition as forest preserves or additions to existing forest preserves. In addition the Forest Preserve District adopted a list of criteria to be used to determine if a particular parcel of land will be acquired:
Priorities for Land Acquisition

The next step in developing a Strategic Land Conservation Plan the Council and staff developed a set of screening questions to use to evaluate specific parcels of land. These are presented in the Appendix A.

Policy Options for Land Acquisition

Land Advisory Council and FPD staff then developed seven options to consider when setting priorities for acquiring additional land for the District, knowing that the District has limited staff and financial resources:

1. **Acquire no more land and focus on demonstrating good stewardship of the lands already entrusted to the District.**

Recognizes the lack of sufficient staff resources to manage the existing preserves, the costs associated with restoring and developing new preserves and the lack of funds for acquisition of land. After discussion, it was decided to reject this option, but to make staffing, management and development costs a key element in considering acquisition of additional land.

2. **Acquire those critical inholdings needed to enhance operations and management of existing preserves.**

Makes the best use of existing staff resources by acquiring inholdings and land that enhances the management and use of the existing preserve with out adding more costs to operation of the District lands.

3. **Acquire properties with significant natural resource value, high quality natural areas, habitat for endangered species and significant natural communities of plants and animals.**

recognizes that high quality natural areas and important wildlife habitat are rare and once destroyed are difficult or impossible to recreate. These types of natural lands are a priority for acquisition in the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan and the 2030 Winnebago County Land Use Plan and are supported by private foundations and state and federal conservation agencies. The opportunity for developing partnerships with other groups and agencies exists to acquire these lands at little or no cost to the district, e.g. Ferguson wetlands.
Priorities for Land Acquisition

4. Complete acquisition of land along the Kishwaukee River gorge between Cherry Valley and New Milford.

Recognizes the threat to the environmentally sensitive lands along the Kishwaukee River gorge from proposed development along I-39 at Baxter Road, and the value of the investment in public lands already made in this popular recreational area.

5. Enlarge existing preserves.

Focuses on the need to enlarge existing preserves to protect natural resources, enhance wildlife habitat, expand recreational opportunities, and enable management efficiencies.

6. Expand holdings along the Pecatonica, Sugar, and Kishwaukee rivers and Kilbuck Creek.

Expands existing holdings along the Pecatonica River, Sugar River, Kishwaukee River and Kilbuck Creek through partnerships with other groups and agencies.

7. Create new preserves on the Rock River, Pecatonica River, South Branch of Kishwaukee River, and on Grove Creek.

Would create new forest preserves along the Rock River, Pecatonica River, South Branch of Kishwaukee River, and Grove Creek. The development of new preserves would be phased in over time as funds allow. Land would be secured and “banked” until it can be developed.

All seven options were presented to the Board of Commissioners for consideration to provide direction as to which options should be used while developing the Strategic Plan. The Commissioners decided that Options 2, 3 and 4 should be the priorities for acquisition of additional land for the District. They also said that property included in Options 5–7 should be considered if they are important and offered for sale to the District. After discussion of the needs and limitations on District staff and resources the Land Advisory Council agreed to put the highest priority on lands in Option 2 – 4, but will consider land in Options 5 – 7 as they became available.

The staff identified tracts of land for acquisition for each priority. The LAC reviewed and reclassified several tracts and discussed various strategies to acquire the land in priorities 2 – 4.
Strategies for Expanding Land Holdings
Established by the Land Advisory Council

Priority 2— Acquire those critical inholdings needed to enhance operations and management of existing preserves.

Goal – Use current bonding authority to acquire critical inholdings of existing forest preserves.

Implementation Strategies
1. Contact each owner of land identified in Option 2 and determine their interest in selling the land.
2. Reauthorize sale of bonds that are maturing to provide needed funds
3. Investigate potential grants to match acquisition bonds.
4. Negotiate purchase of land from willing sellers

Priority 3— Acquire properties with significant natural resource value, high quality natural areas, habitat for endangered species and significant natural communities of plants and animals.

Goal – Form partnerships with other groups and agencies to preserve important natural areas.

Implementation Strategies
1. Update information on 23 potential INAI sites identified in county and goals of IWAP.
2. Convene meeting with staff of NLI, DU, PF, SWCD, OLP, IDNR, INPC, RPD to determine plans and priorities for acquisition and protection of natural areas identified by INAI and IWAP.
3. Secure funding to carry out landowner contact program in cooperation with other groups and agencies and develop materials about land protection tools available to owners of natural lands.
4. Develop database of landowners
5. Develop and print educational materials about gifts of land and other options for protecting land in cooperation with other groups.
6. Distribute educational materials, and train staff and volunteers to respond to requests for more information.
7. Refer landowners to other groups as appropriate.
8. Assign lead agency for each natural area and monitor progress in working with landowners to preserve and protect areas with regular meetings.
9. Secure private funds for acquisition of lands that enlarge existing preserves or are along river corridors.
10. Acquire land and restore/manage habitat for plants and wildlife with limited public facilities.
11. Develop process and program to cultivate and recognize potential donors.
12. Maintain regular contact with landowners who are interested in selling land at a future date.

Priority 4— Complete acquisition of land along the Kishwaukee River gorge between Cherry Valley and New Milford.

Goal – Complete protection of lands in Kishwaukee River gorge.

Implementation Strategies
1. Contact landowners along river west of I-39 to determine their interest in protecting their land.
2. Discuss use of solid waste tipping fees for acquisition of land along the Kishwaukee River with the Winnebago County Board and landfill company.
3. Determine the total cost to protect remaining land along river in the Gorge area, and publish information about the importance of the corridor and threats to the area.
4. Talk to funders about the possibility of a major grant to purchase land along the river gorge.
5. Prepare land acquisition proposal and seek funding.

Priorities 5—7

Goal – Wait for land owners to offer land for sale and evaluate property against plan and screening questions.
## LAND ACQUISITION SUMMARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Acres</th>
<th>Cumulative Total Acres</th>
<th>*Estimated Cost</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Priority 1 (no more land)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priority 2</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>$600,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priority 3</td>
<td>1,725</td>
<td>1,875</td>
<td>$6,800,000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priority 4</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>2,250</td>
<td>$2,600,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priority 5</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>5,250</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priority 6</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>8,750</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priority 7</td>
<td>5,300</td>
<td>14,050</td>
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Forest Preserve Commissioners approved to proceed with Priorities 2-4.

*Estimated cost is established for January 2017. It is an estimate only as Forest Preserve acquisitions are based upon a certified appraisal.

**Cost to be shared with other organizations and foundations.
Appendix A

Land Acquisition Procedures and Screening Questions

Land Acquisition Procedures

The staff and Board of the Forest Preserves will follow the following procedures below when considering the acquisition of a parcel of land by purchase, donation or bequest:

1. Land owner or agent contacts staff, or staff contacts the land owner or agent about acquisition of land.

2. Staff determines the location of the land in relation to existing forest preserves and the Greenways Plan “Priority Acquisition” areas, has significant conservation or recreational value.

3. Staff declines to consider land that lies outside the “Priority Acquisition” area, or is not next to an existing forest preserve or does not have significant conservation or recreation value, and reports decision to the LAC.

4. Staff arranges site visit/inspection of land that lies within the “Priority Acquisition” area on the Greenways Plan map, or is next to an existing forest preserve, or has significant conservation or recreation value.

5. Staff prepares a report, maps, photos and checklist about the potential acquisition of the parcel, its natural resource and conservation and recreation values, cost of acquisition and restoration, possible funding sources and any management or development issues that may exist.

6. Staff reports to the LAC about the potential for acquisition of the parcel and asks for a review of the land acquisition project. If needed a special meeting of the LAC will be called to consider potential land acquisition projects that require immediate action.

7. LAC makes a recommendation on the suitability of the land for acquisition as a forest preserve or an addition to an existing forest preserve, and refers their recommendation to the Board of Commissioners.

8. Board of Commissioners review the recommendation of the LAC as to the suitability of the land for acquisition as a forest preserve or an addition to an existing forest preserve and directs staff to proceed or not to proceed with the project.

9. Staff orders title commitment for the property, and appraisal of the value, and determines sources of funding for the acquisition, restoration and/or development of the property.

10. Staff reports to the Board of Commissioners any title issues, the appraised value of the property and the funding strategy.

11. Board of Commissioners approves or rejects the acquisition project. If acquisition is approved, the Board authorizes staff to negotiate with the owner or agent to purchase the property if appropriate.

12. Staff periodically reports to the LAC and the Board the status of the negotiations for acquisition of land.

References

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Screening Question</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Low</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Does the property connect to an existing protected area and improve wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities or operational efficiency of an existing preserve?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. What is the intended use of the property and what work will be needed?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Does the property contain a natural community of forest, prairie or wetland, or provide critical habitat for rare or endangered species?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Does the property have any historic or cultural value?</td>
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<td>5. How big is the property? Is its size appropriate for its intended use?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Is there an imminent threat that the property will be lost to development?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Is the property identified on the Greenways Plan or other plans as an important area for acquisition or protection?</td>
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<td>8. Does the property have significant conservation value?</td>
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<td>9. Does the property have significant recreational value?</td>
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<td>10. Is acquiring the property otherwise in the public interest?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Underlying Assumptions

1. The Council recommends projects to the Commission without regard to whether there is a willing seller or what the asking price might be. The Commission will not acquire property without a willing seller. The Commission cannot acquire property for which it does not have funding.

2. The Council will use the Screen as an **objective** tool to help inform what is expected to be a **subjective** determination. The Screen will help compare two or more projects, but it is not expected to be used as a rigid scoring tool.

3. **Properties** will have defined boundaries. If a property is recommended by the Council for acquisition, all of its component parcels will be equally recommended.

Screen Questions and Definitions

1. **Does the property connect to an existing protected area and improve wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities or operational efficiency of an existing preserve?**
   - “Protected area” implies that the property is owned in fee by a non-profit organization or branch of government, or that such an institution holds a permanent easement that restricted its subdivision, development, and/or use.
   - **High** – The property shares a significant boundary relative to its size and/or connects an isolated protected area to other protected areas to form a corridor.
   - **Medium** – The property shares some boundary or touch-point with a protected area.
   - **Low** – The property does not connect with an existing protected area.

2. **What is the intended use of the property and what work will be needed to make it usable?**
   - “Usable” implies usable by the public.
   - **High** – The property is open and used by the public now. It might have existing trails, facilities, or other structures. The property includes significant river frontage.
   - **Medium** – The property is not usable now, but there is a plan that is adequately funded to make it usable in the next several years.
   - **Low** – The property is not usable now and likely won’t be under current circumstances for five years or longer.

3. **Does the property contain a natural community of forest, prairie or wetland, or provide critical habitat for rare or endangered species?**
   - **High** – The property is listed as an Illinois State Natural Area.
   - **Medium** – The property is not listed as an Illinois State Natural Area, but a case can be made that it should be.
   - **Low** – The property is not listed as an Illinois State Natural Area.

4. **Does the property have any historical or cultural value?**
   - All properties have history. This question implies documentation. Native American burial mounds, historic landmarks, artifact digs, and so on.
   - **High** – The property has significant historical or cultural value.
   - **Medium** – The property has some historical or cultural value.
   - **Low** – The property does not have known historical or cultural value.
5. How big is the property? Is its size appropriate for its intended use?

- **High** – The property is 200 acres or more.
- **Medium** – The property is less than 200 acres, but its size is appropriate for its intended use.
- **Low** – The property is less than 200 acres and would need to be connected to other properties to make it usable.

6. Is there an imminent threat that the property will be lost to development?

- **High** – The property is on the market and there is known developer interest from someone who will develop, clear, or drain it.
- **Medium** – The property is on the market and located in an area of high development pressure and rapid growth, though no specific threat has been identified.
- **Low** – The property is not currently on the market, or it is on the market but there appears to be little or no buyer interest.

7. Is the property identified on the Greenways Plan or other plans as an important area for acquisition or protection?

- **High** – The property is within the Greenways Plan boundary and has been identified as a critical and sensitive area or a priority acquisition area.
- **Medium** – The property is within the Greenways Plan boundary but has not been identified as a critical and sensitive area or a priority acquisition area.
- **Low** – The property is not within the Greenways Plan boundary.

8. Does the property have significant conservation value?

- The Council should evaluate both existing and potential values.
- “Rare and/or endangered species” implies that they are listed. It also is intended to include “communities of species.”
- **High** – The property helps implement the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan. There are stable populations of rare and/or endangered species present.
- **Medium** – There are small, isolated populations of rare and/or endangered species present, or by restoring native habitat, stable populations could be reintroduced.
- **Low** – The property does not have significant conservation value other than as open space.

9. Does the property have significant recreational value?

- Recreational value might be indicated by its current use or by the presence of easy access to the river, a boat launch, hiking paths, picnic or camping facilities, wildlife viewing platforms, and so on.
- **High** – There is significant current public use and/or support for the property, or the property provides opportunities not being met otherwise.
- **Medium** – There is significant potential public use and/or support for the property.
- **Low** – There is not significant potential public use and/or support for the property.

10. Is acquiring the property otherwise in the public interest?

- **High** – Protection of the property will help to implement the Winnebago County 2030 land use plan, or is an important partnership with other public agencies.
- **Medium** – The property is located within a recognized floodplain boundary.
- **Low** – Acquiring the property is not otherwise in the public interest.
APPENDIX B

PROTECTION OF NATURAL RESOURCE AREAS

In October 2016 individuals connected to local conservation agencies met to discuss the unprotected natural areas in the county and strategies to contact land owners. The agencies included Winnebago County Soil and Water Service, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Rockford Park District, Natural Land Institute, Rockford Metropolitan Agency for Planning, Severson Dells Nature Center, Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, Land Advisory Council and the Forest Preserves of Winnebago County staff.

The recent evaluation by the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory (INAI) at first identified 57 sites as possible natural areas, but only 23 of the sites were considered worthy of further study and only 4 of the 23 were nominated as INAI sites. Some of the sites not chosen may be worthy of local protection and more sites not identified may be important local natural areas. It was agreed that the agencies would evaluate these sites to determine if they warranted protection.

Criteria to evaluate natural resource area protection by the Forest Preserves of Winnebago County will use the INPC’s ‘Land and Water Reserve’ qualifications as a guide but will be more inclusive. The criteria for protection are:

1. Forests of 40 ac or more with 75% native vegetation
2. Sites with 20 acres or more that are wetland or have wetland restoration potential
3. Sites known to support threatened or endangered species
4. Sites with rare or unique geologic features in Winnebago County
5. Sites 10 ac or more of grade C prairie with expansion potential possible to 100 ac
6. Land along streams whose biologic diversity is class A or B
7. Archaeologic sites that have important historic or prehistoric significance
8. Plant communities not represented in existing forest preserve property:

- Dry upland forest
- Wet mesic upland forest
- Mesic savanna
- Wet mesic sand prairie
- Dry mesic gravel prairie
- Mesic gravel prairie
- Shrub prairie
- Dry mesic sand prairie
- Mesic sand prairie
- Gravel hill prairie
- Sedge meadow
- Shrub swamp
- Dry mesic dolomite prairie

Each site the forest preserve considers for protection will be evaluated on its merits as fitting the qualifications of a natural area. Natural areas that connect to an existing preserve have no size limitation, however, new areas not connected to an existing preserve should have at least a 40 acre growth potential. Natural areas not suitable as a preserve will be recommended to others for protection.

Illinois Natural Area Inventory is a data base of natural area protected by the IDNR, Nature Preserves Commission.
### Plant Communities in Existing Forest Preserves

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*Jones, Michael. The Flora and Vegetational History of Winnebago County. (Rockford, 1994) pp. 23-33*
Native Plant Communities of Winnebago County

The following community descriptions are adapted from the “Classification of Natural Communities in Illinois” by John White and Michael H. Madany (1978).

Forest Communities

Upland Forest

Dry upland forest – This community usually can be found with a southern to southwestern exposure on steep ridges, at the crest of river bluffs, and at the edge of dolomite cliffs. Soils are dry and poorly developed because of steep slopes or because of the presence of bedrock, sand, or gravel at or near the surface.

Dry-mesic upland forest – This community occurs on slopes and the sides of ravines. Soil in this community is intermediate along a soil moisture gradient. The canopy is usually more open than in a mesic forest.

Mesic upland forest – This community occurs in narrow ravines, on north-facing sides of slopes and larger ravines, and on level ground with moderately high available moisture. Ideal soil moisture results in a dense canopy and an understory of shade-tolerant plants.

Wet-mesic upland forest – Poor drainage on level topography causes this community. Wet-mesic upland forest usually is found along seepage areas and along shallow drainageways. No clear dominance is evident.

Floodplain Forest

Floodplain forests occur along streams. They range from mesic to wet, depending on the permeability of the soil and the frequency and duration of flooding.

Wet-mesic floodplain forest – Species diversity of the overstory and ground layer of this community is higher than in mesic floodplain forest. No clear dominance is evident, and there is usually a mixture of trees.

Wet floodplain forest – This community is flooded so frequently, or flooding is so prolonged, that the diversity in the overstory and understory is lowered and the forest is often open. Nettles and vines are often prominent.

Sand Forest

This community subclass is found only in the sand deposits of Shirland and Rockton Townships. The species of this community are similar to those in sand savannas. Fire exclusion has increased the acreage of sand forest at the expense of savannas.

Dry sand forest – This community is found at the top of dunes and ridges with the least humus and soil moisture. Trees in this community are often scrubby.

Savanna Communities

Savanna

Dry-mesic savanna – Soil moisture is comparable to that of dry-mesic upland forests. The ground layer is comparable to that of dry-mesic prairies.
**Mesic savanna** – Moisture level and ground vegetation are similar to those of mesic prairies. This community is usually found at the base of moraine ridges, or sometimes as an island in wetland vegetation.

**Sand Savanna**

**Dry sand savanna** – The crests of the highest dunes support this community. There is little or no A horizon (topsoil); grasses are short and plant species diversity is low.

**Dry-mesic sand savanna** – This community is found at a lower topographic position than the dry sand savanna, and on north-and east-facing dune slopes. There is some development of an A horizon.

**Prairie Communities**

**Shrub Prairie**

**Shrub prairie** – This community is dominated by a wide variety of shrubs and grasses and has a nearly continuous ground layer of mosses.

**Prairie**

**Dry prairie** – This community is found on steep slopes that are somewhat excessively drained. Grasses are less than 1 meter tall.

**Dry-mesic prairie** – Moisture levels and grass height approach those of a mesic prairie, and plant species diversity is greater than that of dry prairies.

**Mesic prairie** – Favorable moisture conditions allow for maximum plant species diversity and maximum grass and forb height, which can sometimes be as tall as 2 meters. The grass layer may be only a meter if *Sporobolus heterolepis* (Prairie dropseed) is dominant. This community was one of the most widespread and characteristic communities in Illinois, but has become one of the rarest communities since its fertile soil makes it our richest cropland.

**Wet-mesic prairie** – The water table is near the surface and surface water is present after heavy rains. In terms of grass species and moisture levels, this community is an intergrade between mesic prairie and wet prairie.

**Wet prairie** – Plant species diversity is lower than that of other prairie communities. The soil is nearly always saturated and surface water is present in spring and winter.

**Sand Prairie**

**Dry sand prairie** – Grass is less than one meter tall and soil lacks a dark A horizon. This community occurs at the crests of sand dunes.

**Dry-mesic sand prairie** – This community has a dark A horizon with average grass height and species diversity approaching that of mesic sand prairies.

**Mesic sand prairie** – This community has a deep A horizon. Mosses and low shrubs are common but not dominant. Characteristic mesic prairie forbs such as *Echinacea pallida* (Pale purple coneflower), *Ratibida pinnata* (Yellow coneflower), and *Silphium laciniatum* (Compass plant) are rare or absent.

**Wet-mesic sand prairie** – Surface water is present for short periods. The soil has a deep, acidic, dark A horizon, and the grass mixture is transitional between mesic sand prairie and wet sand prairie. Small areas of wet-mesic sand prairie are commonly mixed in with mesic sand prairie.
Wet sand prairie – Wet sand prairie is floristically very similar to wet prairie. Surface water is present for as much as one-third of the year.

Gravel Prairie
Dry gravel prairie – Grasses average less than one meter in height, being found on steep gravel slopes.

Dry-mesic gravel prairie – This community is found on lower slopes, and its soil has a higher moisture content than that of dry gavel prairies. The grass height is intermediate between dry gravel prairies and mesic gravel prairies.

Mesic gravel prairie – This community is found near the base of gravel ridges, which accounts for its relatively high soil moisture. Diversity of plant species and grass height approach those of mesic prairies.

Dolomite Prairie
Dry dolomite prairie – The soil is very shallow and has exposed patches of dolomite “pavement.” The grass is less than a meter tall.

Dry-mesic dolomite prairie – The soil is slightly deeper than in dry dolomite prairie, grass is taller, and species diversity is greater than on the dry dolomite prairie.

Hill Prairie
Gravel hill prairie – This community is distinguished from gravel prairies by being an opening in a forest, rather than part of a continuous prairie.

Sand hill prairie – Found on sand dunes atop river bluffs.

Wetland Communities

Marsh
Marsh – Our marshes are in river valleys and on an old lake plain. Marshes have a wide variety of plant communities, determined greatly by water depth and also by fluctuations in water levels, fire frequency, and muskrat populations.

Sedge Meadow
Sedge meadow – The soil moisture is much like that of a wet prairie, with some floristic overlap between the two communities.

Seep and Spring
Seep – This is the typical seep community with circumneutral water. A tree cover is often present. Seeps are commonly too small to be recognized as significant communities.

Spring community – Springs usually are simply considered to be features of larger communities. Vascular plant communities are not well-developed in this native plant community.

Primary Communities

Cliff
Dolomite cliff community – This type of cliff supports the most vegetation, and for the most part it faces north or east. Shading from adjacent forests plays an important role in determining the composition of the vegetation. The bedrock in this community is more resistant to weathering than in other cliff communities, and it has a higher pH than sandstone.
RESOLUTION
16-0103

Land Advisory Council Land Acquisition Options

WHEREAS, the Forest Preserves of Winnebago County Board of Commissioners (Board) resolved to reinstate the Land Advisory Council (Council) in July, 2012; and,

WHEREAS, the Board charged the Council to develop criteria and options for the acquisition of land to be held as forest preserve properties; and,

WHEREAS, the Council developed seven (7) options for the Strategic Land Conservation and Management Plan regarding land acquisition; and,

WHEREAS, the Council has asked the Board to provide direction as to which of the seven (7) options the Council should use while developing their Strategic Plan;

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, the Board has decided the Council should pursue Options # 2, 3 and 4 in the development of their Strategic Plan.

Voting YES 6  Voting NO 0

The above and foregoing Resolution was adopted this 20th day of January, 2016.

That this Resolution shall be in full force and effect immediately upon its adoption.

Judith Barnard, President
Board of Commissioners
RESOLUTION  
No. 14-1206  
LAND ACQUISITION PRIORITIES and PROCEDURES

WHEREAS, the Board of Commissioners (Board) of the Forest Preserves of Winnebago County (Forest Preserves) wanted to make informed and educated decisions about the purchase of future lands for the Forest Preserves; and

WHEREAS, the Board passed a Resolution in March, 2013 establishing the Land Advisory Council (Council) to advise the Board on land acquisition matters; and

WHEREAS, the Board requested the Council establish procedures for land acquisition; and

WHEREAS, the Council developed the Land Acquisition Priorities and Procedures.

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Board of Commissioners of the Forest Preserves of Winnebago County adopt the Land Acquisition Priorities and Procedures.

Voting YES  

Voting NO

The above and foregoing Resolution was adopted this 17th day of December, 2014.

That this Resolution shall be in full force and effect immediately upon its adoption.

Judith Barnard, President  
Board of Commissioners