

oak forest heritage preserve master plan & vision executive summary

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Prepared for:
Forest Preserve District of Cook County
Cook County Real Estate Management Division

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Residents enjoy watermelon outside the Oak Forest Hospital.

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Project Summary & Purpose

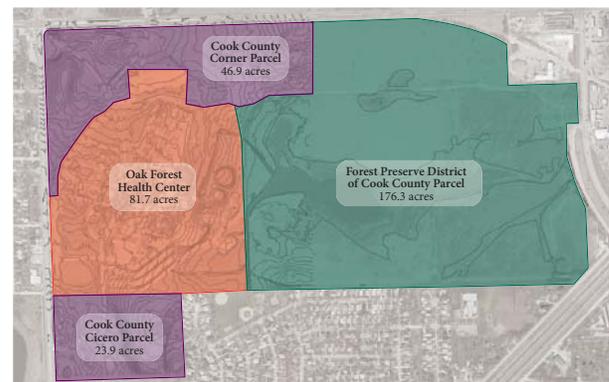
The Oak Forest Heritage Preserve Master Plan is a comprehensive vision for the future development, public use, and long-term management of the Oak Forest Heritage Preserve. The plan is intended to help guide circulation and access improvements, ecological and site restoration, memorialization of sacred space, implementation of recreational amenities, and the preservation and interpretation of the rich natural and cultural history of the Preserve and adjacent properties. The plan addresses four parcels: the Forest Preserve District of Cook County (FPDCC) Parcel, and three others immediately adjacent to the Preserve—the Corner Parcel, the Oak Forest Health Center (OFHC), and the Cicero Parcel, all owned by Cook County.

All uses and development proposed for the Oak Forest Heritage Preserve in this Master Plan are consistent with the mission of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County...*to restore, restock, protect and preserve the natural forests and such lands together with their flora and fauna, as nearly as may be, in their natural state and condition, for the purpose of the education, pleasure, and recreation of the public...*

Future uses will also recognize ecosystem health, preservation of historic resources, protection and interpretation, and the partnership with the Oak Forest Health Center.

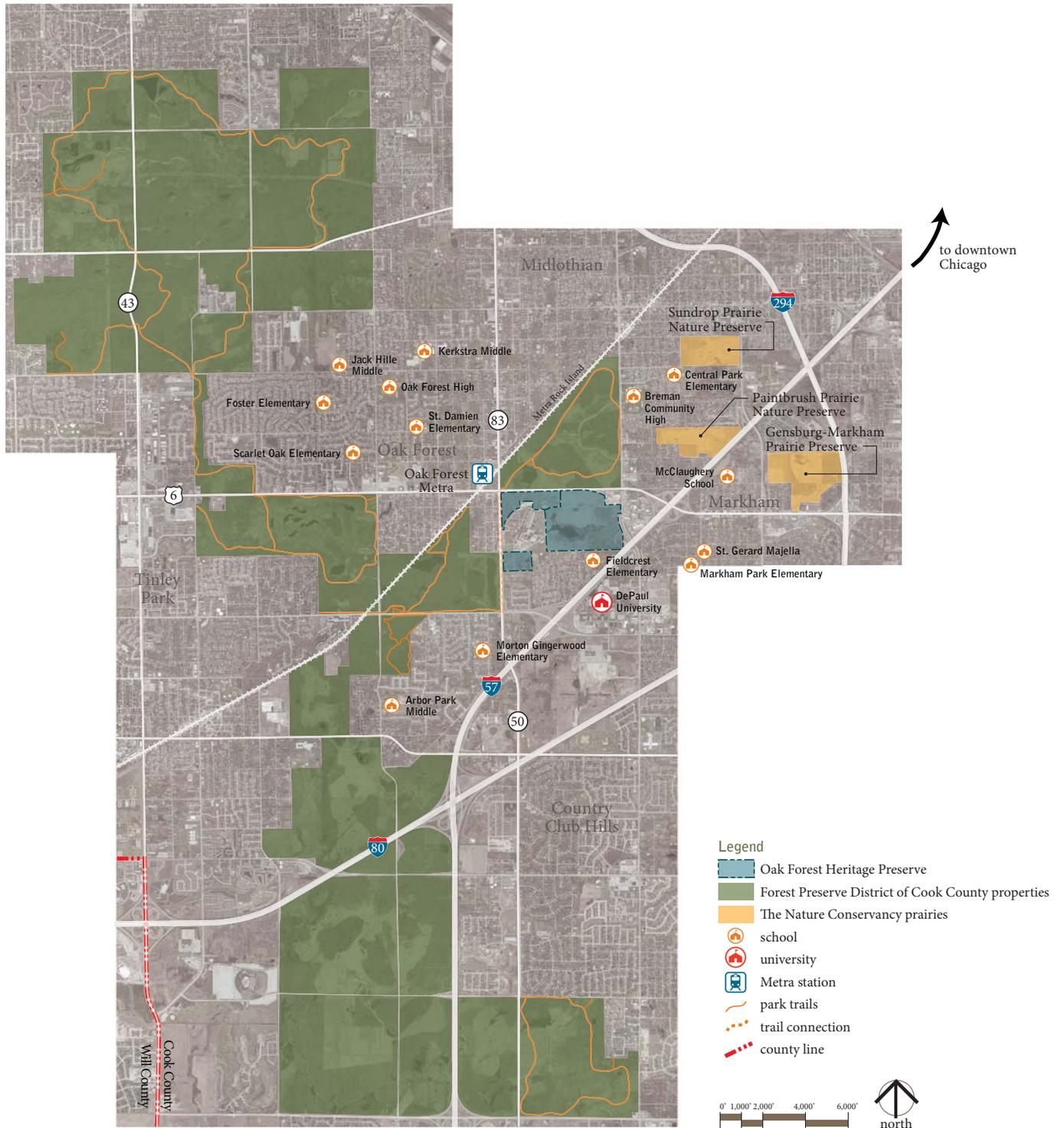
Planning Process

The master planning process began in the fall of 2011, when a team of consultants led by Conservation Design Forum, Inc. (CDF) was retained to assist the FPDCC and Cook County in the analysis and planning of the Oak Forest Heritage Preserve. Acquired in 2010 by the FPDCC, the property warranted detailed investigation and documentation of the site's ecological and cultural features, as well as the rich history of human activity and interaction over many millennia. These discoveries helped guide the development of the Master Plan. The team CDF assembled included experts in all aspects of naturally and culturally sustainable planning practice: **Conservation Design Forum, Inc.** (Project Lead, Landscape Architecture, Planning), **Bluestone + Associates** (Interpretive Planning), **Environmental Design International** (Environmental Assessment), **Midwest Archaeological Research Services, Inc.** (Cultural Resources), and **Primera Engineers** (Engineering).



project parcel map

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regional context map



Pogie Lake

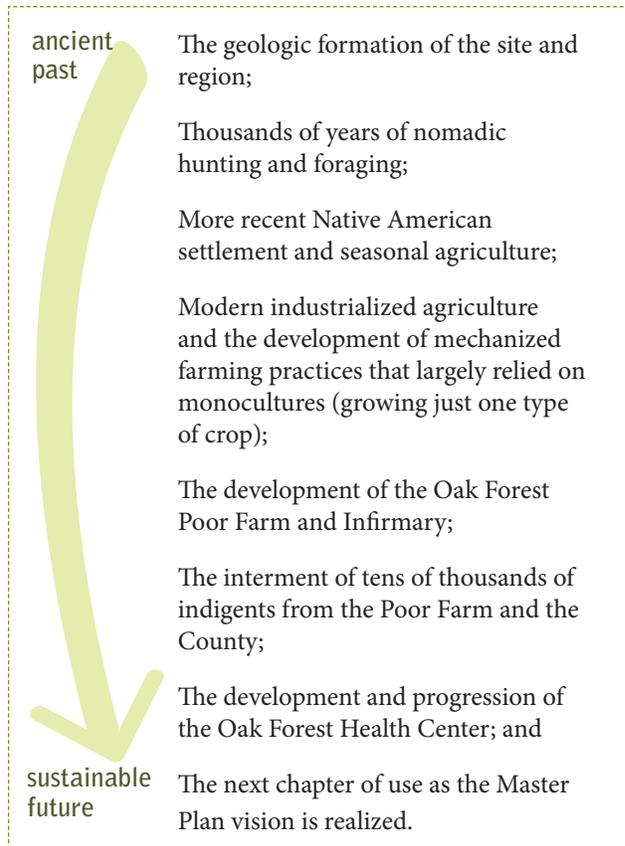
Project Goals

The Master Plan goals are to:

- Restore the ecological landscape, improve surface water management, and provide new recreation improvements consistent with the FPDCC's mission;
- Showcase the rich cultural history of the site;
- Identify opportunities for continued connections between the Oak Forest Health Center and the Forest Preserve District properties, while addressing the security needs of both; and
- Explore connections to the larger community.

Telling the Story

The Oak Forest Heritage Preserve is a site with a complex and interconnected set of stories of human history, archaeology, geology, ecology and natural history that span millennia. The property has seen changes in occupancy and use that have affected the health of those living on it and upon the land itself. The following is a generalized chronology of the evolution of use:



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Site Analysis - Key Findings

Cultural & Geological Context

Native American Settlement

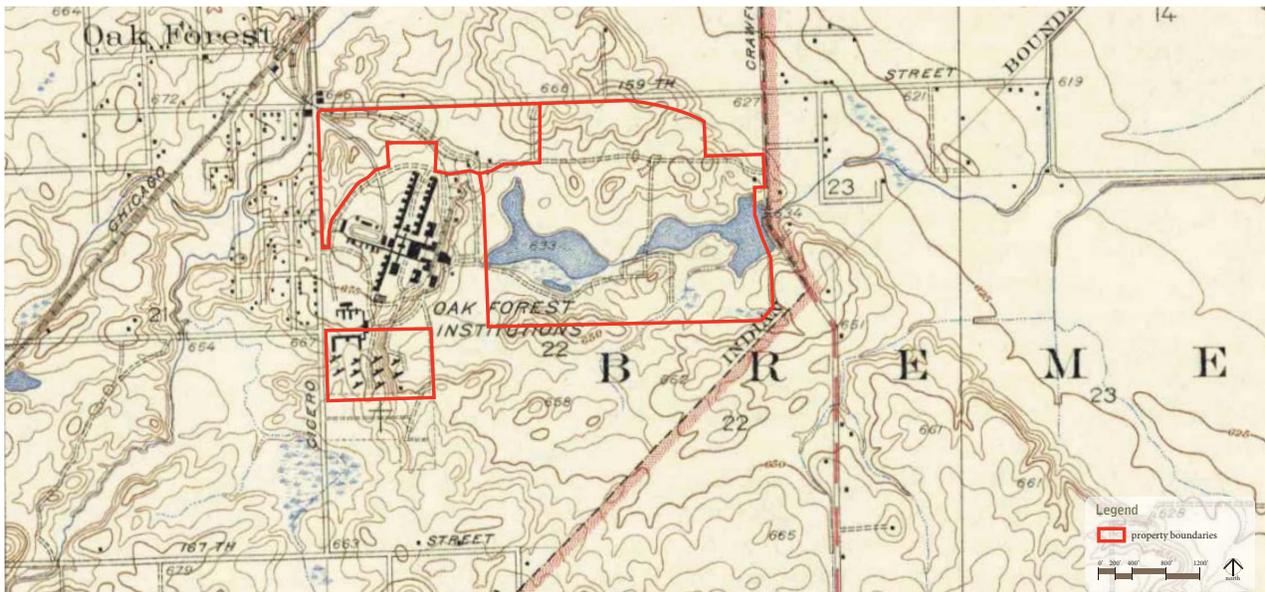
After the last retreat of the Wisconsin Glacier approximately 14,000 years ago, the land area that includes the Oak Forest Heritage Preserve has been a place of significance. This is due largely to its location at the transition between a morainal ridge left behind by the retreating glacier and the flat, open land of the Chicago Lake Plain, approximately 25-30 feet below. The elevation of the moraine above the plains offered Native American inhabitants refuge from the heat and humidity of low-lying swamps, views of sweeping prairie fires and the oncoming enemy, and ready access to nearby woodlands for harvesting materials for housing and sustenance. In this position, the recessional edge also provided the best trail location for travel and trading. The value of this location to Native American culture was confirmed in 1958, when an archeological investigation uncovered eight houses and mapped an entire Native American village—the first in northeastern Illinois. The site appears to have been occupied approximately around 1680.

Historic Vegetation

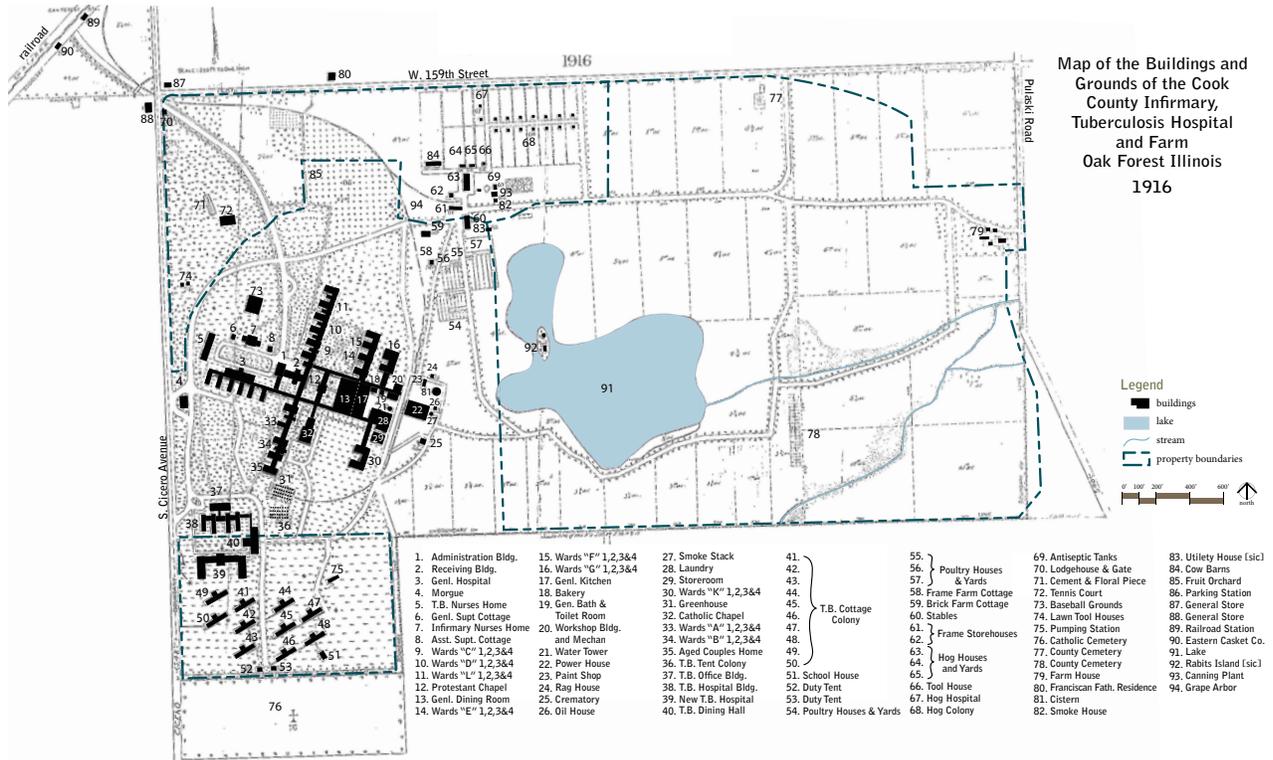
Vegetation reported in the area of the Oak Forest Heritage Preserve included oak savanna, oak-hickory forest, mesic and wet prairie, sedge meadow and pond systems. With the exception of wood harvesting, seeding, and mowing, it is possible that some areas of the parcel have been relatively undisturbed since the early surveyor reports, and the oak savanna in the northwest corner of the Oak Forest site may be a remnant of the original woodland described by land surveys in 1822.



oak savanna at the Corner Parcel



1929 USGS topography



building and grounds map from 1916

A History of Healing

In 1910, what was to later become Oak Forest Hospital and today's Oak Forest Health Center, opened its doors as the Cook County Work Farm/Oak Forest Infirmary, a poor farm and home for the county's indigent population. The location of this institution, 22 miles from Chicago, served as a major stimulus for the 20th century growth of the Oak Forest community. In addition to the Poor Farm, the Oak Forest Infirmary property also served as a tuberculosis treatment center and burial site for the county's indigent and many of those who died at Oak Forest Hospital. Written records of these burials have been preserved by Cook County, beginning March 4, 1911, and continuing through November 17, 1971.

Site Conditions

Ecological Inventory

The current ecological conditions at the Preserve include six general plant communities:

Mowed lawn: areas of turf grasses that are maintained by regular mowing.

Oak savanna with lawn: rolling, timbered landscape that include mature oaks.

Bur oak hillside: a small, east-facing slope in the Cicero Parcel that has Bur Oak as the dominate canopy tree, and weedy shrubs in the sub-canopy.

Old field: open fields dominated by a mixture of Eurasian grasses and forbs, plus various native species.

Overgrown thicket: disturbed areas comprised primarily of unassociated woody growth.

executive summary

Wetlands: seven delineated wetland areas, most of marginal to poor quality. Wetland Five contains open water (Pogie Lake) and its associated drainage channels. As part of a largely urbanized watershed, the water levels in Pogie Lake fluctuate with rainfall runoff, and the site experiences flooding. The hydrology of the Pogie Lake aquatic complex is still remarkably stable given the largely urbanized condition of the upstream watershed area and drainage channels directing stormwater into the system.

Cultural & Archaeological Findings

During the 2011 Phase 1 Cultural Assessment, a reconnaissance survey conducted on the FPDCC and Corner Parcels as part of the background investigation for this Master Plan, Midwest Archaeological Research Services, Inc. employed shovel probes as a means of surveying the land. A total of 411 prehistoric artifacts and 40 historic artifacts were recovered during the survey. All of the prehistoric artifacts are stone, either tools or the by-products of stone tool manufacture and/or re-sharpening. Nine new sites recorded with the Illinois State Museum and the increased boundaries for two of the previously recorded sites. These findings, in conjunction with the findings from the 1958 and 1979 excavations help to establish this site and a unique and valuable archaeological site.

The Vision

The Oak Forest Heritage Preserve Master Plan is intended to guide the evolution of the property from an inaccessible, environmentally disturbed site with a hidden past, into a preserve that is beautiful, culturally and biologically rich, accessible, and educational. The plan includes ecological, cultural, recreational, and interpretive elements that uncover the site's rich history, and help to define a new future—one in which the Oak Forest Heritage Preserve is a valued, well-utilized amenity embraced by the community of Oak Forest, Cook County, and the region.



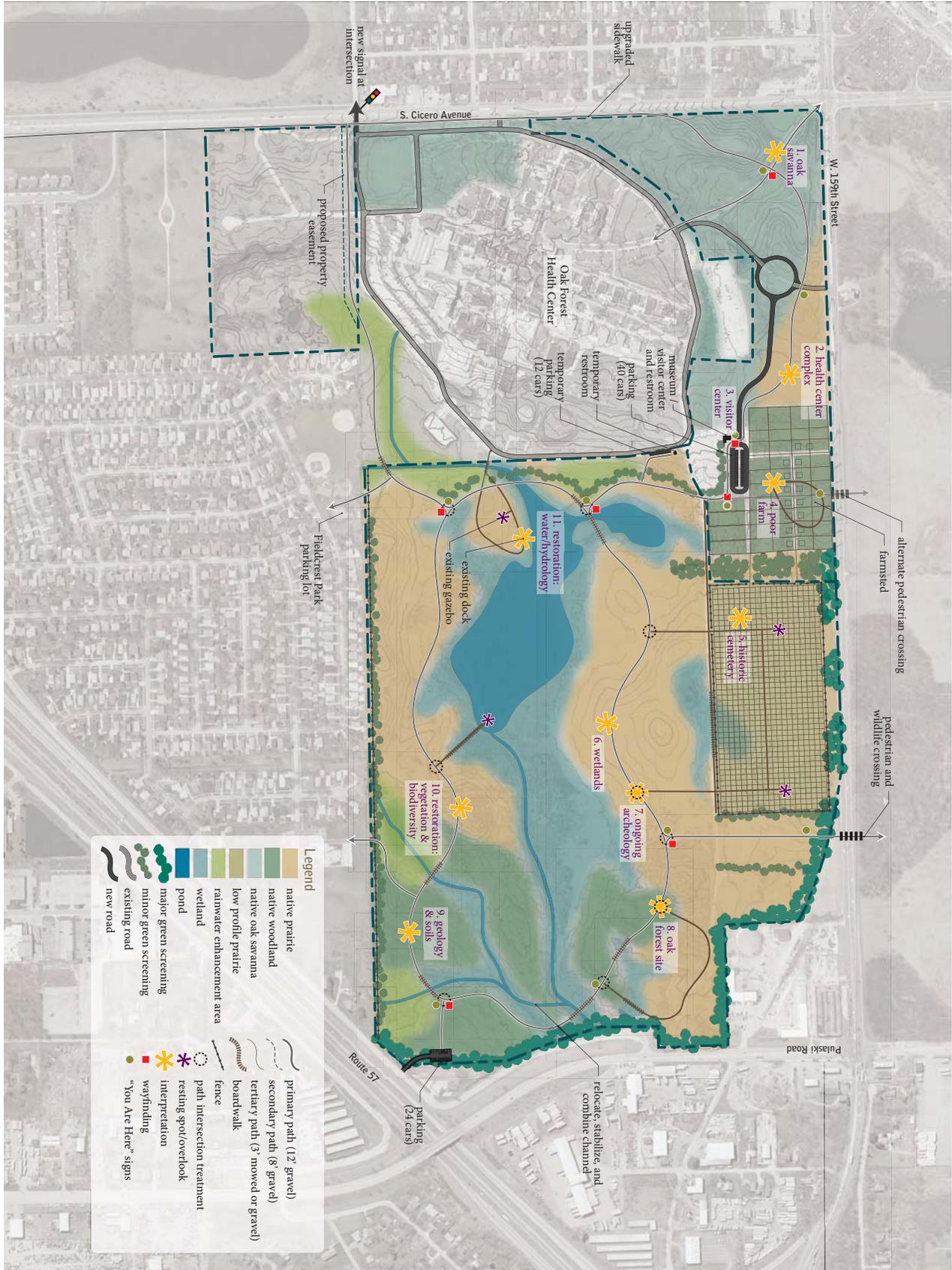
tool making debris found at the Oak Forest Heritage Preserve



bur oak hillside



old field



master site plan

executive summary

Infrastructure Improvements

Vehicular Access

Vehicles will access the Oak Forest Heritage Preserve through the existing entrance drive off of 159th Street (currently used for the Oak Forest Health Center) with separated, secure entrances for the OFHC and FPDCC activities.

Trails

A system of trails will loop through the FPDCC parcel and around the OFHC campus. The loop path around the OFHC will connect to the Cicero Avenue sidewalk, which will be widened to allow bicycles and pedestrians to safely pass. The trail loop around the FPDCC parcel will follow the rolling topography of the site, passing through each type of plant community. A connection between this path and the Fieldcrest neighborhood is proposed through two southward spurs: one to the parking lot at Fieldcrest Park, and the second at Fieldcrest Elementary School.

A number of secondary and tertiary paths offer a more intimate, slower-paced pedestrian experience and provide access to the delineated character zones, cultural amenities, and interpretation.

Adjacent Connections

The primary path connects the two adjacent Forest Preserves, Midlothian Meadows and St. Mihiel Reservation, in an effort to join these fragmented open spaces. A pedestrian and wildlife crossing over 159th Street could potentially be built on the northeast side of the FPDCC Parcel to allow for a safe, grade-separated crossing over 159th Street for people, bicycles, and (potentially) the many wildlife species that live here. Additionally, a new traffic signal is suggested for the 163rd Street and Cicero Avenue intersection to provide a connection from the Preserve site to the St. Mihiel Reservation and the Twin Lakes.



typical primary path section



The Corner Parcel could be restored to an oak savanna, an ecosystem that dominated this area before European settlement.

Structures

The proposed Visitor Center would ideally re-use an existing building to house an interpretive museum. A separate restroom could also be installed near the main entrance of the Preserve, as seen on the Master Plan.

Landscape Restoration

In order to achieve a natural landscape that is in harmony with the site, virtually the entire property will need to be re-established with native plant ecosystems appropriate for the climate, geology, hydrology, and other conditions of the overall habitat. The Oak Forest Heritage Preserve Master Plan has identified five general plant community types that would be appropriate to establish or reestablish on site, based on initial field observations of existing conditions, historic cultural use, and intended use of the land. The communities are native prairie, native woodland, native oak savanna, rainwater enhancement areas, and wetland.

In addition to the restoration areas, this plan envisions the creation of bioinfiltration and other water absorptive landscapes elements to help recreate natural hydrology for stormwater treatment. Vegetative screens along the edges of the site help ensure separation between conflicting uses and serve as noise and visual buffers between the Preserve and adjacent properties.

Cultural Landscapes

While the vast majority of the site is proposed to be preserved and restored as natural/native landscape, some “feature areas” are planned as cultural landscapes, using adapted, compatible plant species.

Farmstead: The historic Poor Farm will be “restored” to create the feeling and aesthetic of the working farm of the site’s past. The landscape could consist of prairie grasses and perennials, an ornamental orchard, and vegetable and herb plots that could become an active farming or community gardening practice associated



A community garden in the Corner Parcel farmstead utilizes the remaining cement infrastructure from historic livestock pens.

with the OFHC’s horticultural therapy program or a local gardening organization.

Historic Cemetery: Although the physical boundaries and extent of burials within the historic cemetery on site are unclear, the Master Plan sets aside a cemetery space in the general location of the historic burials as a place for reflection and memorial within the Preserve. The landscape treatment in the cemetery will be characterized by a grid of mass plantings of low profile prairie grass species.

Oak Forest Site: The Native American Oak Forest site, perhaps the most culturally significant place on the property, should stand apart as a unique part of the Preserve. The 17th century Native American dwellings that were uncovered during archaeological excavations in 1958 and 1979 could be marked on the ground using stones or temporarily recreated 3-dimensionally using invasive trees removed from the site during restoration.

Pogie Lake: Restoring the shoreline of Pogie Lake will help to highlight the wildlife that is already present, draw more species to the site, and ensure the long term health of this ecologically and culturally significant feature.

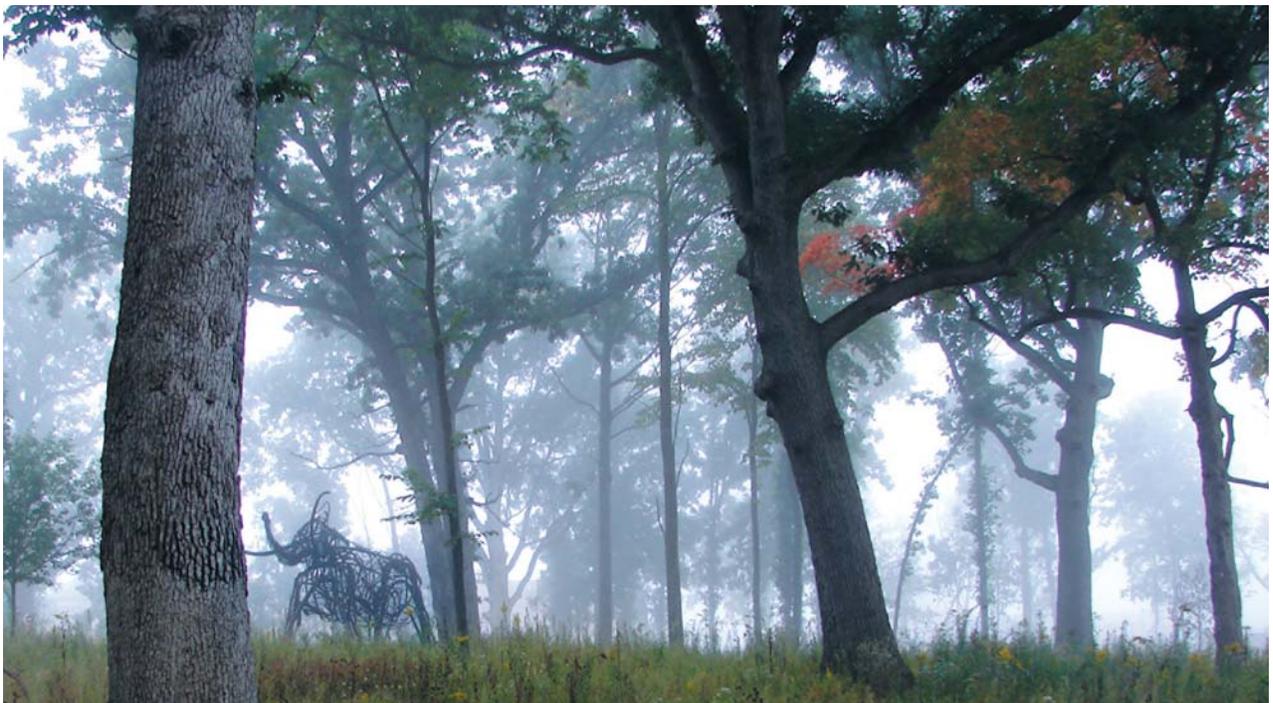
Interpretive Plan

An essential aspect of this Master Plan is the integration of access, controlled views, artwork, landscape, and educational and interactive features into the landscape. The addition of informational signage, interpretive elements, and wayfinding helps to provide an interesting and rewarding experience for visitors.

In total there are eleven distinct locations or stops at which the history and natural history of the site could be interpreted to the visiting public. These stops are located throughout the combined properties on site and could consist of a combination of interpretive signage, wayfinding, sculpture, and other storytelling tools. Stop would include information on the oak savanna, health



A grid of gravel paths planted with low-profile prairie grasses reflect the layout of unmarked burial plots beneath.



A full-scale, three-dimensional mammoth sculpture at Hidden Oaks Nature Center is a unique interpretive piece.

executive summary

center complex, Poor Farm, historic cemetery, wetlands, archaeological history, Native American settlement, geology and soils, and ecological restoration.

Project Phasing

The Master Plan for the Oak Forest Heritage Preserve presents a comprehensive, ecologically, and culturally sustainable transformation for the site that will occur over many years. The first phases focus on making the Preserve accessible to public, creating safe vehicular and pedestrian access to the Preserve, and the restoration and enhancement of the hydrology and landscape:

Phase 1a would include trail extensions to the Fieldcrest subdivision, a temporary parking area near the existing gazebo or a small new lot off the OFHC drive, wayfinding, and “under construction” signage. Public access could be allowed as early as Fall of 2012.

Estimated costs: \$42,000 – \$80,000

Phase 1b would begin in Spring 2013 with the first phase of site improvements, including the initial landscape restoration, planting in the cemetery, vegetative screening, hydrological improvements, pedestrian paths, and wayfinding and interpretive stops.

Estimated costs: \$1.8 - \$2.7 million

Phase 1c initiates the improvements on Cook County properties: upgrading the Cicero Avenue sidewalk, restoration in the Corner Parcel, stormwater treatment area establishment, additional signage, and several interpretive stops.

Estimated costs: \$580,000 - \$1 million

Phase 1d begins initial improvements to the Oak Forest Health Center Campus, such as a path around the health center, landscape restoration, stormwater treatment area establishment, and additional temporary wayfinding signage.

Estimated costs: \$86,900 – 138,000

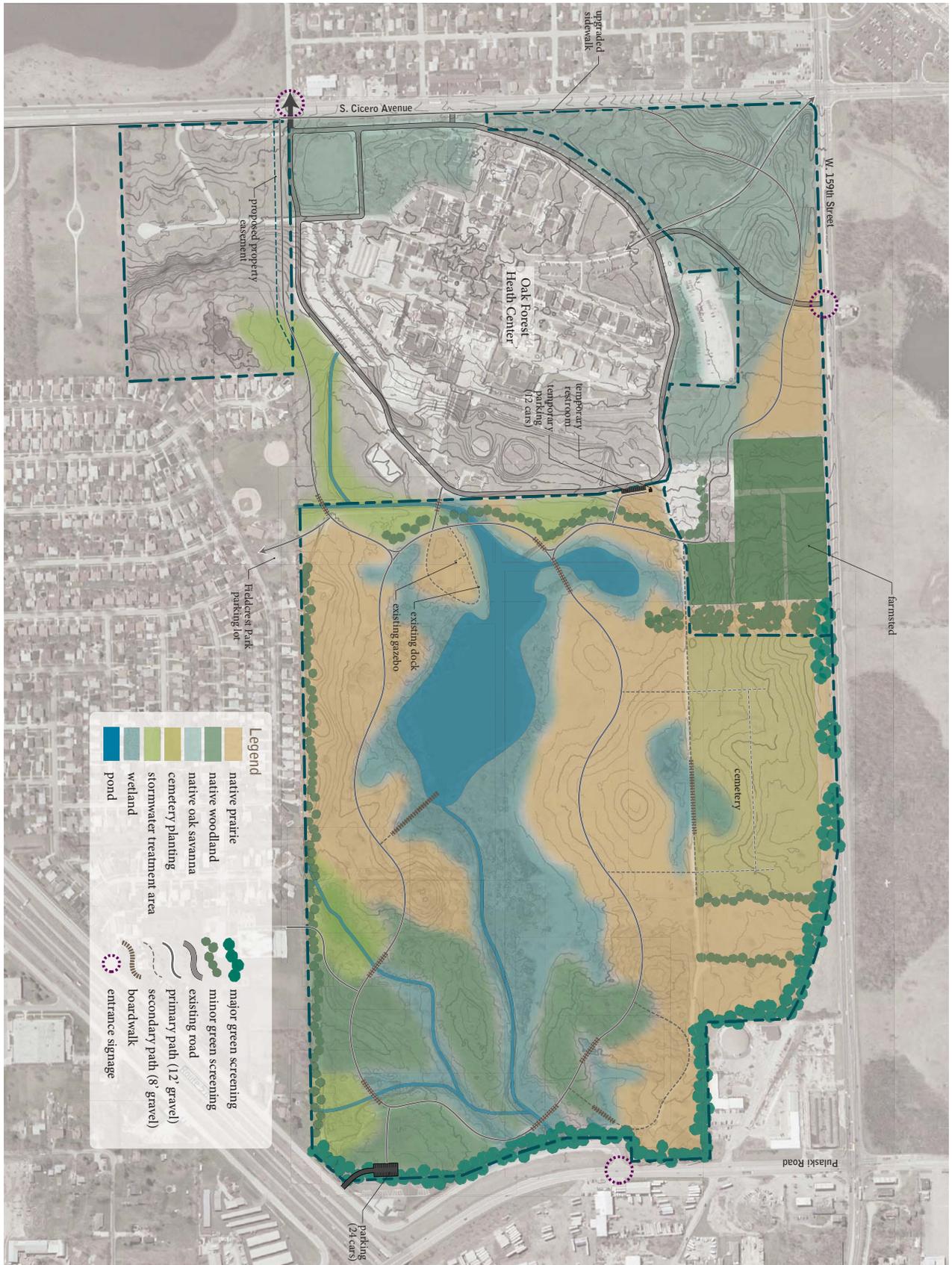
The cost of the initial phases of the improvements is estimated at \$2.5 to 3.9 million and would be funded from existing FPDCC Capital Funds.

All further site work and improvements would depend on securing funding and potential partners; these “future phases” would include the creation of feature areas like the cemetery and farmstead, the visitor’s center, final interpretive stations, permanent parking areas, entrance drive and traffic circle, traffic signal at Cicero and 163rd Street, and an above-grade pedestrian crossing over 159th Street. It is recommended to form a partnership committee to jointly pursue funding for future phases, and begin identifying potential funding sources for the future phases immediately.

Funding Strategies

There are a number of local, state, and federal agencies that promote and support many of the strategies and tactics outlined in the Oak Forest Heritage Preserve Master Plan. These agencies offer grants, tax incentives, and other forms of financial incentives for projects such as this to lead the way in implementing and applying sustainable practices. Current programs and funding sources that may be applicable to the Oak Forest Heritage Preserve include the USEPA Section 319 Program, Illinois Green Infrastructure Grant Program for Stormwater Management, Open Space Land Acquisition Development Program, and the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

The Master Plan includes a variety of different programming opportunities that, in addition to ecological conservation and restoration, include health and wellness, outdoor recreation, cultural heritage, political history, and education. Private foundations and corporate sponsors that focus on these issues could be approached for financial support.



phases 1a - 1d

oak forest
heritage preserve
master plan & vision

executive
summary
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