

# Illinois Assessment of Parks and Conservation Funding Needs and Economic Benefits



LAURA STOECKER PHOTOGRAPHY LTD

Open space in Illinois is vanishing at an alarming rate, threatening our proud outdoor heritage and the ability of current residents and future generations to enjoy the natural beauty of the prairie state.

At the heart of the most successful parks and conservation programs is a substantial, long-term, dedicated source of state revenue. With a reliable source of funds, state governments can establish meaningful conservation priorities that protect the most valuable resources, are geographically distributed and otherwise meet important statewide goals and values. State governments with significant funds are better positioned to secure funding from federal governments and attract local government or private philanthropic partners.

## Key Findings

Forest preserve, conservation, and park districts estimate they will need more than \$3 billion in funding over the next five years to meet land acquisition and capital needs in order to serve their populations.

- Parks and open space lands are important to the Illinois economy.
- While neighboring midwestern states, such as Iowa, Wisconsin, and Ohio, increased their financial contributions to land acquisition for

conservation, state spending in Illinois decreased and Illinois ranks near the bottom in dollars spent per capita on land conservation.

- Adequate and accessible open space for Illinois residents to enjoy remains at risk. For example, in the greater Chicagoland area, 42% of residents do not have adequate access to open space.

## FIVE YEAR PROJECTED NEEDS

**Total projected needs over the next five years in Illinois: \$3 billion, 15,978 acres\***

### Forest Preserve and Conservation Districts

- \$433.1 million for land acquisition
- 12,453 acres needed
- \$77.8 million for capital improvement projects
- \$91 million for new facilities

### Park Districts

- \$261 million for land acquisition
- 2,718 acres needed
- \$884.7 million for capital improvement projects
- \$868 million for new facility construction

### Chicago Park District

- Plans to acquire 800 acres
- \$233.9 million for capital improvement projects
- \$159.1 million for new facility projects

\* The Illinois Department of Natural Resources estimates an additional \$1.1 billion for capital needs, including land acquisition

## Economic Benefits of Land Conservation in Illinois

Lands conserved in Illinois provide a host of benefits that have a measurable economic value to the state and its communities. They include natural goods and services such as water quality protection, wildlife habitat, air pollution removal, and carbon sequestration.

- The state's conservation lands help maintain and improve water quality in Illinois by capturing runoff, enhancing infiltration, and removing sediments and pollutants.
- Flooding can lead to major road washouts, damage to state and local road infrastructure, and damage to private residences. Wetlands and natural areas near rivers and streams prevent costly property damage by absorbing and storing floodwaters.

Conservation lands in Illinois reduce pollution as well as sequester and store carbon.

- Illinois has an estimated 77 million trees, which store about 14.7 million metric tons of carbon worth \$335 million.
- Illinois trees also remove more than 13,000 metric tons of air pollution, valued at more than \$108 million.

## Tourism and Outdoor Recreation

Land conservation in Illinois contributes to a thriving outdoor recreation economy.

- Together, residents and nonresidents spend \$25.8 billion each year on outdoor recreation, which generates \$1.7 billion in state and local tax revenue.
- Spending on outdoor recreation also supports 200,000 jobs with an associated \$7.8 billion in wages and salaries.
- Parks are critical for providing access to the outdoors and providing economic benefits to local communities. In 2017, park visitors spent an estimated \$13.8 million in local gateway regions while visiting National Park Service lands, supporting \$7.3 million in labor income and \$20.3 million in economic output in Illinois.

## Widespread Support

Illinois voters consistently demonstrate support for investment in parks and conservation. Between 1998 and 2018, voters approved close to 50 measures for land conservation, which collectively generated more than \$1.3 billion in new land conservation spending.

A 2013 survey of Illinois residents found that 60 percent supported paying more in property taxes to acquire open space and trails.

According to a national survey, a majority of voters (84%) say that we can protect land and water and have a strong economy at the same time.

## Maximizing Impact on State Dollars

State investment in land conservation leverages funding from federal, local, private, and nonprofit sources. By attracting support from other sources, the state does not have to bear the entire cost burden of a land conservation project and therefore maximizes its investment. By leveraging funds, more local projects may be sponsored, creating additional economic benefits. From 1998 to 2015:

- State investment in land conservation through the Open Lands Trust (OLT) leveraged \$106 million in additional federal and local sources of funding.
- State investment in land conservation through the Open Space Lands Acquisition and Development Program (OSLAD) leveraged \$193 million in additional non-state sources of funding on land conservation alone. When other OSLAD funding for capital projects is factored in, the amount of leveraged funding would be several hundred million dollars more.
- The \$3 billion in projected land conservation and capital improvement needs for local agencies over the next five years has been compounded by the 10-year lapse since the last major statewide capital plan.
- \$600 million, or just 20% of the \$3 billion needed, would immediately leverage hundreds of millions of dollars in additional local and federal funds. In the long term, the investment would more than pay for itself through economic and environmental benefits.