



Do Forest Preserves Need a Separate Police Force?

Description

The Cook County Forest Preserve District is a mixed bag.

On one hand, the "woods" are often associated with the seedy underbelly of the region, a place where bodies are dumped, pets are abandoned and anonymous encounters play out.

On the other hand, there are some nice trails, ponds and river stretches and wildlife is commonly visible, from muskrats and coyotes to deer and birds of prey.

Whatever one's impression, the forest preserve bureaucracy historically has been out of whack a place of patronage hires, slacker workers and wasted opportunity.

Which brings us to a couple of related questions:

Does the forest preserve system really need its own police force?

Should the force be dismantled?

Eliminating the forest preserve police department has been discussed numerous times over the years. Some think the Cook County sheriff's police should take over patrols. The subject is again surfacing as county officials discuss "streamlining" and saving money.

Sheriff Tom Dart told us he could handle the same turf with minimal new hires – certainly with a lot fewer officers than are currently handling the preserves – and save taxpayers a bundle. He said any serious talk of streamlining government must include the dissolution of the forest preserve force. Although some are skeptical, he insisted this was not about expanding his power.

There are more than 400 sheriff's police officers. At last count, there were 114 forest preserve cops, with nine recently certified, and four in training and slated to start in July, according to district General Supt. Arnold Randall. The department's annual budget is just under \$10 million.

“I do understand it’s been a topic of discussion for many years . . . it’s come up a couple of times since I got here,” said Randall, who took the administrative helm after being appointed to the post in late 2010 by Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle.

“I have no doubt that the sheriff, and the work they do, they do very well,” Randall added. But, “I think the type of work we ask our officers to do is very different, more akin to park rangers who check fishing licenses and are engaged in conservation issues, in addition to crime fighting.

“Our concern would be if we make any changes, we can’t compromise real safety or the perception of safety, Randall said. “Visibility is key . . . not just driving through a parking lot, but being very active on the trails . . . you need to have people out there who know the areas very well.”

But there could be a cost savings by replacing the force, right?

“I will acknowledge that if you look at all this on paper, financially you could make some savings,” Randall said. “I recognize that . . . but also we have a police force for a reason . . . they provide a real service.”

Benjamin Cox, president and CEO of Friends of the Forest Preserves, echoed that sentiment, calling it “a terrible idea” to dismantle the forest preserve police.

“What we think will happen is the forest preserves will never see a cop again” except in parking lots, with nobody focusing on poaching, fishing license checks and illegal off-trail riding.

But one sheriff’s police officer told us that conservation-related duties aren’t so complicated that they couldn’t be learned and quickly by his agency.

If the entire forest preserve police abandoned ship today and moved to Tahiti, we could take over without a hiccup, he said.

Or is there some middle ground, where the sheriff’s police take over traditional law enforcement in the woods and a small number of rangers are hired to handle conservation matters?

Randall indicated he’s open to discussing this overall subject, but said nothing he has seen or heard as of yet has convinced him the forest preserves would be better off without their own police force.

Some facts worth noting: The forest preserve district and the county are separate taxing bodies; forest preserve cops generally are paid less than sheriff’s police, and there are more than 68,000 acres at issue.

One of the missions of the BGA is to shrink government, but obviously we support doing that in a responsible way. We’re not taking sides here, but county officials need to give this topic serious discussion or, to put it another way, they need to work their way through the brush and find a suitable clearing.