

G'morning all,

A year has passed, and as 2016 dawns, all are comforted by two universal truths. Only ten and a bit more months of political ads, emails & debates until the elections are *finally* over, and only six more months until Illinois' political leaders will finish not agreeing to a 2016 budget and move on to not agreeing to a 2017 budget. Truly, it is a season of joy. In the midst of this revelry, it's time to set our sights firmly on the future by once more gaping slack-jawed at the past. It's 2015 in Review!

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### *Private Land Conservation*

2015 was another busy year for Illinois' nonprofit land trusts. With 988 acres protected over the last twelve months, the total area preserved declined significantly from last year's record breaking high. However, both the quality and quantity of projects has maintained a steady and impressive pace. The year's successes were spearheaded by **Grand Prairie Friends** and **The Nature Conservancy**. Grand Prairie Friends acquired nearly 300 acres in east central Illinois, adding to an existing macrosite that they began assembling only in 2011 and that is coming close to connecting two existing large publicly owned preserves. The Foundation is thus creating a major ecological preserve by serving as both linchpin and organizing force. The Nature Conservancy expanded sites across northern Illinois, growing the Kankakee Sands macrosite by 110 acres and, most impressively, expanding key areas of Nachusa Grasslands by almost 230 acres. The latter project will, in addition to both deepening and broadening the property, provide the potential to enlarge the habitat of the preserve's bison herd. Working in almost every corner of the state, this past year over a dozen land trusts have expanded preserves, established new sites, and built comprehensive protected corridors. Let's dive right in, shall we?

- **Barrington Area Conservation Trust**
  - 3.34 acres in a conservation easement containing wetlands and a small amount of upland in North Barrington, Lake County. The property lies in a depressional wetland that has been undergoing restoration work by the property owner.
- **Citizens for Conservation**
  - 9.6 acres of wetland at Flint Creek Savanna, CFC's preeminent 134 acre property in Lake Barrington, Lake County. The property, which lies along Flint Creek, further develops CFC's long-term goal of protecting this tributary of the Fox River and its immediate environs.
  - 4.5 wetland acres along Flint Creek that connects the 9.6 acres described in the previous bullet point to the main body of the Flint Creek Savanna site.

- 3.36 acres of wetland and woodland along the northeastern extent of Flint Creek, with the eponymous waterway flowing through the property, and 0.56 acres over a wetland/detention basin immediately to the west. The property contains a large number of youngish oaks (~50 years old ) and is a key ecological piece of the larger preserve (which rounded out the year at 144 acres); it's so pivotal that CFC worked towards its acquisition for *32 years*.
- **Friends of the Kankakee**
  - Just over 3.0 acres in Iroquois County acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***. While finalizing details of the creation of the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Friends *also* continued its decades-long work of adding *to* that future Refuge, with two separate acquisitions that brought the total area of the site to an impressive 269 acres.
- **Grand Prairie Friends**
  - 89.8 ravine-filled, heavily wooded acres in Coles County, acquired with support from the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** and the ***Lumpkin Family Foundation***. Adjacent to GPF's Warbler Woods and Embarras Ridges preserves, the addition of this property created a 435 acre woodland and prairie complex running along the Embarras River. Just to the north, the City of Charleston's 844 acre Woodyard Conservation Area and Lake Charleston form the northern anchor of what is now a nearly unbroken preserve of over 1,250 acres.
  - 201.5 acres along the Embarras River in Coles County containing both dense woodlands and agricultural fields, acquired with the strong support of the ***Lumpkin Family Foundation***. The property is divided into two units. The northern unit both lies along the river and is adjacent to the 844 acres of Nature Preserve and lake owned by the City of Charleston described above. The southern unit extends GPF's Warbler Woods macrosite (the one that they had *already* expanded this year by purchasing the 90 acre property described in the previous bullet point) west to the Embarrass River, *also* connecting the site to the privately owned 75 acre Ambraw Woods Land and Water Reserve, registered this past September. The two sites are now separated by only 1,300 feet. In addition, the IDNR's 1,720 acre Fox Ridge State Park lies only  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile to the south of GPF's properties. For those keeping track at home, that's 3,265 acres of high quality habitat across three units that, through GPF's dedication, foresight, and tireless work, are very close to physically linking together. On top of everything else, this was all accomplished in only four years. An all-around inspiring project.
- **Heartlands Conservancy**
  - 9.6 acres in the northeast of the city of Belleville, St. Clair County. A wooded area fronted by a home, this donated property abuts one of the last farmsteads within the immediate city area.
  - 36 acres in a conservation easement in St. Clair County, further developing a growing trend in a County whose diversity of actors and protection methods are unique in the state.
- **Illinois Audubon Society**
  - 80 wooded acres in Will County that will be transferred to the Joliet Park District to expand Pilcher Park with the requirement that the land be dedicated as an Illinois

Nature Preserve. Ah, but that's but a small part of the greater whole. The majority of the existing park will also be dedicated as Nature Preserve, with most of the balance being registered as a Land & Water Reserve. The project will thus result in a ~500 acre Nature Preserve/Land & Water Reserve in the heart of the city, all of which was both catalyzed and made possible by Illinois Audubon's work. This innovative project was made possible with support from the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*.

- **Land Conservancy of McHenry County**

- 38.49 acres in McHenry County, acquired with the invaluable support of the *Grand Victoria Foundation*, this property not only contains a very high quality oak woodland, it also holds an equally high quality sedge meadow alongside two headwater streams that eventually flow into Nippersink Creek, the County's premier waterway. Oh, but wait. There's more. Just as it did with a project last year, TLC worked directly with the McHenry County Conservation District in negotiating the acquisition. The District, through its Foundation, acquired the neighboring 20.18 acres from the nephews of the seller of the TLC parcel, creating a 58.67 acre site. TLC in turn used this acquisition as the necessary match to obtain the funding needed to purchase its property, meaning that TLC and the MCCD have, once again, defined what it means to work together in a true partnership... .. You thought this paragraph was finished, didn't you? Nope. Rounding everything else out, both the TLC and MCCD properties lie within one of the Hackmatack NWR corridors, bringing the Refuge one step closer to true realization. All in all, an awesome project!
- 26.1 acres in a conservation easement containing woodland, prairie, wetland and river in McHenry County. Located in one of the Hackmatack NWR's core areas, Nippersink Creek flows through the property, which lies half a mile upstream from the McHenry County Conservation District's 1,200 acre Queen Anne Prairie Conservation Area. The easement on the property further secures the ecological integrity of the creek while simultaneously establishing the first piece of a protected riverine corridor linking the McHenry County Conservation District's Queen Anne Prairie and Winding Creek Conservation Areas, with additional land protection work in the vicinity likely in 2016.
- 1.84 acres in open field added to an existing 15 acre easement that in turn lies adjacent to a 3.5 acre easement in eastern McHenry County, just south of Moraine Hills State Park.

- **Lake Bluff Open Lands Association**

- 1.33 acres (of which LBOLA already held an easement on 0.45 acres) in Lake County. The wooded property, which contains a home and is located in a residential development was willed to LBOLA by its owner. The parcel contains a portion of a lakeshore ravine; one of only 50-odd such ravines that remain in the whole of the state. The property complements a second easement held by LBOLA to the east along the same ravine, enhancing the organization's ability to care for this unusual geographic feature.

- **Land Conservation Foundation**

- 19.36 heavily wooded acres in Champaign County along the banks of the Sangamon River, on the border with Piatt County. Over the summer, the new property was used as an art camp for local children, an activity that proved so popular that it's likely to become an annual program. The property also directly borders the Piatt County Forest Preserve District's 60 acre Old Forest Preserve, both buffering and expanding the

protected area. The acquisition provides another *fine* example of the significantly enhanced impact that public and private organizations working in tandem can bring about; an impact that simply isn't feasible when working individually. Got a question as to how your organization can effectively work with local government to bring about projects of real and lasting significance? Call LCF. Seriously. Call them. They're really, really good at what they do. Stop reading this right now, and go call them.

- **Natural Land Institute**

- 60.86 acres (62.68 gross acres) in far northeastern Ogle County, at the intersection of McGregor and Weldon Roads. When composing last year's letter I thought that the property had yet to close, but discovered early this year to my chagrin that it had in fact closed in early September! Predominantly in agricultural production with large open fields bisecting the fields, the property was donated by four brothers who wanted to preserve the property in perpetuity. NLI's long history of work in and with local communities in northwestern Illinois made it both the ideal and natural place for the family to turn, and the entire conservation community thus benefits from that strong focus!

- **Openlands**

- Described in detail in the Public Land Conservation section of this letter, Openlands sold 9.32 acres of wetland bisected by Nippersink Creek to the McHenry County Conservation District. Having acquired the abandoned, unbuilt Twin Creeks housing development of which this parcel is a part, Openlands is selling some of the lots to raise the money necessary to preserve the rest of the property in its natural condition. While the parcel was indeed purchased by the District, this wouldn't have been possible without Openlands' decision to embark on such a unique initiative. The organization's skill and expertise in conceiving of and executing the Twin Creeks project is as impressive as it is praiseworthy. Both organizations were and are thus essential to this entire project!

- **ParkLands Foundation**

- 20.6 heavily wooded acres in eastern Woodford County, through which runs the Mackinaw River. The property lies half a mile north of McLean County's 2,170 acre Comlara Park which in turn is adjacent to 210 acres of Fee and Easement lands held by the City of Bloomington and by ParkLands itself. In acquiring the property, ParkLands has both enhanced management opportunities along the river as well as expanded an already substantial macrosite owned by multiple public and private organizations.

- **The Conservation Foundation**

- 0.6506 wooded acres in a conservation easement located in the Village of Winfield, in eastern DuPage County. The easement is adjacent to two other small easements also held by TCF, and is intended to facilitate the reduction of future development immediately to the west.
- 40.0 open acres in DuPage and Kane Counties. Adjacent to the 375 acre Dunham Forest Preserve, two branches of Norton Creek (a tributary of the Fox River) enter the land from the east before converging at the property's western border. The majority of the site, which will be donated to a local village, is used for hay production or is covered by

wetlands, creating a solid buffer for the public forest preserve property to the east while simultaneously providing recreational opportunities for village residents.

- **The Nature Conservancy**

- 109.8 acres through a combination of tax and private sales at Kankakee Sands supported by the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**. Nearly 2,400 acres spread over 40 square miles of southeastern Kankakee County, TNC's Kankakee Sands has been assembled through numerous small acquisitions. Representing one of the finest examples of an oak savanna in the entirety of the state, the Kankakee Sands site also forms an invaluable complement to the new Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area being assembled by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and **Friends of the Kankakee**.
- 1.2 acres through tax sales at the 74 acre Gensburg-Markham Prairie, one of four virgin prairies (the largest such prairie complex in Illinois) comprising the Indian Boundary Prairies in suburban Markham, just outside of Chicago. The small parcels include both degraded woodlands and open fields, and both expand and buffer this Illinois Nature Preserve-dedicated site that TNC has been patiently and methodically assembling for many decades.
- 27.41 acres (28.41 gross acres) at Nachusa Grasslands in Ogle County. Containing woodlands, an open field, and a residential home, this property lies at the intersection of Stone Barn and Lowden Roads. A grant from the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** helped to cover the cost of the undeveloped portion of the land. TNC already owned the land to the north and east of the new property, which has the potential to facilitate the expansion of the bison enclosure. This would be a welcome development, as the herd has grown to 41 animals in 2015!
- 6.68 acres (6.75 gross acres) again at Nachusa Grasslands in Ogle County. This small parcel along W. Flagg Road is a wet, open area with scattered trees which preserves one of the few remaining unprotected parcels along the northern boundary of the main unit of the preserve.
- 194.7 acres (196.3 gross acres) at, yep, Nachusa Grasslands in Lee and Ogle Counties with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** and the **Grand Victoria Foundation**. With this third and most extensive acquisition at the site over the last year, TNC has expanded the site of Illinois' first conservation bison herd to 3,496 acres (with an additional 720 acres protected via conservation easements). The new property, which grows the already impressive site by 6%, expands the preserve to the west, taking in open field, wetlands and wet prairie, and a small woodland.

### **Public Land Conservation**

Last year this letter was focused quite heavily on private land conservation efforts for two very important reasons. First, most of the recipients work for land trusts or work closely with the private sector. Second and far more importantly, I didn't think of writing the letter until October, and while I had very good records of private land acquisition work, I, erm, did *not* have such records for the public sector, having simply noted each new acquisition by the various Forest Preserve and Conservation Districts and then added them into my databases without recording the specifics. So apart from the IDNR, I lumped everything else into a single paragraph, hoped no one would notice (...they did notice...),

and called it a day. I promised myself no shortcuts in 2015 though, and with 949 acres of previously unprotected land acquired by a dozen different public organizations, we've got a lot to work through, so here we go!

- The **Illinois Nature Preserves Commission** continued in its mission to preserve the state's ecological treasures, adding 11 properties totaling 1,314.8 acres (78.75 acres of which was on land owned by neither the public sector nor 501(c)3 land trusts). Four existing Preserves and Reserves were expanded, alongside four new Nature Preserves and three new Land and Water Reserves. 31% of the newly protected properties were dedicated/registered by nonprofit organizations and private individuals, with the balance being dedicated/registered by local governments and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.
- **Illinois Department of Natural Resources**
  - 77.9 acres of prairie, wetland, and stream in Montgomery County to expand the Coffeen Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area.
  - 38.9 wooded acres in the heart of Franklin Creek State Natural Area. Franklin Creek itself runs through this property, which was acquired in 2011 by the **Franklin Creek Preservation Area Committee** with the intention of in turn selling it to the DNR for expansion of the State Natural Area. As discussed last year, the Preservation Area Committee led the creation of the SNA, a feat matched neither before nor since, and, among many other initiatives, now works to expand the site by acquiring land adjacent to the preserve and subsequently transferring it to the State DNR. This property is adjacent to the 22.8 acre property acquired by the Committee last year with support from the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**.
  - ...and that's it from the State this year. Both of the properties described above were acquired last winter or spring. Once summer rolled around, the DNR's ability to engage in real estate transactions, like so much else in state government, was suspended due to the lack of a state budget.
- **DeKalb County Forest Preserve District**
  - 37 acres expanding the 43 acre Prairie Oaks Forest Preserve to the south, supported by the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**. The District will be installing a trail which will traverse a diverse group of habitats including prairie, wetland, and savanna.
  - 1.3 acres to connect the original Prairie Oaks preserve with the 37 acre addition.
  - 1.7 acres to connect to a 37.2 acre agricultural property acquired by the County through the FEMA HGMP, over which **The Conservation Foundation** holds a conservation easement.
- **Forest Preserve District of Cook County**
  - 3.56 acres which creates a connection between the FPDCC's Powderhorn Lake Forest Preserve and the IDNR's William W. Powers State Recreation Area, further developing the Millennium Reserve in and around Calumet.
  - 161.07 acres of wetlands, open water, woods, and agricultural fields in unincorporated southwest Cook County. Lying just north of McGinty Slough, part of the 14,000+ acre Palos Preserves, the property further adds to one of the District's premier macrosites.
  - 23 acres containing a residential house and open fields in Barrington Hills, northwestern Cook County, connecting the 3,850 acre Spring Lake Preserve with the District's new 397 acre Horizon Farm Preserve.

- 1.1 acres of vacated ROW in Dan Ryan Woods, in the northwestern extent of the Calumet landscape area.
  - 2.3 acres containing a house and attendant landscaping, with a creek running through the northeastern corner to expand the 626 acre Jens Jensen Preserve in northern Cook County.
- **Forest Preserve District of DuPage County**
    - 0.18 acres on the eastern side of Belleau Woods.
    - 0.11 acres of a vacated right-of-way at Cricket Creek (Forest Preserve), south of Fullerton Avenue.
    - 0.60 acres of vacated right-of-way at the northern extent of Broadview Slough.
    - 0.54 wooded acres at the north end of Cricket Creek (Forest Preserve).
    - 0.17 acres of vacated right-of-way in the southern unit of Fischer Woods.
    - 0.92 acres directly northwest of Fischer Woods.
    - 1.74 acres at the northeast corner of the small Goodrich Woods.
    - 1.02 wooded acres of vacated right-of-way at Meacham Grove, along Bloomingdale Road.
    - 0.58 acres of vacated right-of-way in the northwest section of Pratt's Wayne Woods.
    - 1.74 acres along Elizabeth Drive at Salt Creek Park.
    - 0.60 acres of vacated right-of-way along the eastern border of St. James Farm.
    - 0.45 acres of vacated right-of-way in the northwestern portion of West DuPage Woods.
    - 0.21 wooded acres in the southwest portion of Churchill Woods.
    - 9.02 acres of woodland and open field lying just to the east of the northeastern extent of Waterfall Glen.
- **Forest Preserve District of Kane County**
    - 29.66 acres of agricultural fields with a wooded waterway running through the middle as an addition to the 166 acre Cardinal Creek preserve.
    - 69.6 acres of open field and prairie as an addition to the 1,265 acre Freeman Kame-Meagher Preserve. The new property lies at the southwest corner of the Preserve, along I-90.
- **Forest Preserve District of Will County**
    - 0.21 acres at the I&M Canal, acquired to rationalize ownership of the trail corridor.
    - 0.40 acres to square off Teale Woods Preserve.
    - 0.81 acres along the north bank of Plum Creek to expand Moeller Woods Preserve.
    - 9.41 wooded acres on both sides of Plum Creek to further expand Moeller Woods Preserve.
    - 16.84 acres of mixed forest and field with one building in the northwest corner of Moeller Woods Preserve...seeing a pattern here?
    - And a final 1.35 wooded acres also on the north bank of Plum Creek, adding to the western expansion of...wait for it... Moeller Woods Preserve.
    - A 0.059 acre inholding in the middle of the DuPage River Confluence Preserve.
    - 1.46 acres of trail corridor along the railroad tracks along the west end of the small Wolf Creek Preserve.
    - 34.81 acres at the south end of Lockport Prairie Nature Preserve. A wooded area with scattered wetlands along the Des Plaines River, the property is also adjacent to a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve of the same name.

- **Forest Preserves of Winnebago County**
  - 2.4 acres of residential yard and scattered trees as an addition to Colored Sands Forest Preserve.
  - 3.0 acres of woodland and agricultural field, with a stream running through the woodland as an addition to Oak Ridge Forest Preserve; the addition will allow the District to buffer the stream from agricultural runoff.
  
- **Kendall County Forest Preserve District**
  - 168 acres along the Fox River between the Forest Preserve District's Hoover Forest Preserve and the Illinois DNR's Silver Springs State Park, acquired with support from the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, this property contains a mix of agricultural fields and dense forest along the Fox River. The property also includes a small island located in the middle of the river, further adding to both its diversity and potential.
  
- **Lake County Forest Preserve District**
  - 38.5 acres at Ray Lake Forest Preserve in two separate acquisitions, squaring off the property and enabling the expansion of an adjacent prairie restoration project.
  - 16.9 predominantly wooded acres at Bluebird Meadow Forest Preserve, expanding one of the District's newer properties and adding a natural component to a Preserve that is still mostly comprised of agricultural fields.
  - 18.4 acres of ADID and open water wetlands as an addition to Singing Hills Forest Preserve.
  - 0.22 acres at Wilmot Woods Forest Preserve, acquired via tax sale.
  - 0.37 acres of vacated roadway right-of-way at Greenbelt Forest Preserve in eastern Lake County.
  - 1 acre of wooded land to square off a boundary at Bluebird Meadow Forest Preserve.
  - 15 acres of open field and agricultural lands, filling in a hole at the northern extent of Pine Dunes Forest Preserve, on the border with Wisconsin.
  - 55.7 acres of agricultural fields and woodlands at the eastern edge of Pine Dunes Forest Preserve, along U.S. Route 41.
  - 0.91 acres of vacated right-of-way along the southern extent of Waukegan Savanna Forest Preserve, in eastern Lake County.
  - 0.28 acres of vacated right-of-way in the western extent of Lakewood Forest Preserve, along a corridor that was recently re-naturalized following the realignment of a local thoroughfare.
  - 4.7 wooded acres with a residential house in the northeast corner of Kettle Grove Forest Preserve.
  
- **Lee County Soil and Water Conservation District**
  - 6.6 wooded acres acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** and Ms. Debra Carey, abutting the northeast corner of the 50 acre Ryan Wetland and Sand Prairie, a registered Land and Water Reserve. This property both buffers the Reserve and enables the expansion of one of the most unusual prairie ecosystems in the state.
  - 5.9 heavily wooded acres on the north side of the 27 acre Bartlett Woods Nature Preserve, donated by the landowner. Bartlett Woods is a mesic forest remnant of an historical prairie grove (credit to Randy Heidorn, whose excellent description of the

Nature Preserve posted on the INPC website I am quite shamelessly appropriating here). Located in the Grand Prairie Section of the eponymous Natural Division, there are only ~1,000 acres of high quality mesic upland forest remaining in this larger area, a simple fact which adds to the value of the enlargement of this small site.

- **McHenry County Conservation District**

- 20.18 acres that lies adjacent to and was acquired in conjunction with 38.49 acres owned by the **Land Conservancy of McHenry County**. As detailed above in the description of the TLC parcel, the acquisition of this property (acquired with the strong financial support of the **McHenry County Conservation Foundation**) was made possible through the close coordination of and sharing of resources between the MCCD and TLC. The property contains oak woodlands, a sedge meadow, and a former agricultural field, providing a mixture of habitats within the boundaries of the Hackmatack NWR.
- 0.30 acres of wooded wetland expanding Oakwood Hills Fen, acquired from the County via a tax sale auction.
- 1.6 acres on inholding at Coral Woods (which completely surrounds the property), also acquired from the County via a tax sale auction.
- 9.32 acres of wetland with Nippersink Creek running through the middle of the property, this land lies adjacent to the County's Queen Anne Macrosite. The property is the most recent of several parcels acquired by the District from **Openlands** with the assistance of grant funding. Having acquired an abandoned, unbuilt housing development of which this parcel is a part, Openlands is selling some of the lots to raise the money necessary to preserve the rest of the property in its natural setting, slowly transferring lots to the District to ensure their permanent preservation and care and, in the process, nearly linking two distinct natural areas for the first time.
- 9.91 acres containing several stands of mature oaks, ADID wetlands, and a headwater of McHenry County's previously mentioned premier waterway of Nippersink Creek (a major section of which was *remeandered* by the District in the late 1990s and early 2000s in what remains one of the single most impressive examples of ecological restoration anywhere in the state of Illinois) are interspersed with agricultural fields on this small property that lies 1,500 feet southwest of the District's Alden Sedge Meadow Conservation Area, and that borders a 2.1 acre conservation easement held by the **Land Conservancy of McHenry County**. There's that partnership thing again...

### ***Natural Areas Restoration and Management***

While not practical to detail all of the numerous restoration projects taking place around the state on both publicly and privately held land, there are some very notable and emblematic projects that stand out for their scale or for the unique landscapes in which they're operating.

- **Clifftop** has begun [major restoration activities](#) on 282 of the 400 acres of agricultural land atop Fogelpole Cave, the protection of which was one of [last year's](#) Top 3 Most Awesome Projects. The land atop the cave contains 136 distinct sinkholes which drain into the cave complex, making the minimization of erosion and chemical-laden runoff of significant importance. The land was planted to a mix of over 50 native grasses, sedges, and flowers. The new prairie is

being mowed regularly (by a newly purchased tractor) to control weeds and permit the prairie plants to establish themselves.

- Clifftop also recently completed initial restoration on the nearby 307 acre White Rock Nature Preserve with the support of the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, a property which they own in partnership with *Heartlands Conservancy*.
- **Openlands** is devoting \$3.15 million to restore the 1,155 acre woodland of Deer Grove West on land owned by the *Forest Preserve District of Cook County*. The woodland was the first preserve acquired by the Forest Preserve District; in 1914. The restoration project is deeply impressive in both scope and scale, and should serve as a model for the entire region in addition to its undisputed benefit to the property's flora and fauna.
- **Lake Forest Open Lands Association** is partnering with the City of Lake Forest to commit \$3.5 million to the restoration of the City-owned McCormick Ravine next year. The 61 acre ravine has been managed by LFOA for decades and is one of the oldest and most geologically stable ravines in the state. 500' feet wide in places, the ravine has been left relatively undisturbed. These two factors combine to make it home to a wide variety of flora including numerous plants of concern. LFOA secured \$2.9M in financing from the U.S. Army Corps for the restoration of the site to which they are adding \$600K. The restoration project will include the removal of early 20<sup>th</sup> century infrastructure alongside further restoration of the vegetative communities. Following the completion of restoration activities, the ravine's ownership will be transferred from the City to LFOA, which will assume all long-term management responsibilities for the property, helping ensure this small remnant ecosystem both continues to thrive and serve the citizens of the community for many decades to come.
- **Openlands**, with the support of the *Grand Victoria Foundation* will begin a five year habitat restoration project in an area stretching from the organization's Lakeshore Preserve in the south to McCormick Ravine (the site of the quite notable restoration project being undertaken by Lake Forest Open Lands Association discussed above) in the north, both located in southeastern Lake County. The project's restoration efforts will center on Schenck Ravine in the southern portion of the Lakeshore Preserve. Over the winter nonnative and invasive trees will be removed. Restoration of the stream which created and runs through the ravine will begin in the spring, with a focus on improving storm water management, reducing erosion and, in the process, improving fish habitat. The Army Corps will provide funding for 65% of the project, while Openlands will provide the remaining 35%. Those funds come from a \$4M 2007 grant from the Foundation for restoration of Lakeshore Preserve's woodlands, uplands, prairies, dunes, lakeshore, and ravine habitats. The delicate nature of the three ravines (Bartlett and Van Horne, in addition to Schenck) has necessitated that much of the work take place in the winter months when the ground is frozen. The current project is the result of several years of planning, with a focus on designing an improved storm water management system to ameliorate the significant degradation that the ravine systems have experienced as a result of increased water flow due to the increased amount of impervious surfaces in the surrounding area.
- **Libertyville Township**, in coordination with *Conserve Lake County* will, with the support of the *Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation* begin restoration next fall on at least 100 acres of farmland in the heart of the 5,800 acre Liberty Prairie Reserve in central Lake County. The property is adjacent to two Illinois Nature Preserves encompassing native prairie, oak woodlands, forest, and an open marsh.

- **Openlands** and the **Forest Preserve District of Will County** have made substantial progress on restoring Messenger Woods and the adjacent Spring Creek Greenway using funds from the O'Hare Modernization Mitigation Account (restoration funds that Chicago had to commit to compensate for the adverse impacts of expanding the airport). In neighboring Cook County, Openlands, in conjunction with the **Forest Preserve District of Cook County**, has nearly completed a seven year restoration effort at the 535 acre Tinley Creek Wetlands/Bartel Grasslands site. The results have been quite notable; a more than doubling of the Floristic Quality Index to 84.8 and a correlated doubling in the number of native species of flora to 347. The improved ecosystem has consequently seen substantial usage by grassland birds; fully half of the state's species in greatest need of conservation are using the site.
- **The Wetlands Initiative** has, with the support of the **Grand Victoria Foundation** made further progress in the three year old restoration of the 160 acre Lobelia Meadows at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. With over 88,000 plugs planted by 2014, 2015 marked the first year in which the entire site began to take on both the appearance and function of a natural ecosystem.
- **Friends of the Chicago River**, with the support of the **Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation** will begin remediation and monitoring of gullies in properties owned by the **Forest Preserve District of Cook County** along the north branch of the Chicago River.
- **Ducks Unlimited**, in partnership with the **Peoria Audubon Society** completed three years of habitat restoration and stewardship work at the 232 acre Chillicothe Bottoms just north of Peoria. The project significantly improved water flow and species diversity at an ecologically rich site along the Middle Illinois River. This work was made possible by support from the **Grand Victoria Foundation** (given as part of the original land acquisition grant) and an additional grant made by the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**. Concurrently, DU also completed restoration of an 83 acre wetland enrolled in the federal Wetland Reserve Program at nearby Upper Peoria Lake.
- **The Wetlands Initiative** has made substantial project in its restoration of the 70 acre Oak Ridge Savanna at Dixon Waterfowl Refuge in Putnam County with the support of the **Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation** and is on track to complete the current phase of work next year. Simultaneously, with the support of the **Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation** and the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** they've begun restoration of the 423 acre Hickory Hollow addition to the already impressive site (the acquisition of which was discussed at length in last year's letter!), and in so doing are providing a buffer to the wooded stream which bisects the property.

### **Top 3 Most Awesome Projects**

After being heavily weighted to the private sector last year and scattered from one end of the state to the other, this year's most impressive projects, quite by chance, all revolve around federally owned (or soon to be owned) sites just south of Chicago. Each was made possible because of a strong partnership between the public and private sectors; indeed, it's more likely than not that none would ever have come to fruition without such collaboration.

- **The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**, working with **Friends of the Kankakee** is in the final stages of creating Illinois' newest Wildlife Refuge; the [Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area](#) in Iroquois County. First proposed in the late 1990s as a bi-state preserve, the revived Refuge is located exclusively in Illinois and was in large part made possible by almost two decades of work by Friends of the Kankakee, supported by the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**. Friends has been purchasing property within the Refuge's proposed boundary since it was first mooted with the intention of transferring that land to the USFWS upon the Refuge's creation. The success of this decades-long effort is both the most impressive land protection project of the year and a likely prelude to impressive work to come.

  - The inaugural ~64 acre parcel is a mixture of open field and woodland, to be transferred by Friends to the Service.
  - The property is adjacent to additional Friends property to the east and to the Illinois DNR's Iroquois County State Fish and Wildlife Area to the west.
  - The Nature Conservancy's Kankakee Sands macrosite lies just to the north of the new Refuge (and is in part contained within its proposed boundaries). These two distinct ecosystem combine to create a unique landscape and equally unique conservation opportunity.
  
- The **U.S. Forest Service** has [introduced a herd of 27 bison](#) to Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie in southern Will County, far and away taking the award for the year's most important restoration/management project. This was done, I can only assume, as a righteous smack down by the Conservation Gods after I stuck my digital tongue out at Midewin last year when TNC's Nachusa Grasslands introduced its first bison herd (consider me suitably chastised!)... it was also done because Forest Service staff had been carefully and diligently planning and preparing for the reintroduction for several years... But yeah, I'm pretty sure it was *mostly* done to teach me a lesson.

  - The Forest Service intends to grow the herd to ~100 animals. Needless to say, quite apart from the effect they'll have on restoring natural functions to the property's floral and faunal communities, the sight of 100 bison running through the plains of suburban Chicago will be both inspiring and a testament to the vision, planning, and dedication of the Service's staff, Midewin's supporters, and its volunteers.
  - The four bull animals came from the Yellowstone herd, and are thus quite likely to be free of any cattle introgression. The twenty three females came from a private herd, and through testing were found to be free of cattle genes. While likely that, in common with Nachusa Grasslands' Wind Cave National Park-sourced herd they do indeed have *some* history of cattle introgression (the animals don't appear to have been tested for Single Nucleotide Polymorphisms, as the technology's only been in wide use for about a decade), this makes the Midewin animals the second truly conservation herd in Illinois. With their reintroduction, Midewin, the country's largest tallgrass prairie restoration project, takes a significant step towards once more becoming a fully functional tallgrass prairie ecosystem.
  
- The **Environmental Law and Policy Center** and **Openlands** (in coordination with a number of other interested parties), with the support of the **Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation** have successfully pushed the proposed [Illiana Expressway](#) to as close to cancellation as infrastructure projects often ever come in the single most important public policy project of the year and will continue to push for its final, formal cancellation over the coming year. A financial and ecological boondoggle, the tollway would have cost Illinois taxpayers an estimated [\\$440](#)

[million to \\$1.1 billion](#), further reducing funds for vital state projects (and state environmental initiatives) while, pivotally, running along the southern boundary of the [Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie](#)... you know...that place I just described as the state's largest and thus potentially most ecologically diverse tallgrass prairie restoration site.

- Though bison are incredible animals, one of Midewin's most important attributes is its scale. That scale permits grassland birds that require large open spaces to thrive in a way impossible in most of the state.
- A major highway adjacent to a natural area creates a host of adverse impacts to a large number of grassland bird species. Light pollution, noise, exhaust fumes and runoff all combine to negatively affect the local avian wildlife.
  - **Openlands** will, with the support of the **Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation** work with local stakeholders over the next year to develop alternative transportation corridors and a comprehensive land use planning process to both cement protection of the prairie and ensure that the local and regional communities can not only continue to grow, but thrive.
- **The Wetlands Initiative**, supported by the **Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation** as well as the **Grand Victoria Foundation** has been restoring key portions of the Midewin site. Adding up to several thousand acres, this work has been ongoing for almost 20 years (as evidenced by the description of Lobelia Meadows in the previous section of this letter), significantly expanding the habitat opportunity not only for birds, but insects and mammals as well. Well done guys and gals. Well done indeed.

### *Even More Awesome People*

As anyone reading this letter knows, there are some justifiably well known, truly extraordinary people working to preserve, restore, and make accessible Illinois' natural heritage (many of whom are recipients of this letter. You know who you are). Most of us can easily name a dozen women and men in both the private and public sectors whose vision and strategic acumen is central to not only the greatest successes of the past several decades, but to today's most exciting and important regional and statewide projects and initiatives

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This section is not about those people. Instead it's an opportunity to learn more about some amazing individuals whose contributions in their communities to the conservation and restoration of Illinois' natural areas is a) long, *long* standing, b) of statewide *significance* if not extent and c) not nearly as widely known as it should be since they don't work for the major public or private organizations in this space.

#### **Debra Carey**

Ms. Debra Carey has been the guiding light of land conservation in Lee County for decades. This is the part where I'm supposed to cleverly list the numerous (very numerous) organizations she's founded or helped direct while pretending that I'm not actually spouting off a bullet pointed list. Forget that. The reality is far, far more impressive than any dry list could do justice to. Ms. Carey, in addition to her role as the Executive Director of the Dixon Park District, has spearheaded the protection of at least half a

dozen major sites in Lee County over the decades; in 2002 the Illinois Audubon Society justifiably awarded Ms. Carey, her mother, and a friend their Conservationist of the Year award.

In 2012, following years of effort and working with the Illinois Audubon Society, the nonprofit acquired the majority of Amboy Marsh, one of the finest wetland/savanna complexes in northern Illinois, with one of the state's largest populations of Blandings Turtles. The site was expanded the following year to just over 300 acres, and I've little doubt will grow yet again. When not running the local park district *or* working with Illinois Audubon on Amboy Marsh *or* The Nature Conservancy on the growth and restoration of Nachusa Grasslands (any one of which is both important and time consuming enough for most people), Ms. Carey is expanding locally owned natural areas. Often drawing upon her personal financial resources, she's shepherded the protection of numerous properties now owned by the County Soil and Water Conservation District...additions to *two* of which are included in this year's letter!

I first had the privilege of speaking with Ms. Carey around two years ago, when I was mapping the protected lands of Lee County for what would eventually become the statewide land protection database that the Prairie State Conservation Coalition currently has in development and had a question about some sites. Typically in such cases, I would count myself inordinately fortunate if I was put in touch with someone who was aware of the *existence* of the site in question. As such, my shock upon having the opportunity to speak with Ms. Carey would have been palpable to anyone in the room. I was blown away by the sheer breadth and *depth* of her knowledge. And she had the documentation to expand upon and back up every site she described; a few weeks after our discussion, as she promised, a package arrived in the mail with a wealth of scientific data and analyses on a multitude of Lee County sites that she and her colleagues had protected, restored, and managed over the years. I now know more about the ecological treasures of Lee County than I do those anywhere else in the state outside of my Chicagoland home. And I owe that wholly to Debra Carey.

Ms. Carey has been instrumental in every stage of the conservation lifecycle of almost every project of ecological significance in Lee County; from identification, to protection, restoration, management, and public access. To quote Tom Clay of Illinois Audubon, "Deb is the quintessential habitat hero and she's an inspiration". Yes, yes she is.

### **Marianne Hahn**

Dr. Marianne Hahn has been a singular force of nature driving the creation and protection of the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area, discussed in detail in the previous section of this letter. In the late 1990s, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service briefly considered establishing a wildlife refuge in Indiana and Illinois; the Grand Kankakee Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. Though the project was ultimately shelved, Dr. Hahn and her colleagues didn't sit around bemoaning the loss. Instead, they expanded the efforts of the recently founded Friends of the Kankakee to acquire and hold natural lands within a unit of the proposed Reserve until such time as the USFWS revived the Refuge proposal, upon which the land would be transferred to the Service to begin building the new Refuge.

Over the course of the next 15+ years, Dr. Hahn negotiated the acquisition of over 250 acres, primarily through the purchase of mostly undeveloped residential housing lots each less than a quarter acre in size. It is from this work that the new National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area will be born. In a very real sense, the Refuge was thus made possible because of her vision and determination. While founding a federal wildlife refuge would be enough to fill the days of most, Dr. Hahn's work has never been limited to 'only' Friends of the Kankakee. Since 2001, she has privately been assembling what has

become the Sweet Fern Savanna Land and Water Reserve in southern Kankakee County. Adjacent to lands owned by TNC and also falling within the boundaries of the new Refuge, this 89 acre (and growing) site has been acquired personally by Dr. Hahn, growing piece by piece into an ecological gem that mixes sand savanna, sand forest, and prairie in a complex mosaic that exemplifies the truly unique nature of the area.

Dr. Hahn's expertise, dedication, and vision are all without equal; I believe it to be no exaggeration to state that the Kankakee Refuge would never have existed without her. Anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote "Never doubt that a small, committed group of people can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has". Dr. Hahn and Friends of the Kankakee demonstrate the profound truth of this observation, and all residents of Illinois owe her a debt of gratitude.

### *2014 Revisited*

Because I'm lame, I missed several projects completed in 2014 both when composing last year's letter and in the immediate follow up. All are fine examples of the excellent work being done throughout the state, and should be recognized as such.

- **Friends of the Sangamon Valley**
  - A 113 acre family farm and adjacent cat cemetery (cats need a final resting place too you know) in Christian County was donated as a life estate, allowing the grantors to continue living on and working the land. Following the grantor's tenancy, Friends may then continue to farm the property until time and resources permit its restoration. All in all, a great deal for everyone involved.
  
- **Grand Prairie Friends**
  - A 20 acre wetland in Champaign County. The Embarras River runs through the middle of this site, which was registered in 2015 as an Illinois Land and Water Reserve.
  - A 192 acre woodland and wetland complex in Coles County, this previously dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve borders the Friends' 141 acre Embarras Ridges property (as well as the 89.8 acre and 204.3 acre properties acquired in 2015), creating what at the time was a 300+ acre contiguous preserve (585 acres by the end of 2015...and that's just the stuff that *they* own) that is well positioned to continue growing.
  
- **Great Rivers Land Preservation Association**
  - 106 acres in Madison County, 10.74 acres of which were subsequently sold in 2015. Finalized in 2014, but not recorded (and thus brought to my attention) until the following calendar year, Piasa Creek runs through the entire property. Woodlands bordering the creek transition to agricultural fields which in turn abut not one, not two, but *three* other GRLT properties that collectively encompass 210 acres. When combined with the new property, they create a 304+ acre preserve along Piasa Creek that GRLT has pieced together one project at a time.

### *Changes at the Top*

2015 was a fairly stable year on the staffing front, with new heads at four (technically five) organizations.

- The inestimable **Paul Marien** has succeeded Kathy Mercer, who has retired after a truly successful and deeply inspiring career, at the **Macon County Conservation District** and **Macon County Conservation Foundation**.
    - Ms. Mercer, over many years, grew both the District and the Foundation with skill and foresight. It is neither exaggeration nor hyperbole to state that she forged a symbiotic relationship between these two public and private institutions that is unmatched anywhere else in the state. Her work is an exemplar of the achievements that are possible through innovation and creative thinking. Ms. Mercer was a force for conservation throughout the state, and both an inspiration and advocate for my own work, for which I owe her an unpayable debt of gratitude.
  - **Jamie Viebach** has taken the reins as the Executive Director at the **Land Conservancy of Will County**.
  - Longtime board member **Edith Auchter** has taken over at **Citizens for Conservation** from Sam Oliver.
    - Ms. Oliver gave more of her time to conservation work each year than most do in a lifetime. It was largely through her dedication that CfC became one of the most successful community-based land trusts in the state. With properties that both complement publicly owned preserves and stand on their own as testaments of the community's natural heritage, Ms. Oliver has left a lasting legacy for her community. I count myself fortunate that I had, on occasion, the pleasure and privilege of working with her.
  - **David Neu** has joined **Conserve Lake County** as the organization's new Executive Director.
- While not (just yet) a change of organizational leadership, I'd be remiss if I didn't spread the word that the conservation community is losing two of its most dedicated and successful public servants at the end of the year, both at the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission.

Mr. **Randy Heidorn** is retiring as the Director of the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission. Mr. Heidorn has stewarded and grown the Commission through decades of work, playing a pivotal role in making the Commission the state's premier guardian of Illinois' rarest natural resources. The imprimatur of the Commission has long been viewed as the ultimate mark of a property's ecological distinction; it is due in large part to Mr. Heidorn's tireless efforts that both the conservation community and elected leadership not only accept but celebrate it as such. In addition to his work managing the Commission's daily work, Mr. Heidorn has over the last few years developed an innovative legislative proposal focused on facilitating more private land conservation while simultaneously leading the development of the Commission's 2015-2020 Strategic Plan (a plan which is quite impressive. Check it out!).

Ms. **Mary Kay Solecki** is retiring from her role as the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission's representative in eastern Illinois after a long and successful career. Ms. Solecki has been one of east central Illinois' greatest environmental champions for longer than I've drawn breath. In addition to her work protecting, restoring, and managing her region's most important ecological treasures, she has also overseen the review and refinement of all Nature Preserve and Land & Water Reserve dedication/registration proposals for the entirety of the state. Ms. Solecki is as

much an expert in conceptualizing, developing, and implementing projects with numerous stakeholders as she is managing and restoring individual properties.

It's been a true pleasure working with both Ms. Solecki and Mr. Heidorn, and I sincerely believe that I can speak for all others who've also had the opportunity to do so when I say that they will be greatly missed.

### *Did You Know?*

- A mapping project of the Prairie State Conservation Coalition has shown that there are 62 501(c)3 environmental nonprofits that hold property or conservation easements and are currently working in Illinois; eight more than previously thought.
- There are 14 Forest Preserve Districts and 5 Conservation Districts in Illinois. The five largest on the basis of land owned or under easement are 1) Forest Preserve District of Cook County (67,484 acres) 2) Lake County Forest Preserve District (30,269 acres) 3) Forest Preserve District of DuPage County (25,933 acres) 4) McHenry County Conservation District (24,650 acres) 5) Forest Preserve District of Will County (21,391 acres)
- With 31 listed species, Illinois ranks 23<sup>rd</sup> out of the 50 states and 5 territories in the number of federally listed Endangered or Threatened species found within its borders.