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## The Conservation Foundation and Open Space Referenda: Assuring Public Funds are Available for Open Space Acquisition

Since 1972, the mission of The Conservation Foundation has been to promote the preservation of open space and natural areas in our communities, and to protect our rivers and streams. By providing a reasoned voice, utilizing grass-roots support, and using a variety of tools and creative methods, The Conservation Foundation has been effective in achieving this mission, helping to preserve nearly 35,000 acres of land.

In 1997, The Conservation Foundation launched a series of campaigns throughout our region to promote the public acquisition of open space. These campaigns, called **Neighbors for Open Space**, have helped raise public funds for open space preservation in DuPage, Kane, Kendall, and Will Counties through the passage of bond referenda. To date, The Conservation Foundation has organized and managed 13 successful campaigns (+6 additional advised) that have raised more than \$750 million preserving nearly 30,000 acres of land in these four counties. Regionally, voters have approved more than \$1.3 billion for open space bond referenda since 1993.

### Here is a brief summary of The Conservation Foundation's 13 Neighbors for Open Space Campaigns:

**DuPage County - November 4, 1997:** On this day, voters in DuPage County passed a referendum by nearly 60 percent to purchase \$75 million in open space for the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County. This was considered close to miraculous by many who thought the referendum would fail in such a conservative county as DuPage. The Conservation Foundation and its Neighbors for Open Space committee organized the campaign.

**Kane County - April 13, 1999:** This was an important day for open space advocates as voters supported four of four open space measures in Northeastern Illinois totaling \$203 million. Voters in Kane County overwhelmingly supported \$70 million in bonds for more forest preserve property with 66 percent support. The Conservation Foundation and its Neighbors for Open Space committee organized the campaign.

**Will County- April 13, 1999:** Voters in Will County approved \$70 for their forest preserves with \$50 million to be used for land acquisition and \$20 million for preserve improvements. And in Homer Township in Will County, voters approved with 65 percent support an \$8 million bond measure for open space. The Conservation Foundation, working through its Neighbors for Open Space committee, financed most of campaign and coordinated the day-to-day operations.

**Kendall County- November 5, 2002:** Voters in Kendall County approved \$5 million in general obligation bonds to purchase open space by a 64 percent favorable vote in the election. The Kendall County Forest Preserve District was able to protect about 600 acres of high quality natural areas, doubling the size of their existing forest preserve system. The Conservation Foundation played a key role in passing the referendum.

**Kane County - April 5, 2005:** On this day alone, voters in Kane County raised more than \$100 million to preserve open space and natural lands. The Kane County Forest Preserve District sought \$75 million in bonds, which easily passed by 64 percent. Campton Township passed their second open space referendum in four years by an astounding 74 percent vote, approving \$28.4 million in bonds. The Conservation Foundation and its Neighbors for Open Space committee organized the Kane campaign, advised and acted as fiscal agent on the Campton one.

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# The Conservation Foundation and Open Space Referenda Continued...

**Will County- April 5, 2005:** The Forest Preserve District of Will County sought \$95 million in bonds from the voters, who responded with 53 percent support. The Village of Romeoville had a creative approach to preserving open space in their town by asking voters for a slight increase in the real estate transfer tax. Support squeaked by with 51 percent, which would provide ongoing annual revenue of about \$500,000 for local parks and open space. The Conservation Foundation and its Neighbors for Open Space committee provided leadership and organized the Will County forest preserve referenda and acted as an advisor to the Romeoville campaign.

**DuPage County – November 7, 2006:** On this day, DuPage County passed its second open space referendum in nine years by an astounding 65 percent vote for \$68 million. This referendum sought to provide the final funding for a long-term land acquisition plan started in the 1970s. Again, The Conservation Foundation and its Neighbors for Open Space committee organized the campaign.

**Kane County- April 17, 2007:** The citizens of Kane County passed their third open space referendum in eight years with 65 percent support for \$85 million to preserve another 3,000-4,000 acres for the forest preserve district. Targeted lands included open space along rivers and streams, especially the Fox River, and areas that would add size to their existing forest preserves. The same group of volunteers that passed the 2005 referendum made up this Neighbors for Open Space committee.

**Kendall County- April 17, 2007:** Kendall County asked for \$45 million, which passed with 68 percent support- the highest percentage of any county open space referendum in the region. This money would double the size of forest preserve holdings to approximately 2,000 acres. The Neighbors for Open Space committee attracted many new individuals and has provided volunteer leadership for future open space measures.

**Fox Valley Park District- February 5, 2008:** The Fox Valley Park District asked residents to approve \$44.8 million when they went to the polls for the February 5 primary election. The referendum, called the Open Space, Parks and Recreation Investment Plan, passed with 66 percent support, an extremely high amount during a down economy. The funds were marked for land acquisition, open space, trail and nature area projects, and park and recreation projects including improvements to neighborhood and community parks. As in past campaigns, The Conservation Foundation organized the campaign, worked with volunteers and community leaders, and was able to generate three powerful direct mail brochures sent to targeted voters.

**Kane County- April 5, 2011:** The Kane County Forest Preserve District went out again, with The Conservation Foundation's leadership, to ask voters for \$30 million this time. Although the economy was quite different from past successful referenda, our polling showed a tweaking of the message targeted to a strategic slice of the voter base would pull off a narrow victory. Indeed, the referendum passed with 55 percent support and 2,000 more acres of land could be preserved.

**Butterfield Park District- November 4, 2014:** The Butterfield Park District asked The Conservation Foundation to purchase 2.5 acres of land at the NE corner of Rt. 53/56 and then help them pass a referendum to pay for it, along with improvements in other parks. After purchasing the land for \$1.5 million, the park district placed a \$3 million question on the ballot. Working with local residents, The Conservation Foundation helped pass this bond measure with 70 percent support.

**Kane County- April 4, 2017:** Kane County Forest Preserve District passed its fifth referendum in the past 18 years, raising a total of \$310 million. This referendum was for \$50 million and passed with 54 percent support. An additional 2,000 acres of land will be added to their existing 21,000-acre system. Approximately 20 percent of this bond will be used for ecological restoration and capital improvements that improve and provide more access to their existing lands.

The Conservation Foundation, through its **Neighbors for Open Space** committees, provides leadership and manages these open space referendum campaigns by:

- conducting all of the polling and survey work to help determine voter support,
- helping to create political support for the referenda,
- recruiting and creating the local citizen campaign committee,
- creating meaningful messages and delivering those messages through a cost-effective, well-executed strategic communications plan,
- lining up the major endorsements for the campaign

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