

Speech to Forest Preserve District Board

Tuesday, April 8, 2008

First of all, I would like to thank President Stroger and the Commissioners for the opportunity to speak this morning in an effort to save the Swallow Cliff Toboggan Slides. I commend you all for your public service to this great county and region. As the Mayor of the small town of Palos Park, I can only imagine the intense scrutiny all of you face in the difficult task to govern one of the largest counties in the United States. I would like to thank all who participated in the SOS effort. The effort to Save Our Slides truly has been a broad-based, grass roots community effort.

The great men and women of the past are our teachers. Chicago's greatest planner once said, "Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work. . . Remember that our sons and grandsons are going to do things that would stagger us. . . . Think big." Daniel Burnham, Chicago's great architect, would, I think today, urge us to "Make no little plans." Chicago enjoys a history laden with ambitious dreamers, men and women who, like Burnham, did not ask only what was practical, but sought to achieve the very limits of possible, the dream. Where would our Chicago be today without the grand plans for the abundant and beautiful recreational space along Lake Michigan and throughout our city? No doubt little plans are less risky, less costly and easier to achieve. We in Chicago are blessed for the men and women who risked their professional and political lives for their passion and vision to achieve greatness for Chicago. Chicago's bid for the 2016 Olympics serves as yet another shining example of the region's vision for the future. As you know, Swallow Cliff and the surrounding forest preserve is slated as a venue for cycling for the Chicago Olympics.

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County is an important part of Chicago's grand and ambitious plan. After a number of fits and starts, the State Legislature, through the efforts of Burnham, Foreman, Jensen, Perkins, among others, passed a law in 1913 providing for the preservation of forests and natural lands for the education, pleasure, and recreation of the public.

The Swallow Cliff lands were among the first acquired by the Forest Preserve District in the 1920s and have always played a prominent role. The Palos Historical Society is currently exhibiting at the Palos Park Public Library a showcase of the magnificent history of the toboggan slides and the attractions that began with the construction of a ski jump in the 1920s. A National Ski Jump contest was held annually at Swallow Cliff during the 1920s and 1930s, drawing to it the best in the Nation. The Toboggan slides were constructed in 1930 and have been enjoyed by thousands and known far and wide. The Swallow Cliff toboggan slides hold a special place in the minds and hearts of Chicagoans, they are older, have more history and are larger in scope and operation than all of the others being considered for demolition. An article in the February 1, 2006 edition of Chicago Life put it best:

“Of the toboggan runs that were once open, the ones at Bemis Woods, Dan Ryan Woods, Deer Grove and Jensen Slides, there was one that always stood apart, celebrated and feared more than all the others. The six parallel toboggan runs at Swallow Cliff in Palos Township, known to many fans as “Terror Hill,” are yesterday’s Great America. Ask anyone about them, and if they’ve not been, they’ve heard of them.”

The Board’s current plan for Swallow Cliff involves demolition of the six slides and a reduction in the grade of the hill for sledding. I have no doubt that it is a good plan. It is, however, a little plan—not a plan that Daniel Burnham would embrace. The Board’s plan lumps Swallow Cliff as just another toboggan slide location and ignores the considerable history and prominence that the Swallow Cliff holds above all of the other locations. Swallow Cliff deserves a different fate than the others. Why not save the funds required to demolish the toboggan slides and put the sledding on another part of the considerable hill at Swallow Cliff. The two could exist side by side and attract enthusiasts to the other. This would allow more time to formulate an alternative plan for utilizing the toboggan slides, while at the same time showcasing the wonderful recreational opportunities at Swallow Cliff.

I understand that a few years back, the Board considered a proposal from a private company willing to invest to make Swallow Cliff a regional recreational attraction. I believe that an ambitious plan on that scale is what the Board should now consider. Swallow Cliff is accessible enough to draw toboggan fans from throughout the Chicago Metropolitan area as the one, last, great location for toboggan slides in Cook County. Perhaps what is called for is a citizen committee in the finest Chicago tradition to explore better options for Swallow Cliff. I would be honored to serve on that committee and know many others who would leap at the opportunity. For all of these reasons, I respectfully urge the Board to, in the words of Daniel Burnham, make no little plans, to think big and strive for greatness for Swallow Cliff and the Forest Preserve District, to preserve the great tradition of the Forest Preserve District and spare the Swallow Cliff toboggan slides a most unfortunate fate. Thank you for your time and attention.