



AGENDA MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 25, 2025

TO: Forest Preserve District Planning and Utilization Committee

FROM: Patrick Chess, Director of Natural Resources
Benjamin Haberthur, Executive Director

SUBJECT: Presentation and Approval of a License Agreement with American Indian Center at the Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve

PURPOSE:

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide the Committee with information to consider the approval of a license agreement with the American Indian Center for the use of portions of Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve for the reintroduction of the North American Buffalo (*Bison bison*).

BACKGROUND:

The tallgrass prairie once covered Illinois in an ocean of grass. These diverse and productive ecosystems put down deep, stubborn roots and resisted settlement until the invention of the steel plow in the 1830s. Rapidly, the prairie disappeared from the landscape, ultimately leaving Illinois with less than a tenth of a percent of its original 22 million acres of prairie.

Restoring tallgrass prairie has been one of the primary goals of the District. Currently the District is converting about 250 acres of agriculture to prairie annually. Restoration is a hands-on process to manage and maintain the diversity once present. Key to the historic management of the prairie was ecological disturbance, primarily driven by two factors: fire and grazing. Fire has been reintroduced by staff, but the grazing component is still missing. Bison were one of the engineers of the prairie, but suffered and even quicker decline than the prairie itself, and were fully extirpated from the state in the early 1800s.

Conservation efforts to preserve the North American bison have been wildly successful in the west, and more recently have proven to be successful east of the Mississippi River as well. The District has also completed a multi-year pilot project at Aurora West Forest Preserve. Over a 5-year period (2018-2023), cattle were used to simulate bison and demonstrated that our rebuilt grasslands can function following the introduction of a properly stocked grazing species.

In fall 2024, the District built a fence to enclose 32 acres of restored tallgrass prairie with the intent to reintroduce bison to the landscape. In June 2025, the District released a request for proposals to seek a partner organization interested in a regenerative bison grazing collaboration.

The only proposal submitted was from the American Indian Center (AIC) in partnership with Ruhter Bison. AIC is the nation's first urban Native center, founded in 1953. AIC serves all Native people thorough a variety of programs, including Traditional Ecological Knowledge programs designed to maintain connections to traditional lifeways and a food sovereignty program that teaches gardening, foraging and traditional foods as tools for healing.

Ruhter Bison has extensive experience managing bison herds for conservation purposes, including a herd on McHenry County Conservation District property. They will handle the day-to-day care of the herd, ensuring animal health and safety.

The proposed license agreement with AIC calls for a three-year term with the potential for up to four renewal options. Initially, there will be between 6-12 bison within the Burlington herd, with the potential for expansion as the fenced in area grows in size. As bison owners, AIC will assume liability for the herd. Additionally, to help mitigate potential risks, District staff alongside representatives from AIC and Ruhter Bison have collaborated on a detailed incident response plan outlining emergency response procedures.

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

The financial terms of license call for a grazing fee of \$10/acre. For the initial 32-acre pasture, this brings the total fee to \$320 annually.

RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends the Committee approve the license agreement with American Indian Center for the use of portions of Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve, for bison grazing.

ATTACHMENTS:

License Agreement
Management Plan
Incident Response Procedure
License Map