

What is an Interpretive Plan?

Since an Interpretive Plan is based on the things that make an institution unique they are as diverse as the institutions themselves, making them hard to define. **As you read these examples think of how they relate to the Champaign County Forest Preserve District?**

- An Interpretive Plan is a document that **guides all “conversations” with the visitors** (programming, signs, website, brochures, informal exchanges, etc.) Within the document one can find a breakdown of visitor types, educational goals, and the types of “conversations” used most by the institution.
- An Interpretive Plan is the **story of a place**. It combines images and factual information, but also **stories** and educational content, along with a physical setting. **Its purpose is to orient and inspire the visitor by guiding the design and content of educational programs, publications and signs, exhibits and facilities.**
- An Interpretive Plan provides: **Structure & direction** to projects (short & long-term), ensuring resources are used efficiently; District -wide objectives that **keep everyone on the same page** and their **ideas on track**; A reference that keeps all interpretation **relevant, appealing & accessible to the public.**

CCFPD Interpretive Plan

It is a document but also an idea that outlines themes, through which the natural and cultural stories of Champaign County can be told. By fusing the natural and cultural stories under broad themes the Interpretive Plan provides a guide to understanding how these stories interact with and impact each other - thus, telling *the* story of Champaign County.

Interpretive Planning and the Visitor

An Interpretive Plan guides the visitor experience through different forms of conversations (programming, signs, website, brochures, informal exchanges, etc.) Ideally, it can even influence visitors’ behavior, feelings, and thoughts about the preserves, their community, or the world. **What do you do that guides the visitor experience?**

Effective Interpretation Can . . .

Provide basic information

Educate

Inspire stewardship/
change behavior

Every site that welcomes visitors should have a process by which to design and improve the visitor experience. An Interpretive Plan assures that there is a **thread** that ties all sites, features, and employees together. The **story** includes factual information, but the emphasis of interpretation is to **provoke and engage a visitor in a direct connection to and appreciation of the site.**

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Stories help people **identify and understand their natural and cultural resources and the efforts of the Forest Preserve District.** Visitors will understand the purpose of the preserves through the stories we tell. Since visitors are members of Champaign County’s cultural and natural communities, they will feel ownership of its resources and the forest preserves’ facilities because they will **see themselves as a part of the story.** In turn, they will **support the District’s efforts** by visiting more often, taking care of the facilities while visiting, or taking action in it’s favor within the community.

Concerns among employees

As with anything new within the District there can be apprehension and confusion among employees. It is best to address ALL concerns no matter how minor or major as early on in the process as possible. Below are a few answers to very common concerns that have already been voiced by District employees.

- **The plan will not be forgotten about.** The education staff is working to fine tune it and has already applied it to programming.
- It is the **perfect time to implement such a plan.** Communication within the District has improved greatly over the last couple years and there are a lot of innovative thinkers that are open to change for the betterment of the District.
- **The plan will not create extra work.** Its purpose within the District is to raise awareness and help staff understand how theirs and other departments are equally important to building positive relationships with the public and contributing to the success of the Forest Preserve District.
- **The plan is part of everyone's daily routine.** Everyone who interacts with the public, prepares things for the public, or supports those who do is an interpreter whose actions affect visitors' experiences.

What are some of your specific concerns? Do these statements alleviate any of them?

How to make it work

The Interpretive Plan is not something that will take effect on a specific date. It is a process that will continue to evolve for years to come. With each new experience the District will find different situations in which to implement it and unexpected things that weaken it. There are small steps to take now to prepare for any potential changes that the future may bring.

Programming is a big part of the plan. The education staff is developing it and will implement it, and the plan will come through strongest in their daily routines. However, members of the non-education staff have a part. Here's how you can help...

#1 way: Raise your awareness. Just by reading this brochure you have participated in implementing the interpretive plan. Take the extra couple minutes a day to make yourself aware of what is happening within the District.

#2 way: Step into someone else's shoes. Visitors experience the forest preserves in many different ways, from fishing, to hiking, to playing a round of golf, to participating in a public program. **Think of how your job and other jobs in the District have an impact on the visitors' experience when they are enjoying the forest preserves on their own or participating in a program.** Each of these experiences is equally important to building a relationship with the public, just as every staff member is equally important to creating that experience. **It is essential that everyone identify the ways their job contributes and understands how other departments contribute as well.**

#3 way: Voice your opinions and concerns! The more you participate the more ownership you will feel, the less confusing it will be later and the more representative the plan and execution of it will be of the entire District.

Who benefits & how?

The Interpretive Plan is not about "buying in." It is more about raising your awareness. How many times, at work or in the community have you been asked about the Forest Preserve District and not known the answer? Or, heard something you didn't know about the District from someone other than a coworker? As frustrated, confused, or embarrassed as you may feel in these situations, also consider the person who asked the question or made the comment, and how it reflects on the District?

You Benefit

It is up to you to establish how much you will be involved with the Interpretive Plan. The more you are aware that are happening around the preserves, the more positive impacts it will have on your daily work and relationships with coworkers.

How to raise your awareness

Pay attention to what's happening, but also to how you and everyone in the District interprets the preserves. routines differ, how are they similar and what kind of impact does it have on the visitor? If you are aware of the

- You can help concerned visitors understand, why trees are coming down and areas are being cleared
- When yours and another department have work to do in the same area you can avoid conflict if both departments understand the importance of each other's project, and compromise will be easier.
- When you're talking to a neighbor and they ask for suggestions on what to do with their grandchildren you can tell them about the amenities at each of the preserves or about a public program or exhibit you know about
- Next time you get an email about the interpretive plan, you will understand what it is and how to apply it

These are very general examples. As awareness grows you will see its positive impact in other places. Remember, awareness goes two ways. As you learn more about other departments make sure you are keeping them informed about your work.

What are some things that would help you raise yours and other's awareness?

CCFPD Benefits

Here's how the entire Forest Preserve District will benefit by using the Interpretive Plan to build relationships with the visitors...

The Champaign County Forest Preserve District develops a district-wide interpretive plan that fuses environmental and cultural education

"Conversations" with the public tell the story of Champaign County and the relationship of cultural and natural resources

Champaign County residents are able to identify and understand resources and see themselves as part of the story

Champaign County residents develop a feeling of ownership and a desire to become stewards of their resources

- Returning and new visitors will utilize the entire Forest Preserve District and its amenities more.
- Visitors will take the initiative to care for the forest preserves while visiting (following rules and respecting property)
- The Forest Preserve District will build respect, trust and a support base within the community.
- Everyone working under the same objectives, even though doing very different work, will lead to better communication and understanding among employees.

"My job is like a piece of fabric, when everyone begins to do their part I will feel the effects and the fabric will get stronger."
-CCFPD Employee