

Jackson Park Watch Statement

To the Meeting of the Chicago Park District Board of Commissioners

Wednesday, November 9, 2016

Brenda Nelms, JPW co-coordinator

Good afternoon Commissioners, President Ruiz, and Superintendent Kelly. I am Brenda Nelms, co-coordinator of Jackson Park Watch. Thank you for the opportunity to address you again.

Jackson Park Watch is dedicated to ensuring that plans and decisions about Jackson Park are developed through an inclusive and transparent process grounded in robust community engagement. The need for such a process has never been greater or more urgent. From its inception Jackson Park Watch has been concerned with the short-sightedness of the Park District in allowing a private entity, Project 120, to proceed with its plans for new structures and installations in the northern end of Jackson Park without regard for their impact on the character of park as a whole and also without regard for the possible nearby placement of the Obama Presidential Center.

The July announcement that the Obama Library will indeed be situated in Jackson Park has unleashed a deluge of additional plans aimed at transforming the park into a Southside tourist mecca. All of these special-interest initiatives—old and new, by Project 120 and by others—ignore the fact that Jackson Park is not a blank canvas and is not divided into discrete blocs on which new buildings or developments can be plopped willy-nilly. Jackson Park is an established park with a large and devoted constituency in the neighborhoods that border it (South Shore, Woodlawn and Hyde Park) and in the greater Southside and beyond. As special interests vie to modify the park for their own purposes, we should not lose sight of the importance and primacy of Jackson Park as a park for local users— a place to enjoy nature, to play, to gather with family and friends, to recreate.

Planning for Jackson Park must be approached carefully and holistically, and the voices of the local constituencies must be heard and honored before any changes are contemplated or decisions made. Project 120's installation of Sky Landing on Wooded Island has already brought new and unwelcome restrictions on users of that central core of the park, emphasizing that the need for an inclusive and transparent process grounded in robust community engagement has never been greater. We are at a point where prior plans should be set aside, and the conversation should begin anew to determine the future shape of Jackson Park. We urge you, Mr. Kelly and Commissioners, to remember that your primary commitment is to the children and families who use the park on a regular basis and depend on it for recreation and renewal and to implement a comprehensive and inclusive planning process immediately, before the special interests gobble up the park bite by bite.

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