

## **Serious questions related to the Yoko Ono installation on Jackson Park's Wooded Island**

### Process:

How it is possible that Yoko Ono's "Sky Landing," a permanent sculpture promoted by Project 120, can be installed in a public park without leaving any trace of a public process to assess community sentiment or environmental impact or any trace of a public agreement with the Chicago Park District?

### Precedent:

- Will this same secret process be used to construct the pavilion/music venue also promoted by Project 120?
- Are we looking at the beginning of a new Lucas-like pattern of wealthy parties and the Park District working out of the public eye to develop plans for major changes in our public parks, changes that are revealed to the public only when they are a done deal?

### Background:

Project 120's proposal for an installation by Yoko Ono was first revealed to the public at a meeting in Hyde Park in January 2015. No detail was provided then or in subsequent presentations in spite of questions from community members, yet we now know specific plans and preparations for the installation were already underway as early as 2013. The targeted area (along with the Osaka Japanese Garden) had been carefully excluded from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers GLFER Project, a multi-year, \$8M initiative to restore the important migratory bird, fish and wildlife habitat on the Wooded Island. In mid-2015, the Park District created new curved earthen mounds just west of what has been the entrance to the Osaka Japanese Garden that were advertised as the future home of "Sky Landing." Since early summer 2016, workers have been doing further site preparations including construction of the concrete base for the art piece, which will consist of 12 tall, polished-metal lotus "petals."

As Project 120 continued to issue announcements without details about the coming installation, Jackson Park Watch (JPW), a community initiative dedicated to the principle of community engagement in major decisions about Chicago's public parks, attempted to get the missing information. When JPW submitted a FOIA request in April 2016 to the Park District seeking documents and agreements relating to "Sky Landing," the response was that the only agreement was a Memorandum Of Understanding concluded between Project 120 and the Park District in July 2014. The very existence of this MOU had come to light only in February 2016, as Robert Karr, president of Project 120, was persistently questioned at a public meeting about his authority to develop multiple proposals for changes in Jackson Park and other parks. Obtained from the Park District by JPW after repeated requests in March, the previously secret MOU has several striking elements:

- It creates a "civic public-private partnership" between Project 120 and the Park District.
- It gives Project 120 effective authority to implement changes for the duration of the MOU, July 2014-August 2017, in an area newly labeled 'The Garden of the Phoenix' and defined as "one continuous area from the south side of the Museum of Science and Industry to the north end of the Wooded Island."

- Although it contains detailed information about the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers GLFER project which Project 120 helped to fund, its appendices offer only a very general description of plans for a ‘Phoenix Pavilion and Music Court’ and an even more general reference to plans for a sculpture by Yoko Ono.

Recognizing that the MOU did not address any of the most important questions about the Yoko Ono installation, JPW coordinators have appeared at the monthly Park District Board of Commissioners meeting in June, July, and August to express concerns and request responses. At the August meeting, the Commissioners were asked:

Who will own the sculpture? Who is paying for it and for its installation? Who will maintain it? At whose expense? What are the plans for the new space that will be created? How will they impact the adjacent nature sanctuary?

There has been no response. Extensive searching online has likewise failed to uncover answers to these questions.

JPW has submitted additional FOIA requests to the Park District (August 5 and 17), still seeking the missing information. While the Park District has released the access permits awarded to the construction firms, as of August 24 it has not produced a formal agreement or authorization for this installation. This is an apparent conflict with CPD’s policy as stated on its website: *The installation of any art work or sculpture, whether on a temporary or permanent basis, requires a Standard Access Permit. Please note, approval for the display of the art and an agreement regarding the art are also required.*

The lack of a transparent process and of community engagement is alarming and establishes a dangerous precedent. The disturbing implication of the Park District responses to date is that the 2014 Memorandum of Understanding, concluded without public knowledge or input, gives Robert Karr approval to implement Project 120’s plans in Jackson Park without community engagement, without any assessment of the potential environmental impact of a well-attended tourist attraction or event space on the adjacent Paul H. Douglas Nature Sanctuary, and indeed without even any public decision-making by the Park District’s own Board of Commissioners. The further implication of this particular case is that a person or group with sufficient means can have a piece of art of its choosing – or perhaps a pavilion or music venue of its design – installed in a public park if so desired. There is thus ample reason for grave concern and serious questions.

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