

Preservation Chicago

Citizens advocating for the preservation of Chicago's historic architecture

Brad Suster January 04, 2018

President

Jacob Kaplan Ms. Eleanor Gorski, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Planning and Development, Historic Preservation Division

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Mr. John Sadler, Chicago Department of Transportation

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Ms. Abby Monroe, Coordinating Planner, Department of Planning and Development

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Re: Obama Presidential Center -Jackson Park/Midway Plaisance-Section 106 Hearings and Comments, addressing the Area of Potential Effect-APE, Roadway Improvements and SLFP-South Lakefront Plans.

Board of Directors

Cathie Bond

Dear Ms. Gorski, Mr. Sadler and Ms. Monroe,

Stuart Berman

Emily Nielsen

Joyce Jackson

Thank you for the opportunity to both participate and address issues and on the Area of Potential Effect-APE and road changes impacting Frederick Law Olmsted's historic Jackson Park, the Midway Plaisance and nearby Washington Park, all part of Chicago's legacy Olmsted Parks.

Jack Spicer

Andrea Reed

Susannah Ribstein

Charles Vinz

As Preservation Chicago is a Consulting Party to the project, and part of the Section 106 Hearings on these National Register Resources, we share many of the concerns and impacts stated in the December 1, 2017 meeting. These public comments were also reflected in prior public meetings, relating to the proposed plans and the impact of the Obama Presidential Center and the proposed merger of the two golf courses into one at Jackson Park and South Shore Cultural Center. We are also in agreement with many of the letters received on this topic from other organizations. Specifically, these include letters from Openlands, Jackson Park Watch, Landmarks Illinois and Friends of the Parks to name several, on the inclusion of additional lands added to the APE-Area of Potential Effect, additions to historic features, concerns about the framework plans and variations between 1999 documents, and the absence of actual plans.

While recent Section 106 Meetings, began in December 2017, have initially focused on the APE, roadway plans for Jackson Park and the Midway Plaisance, and the potential negative and adverse impact on these important parklands, we wanted to take this opportunity to express a variety of concerns relating to these proposed plans and concepts. We also would like to address the larger impact of the Obama Presidential Center on historic Jackson Park and the adjacent Midway, in addition

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to other roadways, which will experience an adverse impact, most notably, South Lake Shore Drive and Cornell Drive.

We are of the opinion that these plans are all interrelated and therefore wanted to express our concerns in a direct letter to help understand some of the reasons we have arrived at various conclusions. It is our hope that this will be the most helpful way of expressing concerns about perspective changes to these legacy parks as proposed, and to encourage a more sensitive approach and therefore better outcomes.

We are very concerned about the potential destruction of cultural treasures, impacting cultural, architectural, historical and natural resources, some of which are listed in the National Register of Historic Places documents. Below are listed a wide range of critical features of the park, which may be severely impacted and may or may not have been sensitively considered, prior to the planning of the Obama Presidential Center-OPC and the adjacent buildings and roadways

1.) Potential negative impact on the Frederick Law Olmsted and Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot Design: The preliminary proposed plan as presented, appears to radically change both the historic design and impact of both Jackson Park and the Midway Plaisance, in both the renderings and maps, and appears to reflect a certain insensitivity to the work of Olmsted and his firm. If this project were to proceed forward, as reflected in the preliminary plans relating to road reconfigurations, historic roadway closures and the overall concept to remove 20-plus-acres of parkland for the Obama Presidential Center, this would perhaps represent the most disastrous destruction of one of the most seminal landscapes of Frederick Law Olmsted.

Olmsted and his firm are recognized as one of the world's most important Landscape Architects. The designs of the firm are considered "public works of art," of the highest artistic standards and quality, and employing the "restorative power of landscape for ordinary people," in the words of Olmsted. The South Parks System of Jackson Park, the Midway Plaisance and Washington Park, designed by Olmsted, is one of the firm's most important commissions, alongside with Central Park and Riverside Park in New York City. The Olmsted parks of Chicago represent the very best-of-the-best, and are truly world treasures. Any type of major impact and heavy-handed changes, would be considered adverse changes to these delicate park designs and landscapes, and would result in a major loss of these parks as an Olmsted design and together this would be considered tragic. The two combined proposals for the Jackson Park will most likely modify, impact and change almost every portion and corner of this historic park.

2.) Proposed changes to the Midway Plaisance and adjoining gateway into Jackson Park in the OPC plans may result in the potential loss and irreparable damage of the nexus and the important and delicate link, connecting Jackson Park to the Midway, and extending to Washington Park to the west. This is one of the most important features of these richly composed and articulated parks, along with the relationships and connections between these various components, which are very much a part of these Olmsted world treasures.

3.) The proposed removal of the May McAdams Perennial Garden, dating from the 1930s, designed by a woman and perhaps the Chicago Park District's first female Landscape architect. This is also the site of the 1893 Women's Building, by Sophia Hayden, one of the first large exposition buildings, designed exclusively to showcase Women's achievements, and the only building at the Chicago World's Fair designed by a woman. This is an amazing legacy and so many issues relevant to the Woman's

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Movement, and the great achievements of Women, including Suffrage efforts, were linked to this building and site. The building hosted the likes of Susan B. Anthony, Dr. Caroline Winslow and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in addition to Jane Addams and Bertha Palmer and with works of art and murals by Mary Cassatt. This potential loss of this garden, along with the permanent foundations of the Women's building, located below the soil line, along with other features and memorials, would be a great loss to these many feats and this wonderful story. This is to all be replaced in the OPC plans with a water-retention and drainage pond, as the entire site will be clear-cut and re-graded with excavating equipment in the existing proposed schemes for this site.

4.) The removal of Cornell Drive, which is an original Frederick Law Olmsted feature of the park, noted as "West Drive" in historical plans and documents. This was drastically widened and expanded in the 1960s, with the loss of hundreds of trees and once marked by citizen protests to protect them--all to add additional lanes and to express traffic through the park, which would be considered a misstep today. However, this was a former carriage drive and still retains its historic path, which could be again narrowed to the proportions of a carriage drive and to further calm speeding traffic. It is also thought that removing this drive in the proposed OPC plans would greatly enhance the park and free portions from automobile traffic. However, the experience of driving through a beautiful tree-lined park is also very pleasant for many drivers and the Chicago Parks are really for everyone and much like Lake Shore Drive is a beautiful experience, even if you're in an automobile. Certainly improvements and restoration of the roadway can occur, which would also greatly improve the experience of the park from a vehicle. However, this roadway should remain as a historic and critical Olmsted feature of Jackson Park.

5.) The potential negative impacts on other adjacent and nearby Olmsted roadways and pastoral drives in Jackson Park. This would include a major expansion of South Lake Shore Drive to accommodate the closing of Cornell Drive (formerly West Drive in the Olmsted Plans for Jackson Park) and a reconstruction of that road to new Federal and modern highway standards and regulations, further destroying the character of that amazing roadway, which has "a pastoral boulevard character" as it meets Jackson Park and the Lake Michigan Shoreline. This expansion could negatively impact, modify and destroy a very significant feature of the park, while also potentially further decreasing pedestrian access to Lake Michigan and 57th Street Beach, with this widening and additional traffic now diverted to this roadway. This area of the park is one of Olmsted's most significant relationships, between the park and lagoons and the Lakefront and should not be further modified. There is also the possibility with these changes, that the 57th Street Beach may be physically impacted and reduced in size by proposed modifications and a widening of Lake Shore Drive.

6.) Impact of a large incongruous and awkward parking garage squeezed into the middle of the Midway, at the gateway entry to Jackson Park, with the rearranging of existing streets, and access to the proposed above-ground facility. This is all paired with the visual discourse of an above-ground parking facility, which will upset the integrity of the Midway, which connects both Jackson Park and Washington Parks.

7.) The impact on Promontory Point, with possible changes and modifications to South Lake Shore Drive, and its possible widening to accommodate automobile traffic from the proposed closing of Cornell Drive and other streets and former carriage drives throughout the park.

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8.) Removal of sacred greenspaces, small meadows, and gardens, which are also a vital part of the Olmsted legacy of trees, which often help to form these spaces. Olmsted cited that the trees are very important and among his favorite things, and this site has many old growth trees, some predating the park and reflecting the wetlands that existed where the Lakefront met the marshy soils of Chicago. He also advocated for *"the respect of the genius of a place...noting every site has ecologically and spiritually unique qualities"* and *"...to create an unconscious process that produced relaxation"* to the viewer and the experience of the parks. These parks and this park were for everyone, without distraction or *"distracting elements"*, which Olmsted fought continuously, until perfect. The proposed modifications and OPC tower in Jackson Park will certainly be a *"distracting element"*. The idea of an Olmsted park as a place to regenerate oneself in nature, especially in a large industrial city like Chicago, is reflected in his quotation--*"It is one great purpose of the Park to supply to the hundreds of thousands of tired workers, who have no opportunity to spend their summers in the country, a specimen of God's handiwork that shall be to them, inexpensively, what a month or two in the White Mountains or in the Adirondacks is, at great cost, to those in easier circumstances."*

9.) The impact on the historical and very important view-sheds and vistas throughout Jackson Park, and on the Midway with this proposal and larger development of the OPC. This project will impact many perspectives and view-sheds from most every direction, and becoming a predominant feature of the park. Olmsted is said to have redesigned the park to accommodate the Palace of Fine Arts, later known as the Field Museum of Natural History until 1922, and then becoming the (Rosenwald) Museum of Science and Industry to present day, as the primary feature of the park. The Museum building, with its symmetrical plan is also visually centered at the park's north end and framed by 57th Street and Cornell Drive, which is proposed to be removed, further unbalancing the original vision, centered within these perimeters by historic carriageways and drives. The proposed tower and OPC would further adversely impact that vision and of course is off-center and off-alignment with Jackson Park, the Midway and would be an asymmetrical feature within a delicately balanced park.

10.) Possible impact of both the Obama Presidential Center Tower, plaza, outbuildings and garage, on the migratory-fly-zone of birds and other wildlife, which use the parks and specifically the long Midway Plaisance expanse, as it has direct access to Lake Michigan from Washington Park and others areas to the west. The area of the Midway proposed for the garage is also a place for waterfowl, which further encourages wildlife and nature in the parks and the Midway.

11.) A tree-cut or loss of approximately 500 trees for just the 20 plus acres of space for the Obama Presidential Center. An additional 2,500 trees, some old-growth trees are to be lost for a reconfiguration of the proposed golf courses and fairways at Jackson Park and South Shore Cultural Center. This may not even include the cutting of trees and the loss of greenspace to further widen South Lake Shore Drive, if Cornell Drive is to be closed and the potential widening of South Stony Island Avenue and both park loss and potential tree cut for this widening and expansion.

It also seems a bit peculiar for a large city like Chicago, that such a proposal would reduce two separate golf courses, with 27 holes and greens, and make one golf course of 18 holes and greens from two. Instead, we should be restoring the two golf courses—the Jackson Park course said to be the oldest course, west of the Allegany's, and instead increase the number of golf courses to three available facilities, with a professional-grade Tiger Woods course elsewhere. Perhaps this could be located on the old South Works Steel Site, along the Lakefront, which would extend the Lakefront park system along the

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newest section of Lake Shore Drive, South of 79th Street-Rainbow Beach. This would help to both preserve and activate recreation and additional greenspaces to the South and have a series of courses for all levels of golfing, from beginners, to intermediate and to a professional level. Such an idea may also positively impact the South Chicago community.

12.) Potential loss and damage to the Nature Sanctuary at the South Shore Cultural Center, which may greatly impact the habitat of many plant and animal species.

13.) In addition to the points above, the disturbance and possible destruction of archeological material comprised of the World's Columbian Exposition/Chicago World's Fair, including foundations of many exhibition halls, by a who's-who of architects that designed these structures. These include the permanent masonry foundations of the Women's Building and the Children's Building, a first of its kind and designed by architect, Sophia Hayden—a woman architect for a Women's Building and dating from 1892-1893. This was a most important event for both Chicago and American, celebrating the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America, by Christopher Columbus. It was an event that was on the world stage and was as important to America, as its European counterparts in London in 1851 and Paris in 1889. This cannot be understated as to its importance, relating to architecture, urban cities, planning, in addition to the technologies that appeared in the many large-scale and voluminous exhibition halls of the Fair.

14.) Addressing the existing neglect and deferred maintenance to crumbling pedestrian paths, numerous park buildings, shelters and features, including the Columbia/Clarence Darrow Bridge, the "Golf Shelter" and Comfort Station, near 67th and Lake Shore Drive, the Iowa Building and other features, which have long ago deserved the attention of the Chicago Park District and the City of Chicago. These should still be restored and addressed, in addition to the many buildings of the South Shore Cultural Center, some which are in better shape than others, like the stables and connecting gatehouse. This reexamination of the parks, is an opportunity to address these issues with or without the addition of the OPC and the proposed changes to the golf courses.

Therefore we at Preservation Chicago feel the impact on the world-renowned legacy parks, of Jackson Park, the Midway, Washington Park and the Chicago Lakefront, would experience a tremendous adverse impact to these very important National Register sites.

We would therefore recommend at this time that the Obama Presidential Center, which we graciously welcome as another great Chicago institution and museum, consider a relocation to another nearby site, which would have a lesser impact on these amazing legacy parks. Perhaps there are equally close sites in proximity to the existing University of Chicago Campus, with its many resources, libraries and museums. This institution would thereby build upon and contribute to those existing resources.

We have also identified several of these potential sites, owned by the University of Chicago, and extending from the Washington Park Neighborhood at the Green Line, which would be most beneficial to the community, to the University of Chicago Campus. Other sites, fronting, but not on, the Midway Plaisance, at both 60th and Cottage Grove Avenue (which is currently a paved parking lot), and to a site just west of and adjacent to The Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts (another paved parking lot), which would also place these buildings, also by the same architect, next to one another

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and fronting the Midway. This would allow for a cohesive architectural vision by the same architectural firm, while grouping resources close together. These alternate sites also have ample parking facilities nearby, so a new garage structure would not be required. Perhaps such a site, with the aid of the University of Chicago, could also sponsor the return of the "Obama Presidential Library and Archives concept," which would set a very high standard and level of research, which could further this as a destination for both scholars, researchers and tourists alike.

We hope that these suggestions are helpful and that they may positively impact future plans and decisions relating to the sacred qualities and features of these Olmsted Parks—a true work of art, by one of the great masters of Landscape Architecture.

Sincerely,

Ward Miller

Ward Miller, Executive Director

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