

Candidate Name: Bennett Lawson
Candidate for Ward #: 44
Campaign Name: Friends of Bennett Lawson
Campaign Address: 908 W Belmont Unit 1A

Phone: 7345606321
E-Mail: info@bennettfor44.com
Campaign Manager Name: Joshua Kaufman

A completed questionnaire must be received by Friday, January 27 to have answers distributed to our stakeholders as early voting starts. Please return to rachelbr@fotp.org.

ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND AND PRIORITIES RELATED TO PARKS

A. Briefly describe any accomplishments or projects you have been involved with related to parks.

Response: As Chief of Staff to Alderman Tom Tunney for the past 15 years, I was heavily involved with the development of the AIDS garden, a park that was built out of existing space in homage to the historic belmont rocks area. I was also involved in the development of Donahue park, which was built on a new park space. We have directed OSIF towards new greenspace both in the ward and citywide as staff of the Special Events, Cultural Affairs, and Recreation Committee.

B. Are you planning to introduce legislation or initiatives to address any environmental justice issues? Do you have particular environmental priorities, park programming priorities, or see connections with other priorities for your community? If so, please identify those here.

Response:

I have worked on updating our construction codes to include more efficient materials and encourage electric furnaces.

We continue to divert less than 10% of our residential waste to recycling facilities. As Alderman, I would introduce an ordinance that works to encourage businesses and residents to recycle. I would support the idea of fully electric light rail/electric rail to replace the express lanes on Lake Shore Drive.

C. Chicago's motto is Urbs in Horto (City in a Garden). In the most recent *We Will Chicago* planning process, park discussions were thinly and inadequately spread across all the pillars and not a central focus of planning. How will you prioritize parks or demonstrate that parks are critical to healthy, thriving communities and the entire city and its residents?

Response: Green spaces are integral to the spirit of the 44th ward. As alderman, I will not overlook their importance throughout the planning process.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

Below are 11 topics related to parks. Please share your thoughts and policies on each subject using the list of bulleted questions as a guide.

1) EQUITY PLAN FOR CHICAGO'S PARKS

Forty years ago, On May 13, 1983, the [Chicago Park District entered into a consent decree with the federal government](#), resulting from a three-year investigation and a 1982 federal lawsuit addressing

racial discrimination in the allocation of resources within the park district. The decree sought to promote equal and non-discriminatory treatment of Black and Latino communities by establishing rigorous and detailed systems, procedures and schedules that could assure equity, responsiveness, and transparency for these neighborhoods and their parks. It was in effect for six years, and Friends of the Parks registered our displeasure when the court lifted the order even though the Chicago Park District was not in full compliance with the terms of the Consent Decree.

Many other large cities have a written equity plan or framework to guide work for their park district, but Chicago has no such plan or codified standards despite documented racial inequity in park access and resources per our 2018 State of the Parks report. Public parks on the South and West Sides of Chicago often have less access to building facilities, fewer programs, and less investment in parks.

- What policies do you support to address this inequity and improve the park-going experience in South and West Side neighborhood parks?

I would definitely support a formal plan to address inequity in park access and to improve the park-going experience in all neighborhoods. This would inevitably require additional funding, though. Currently, we have to raise at least 1/3 of the funds, obtain a sponsor, and sometimes spend menu money to get green space projects off the ground. It would be ideal for more money to be allocated to improving parks on the south and west sides of the city so the burden of fundraising does not lie too heavily on the alderman and residents of those communities.

RESPONSE EQUITY PLAN FOR CHICAGO'S PARKS:

2) GREEN SPACE AND CREATING NEW PARKS

While more than [98% of Chicagoans](#) live within a 10-minute walk of green space or a playground, **Chicago lags behind most other high-density cities in park acreage per capita and total city acreage committed to public parkland (9%)**. Residents' access to recreational amenities and facilities they hope to find in their parks is not equitable across the city. The West Side of the city has the least parks or green space. While most parkland is on the city's South Side, these parks receive less capital investment and programmatic funding than North Side parks and much of it is undeveloped or underdeveloped brownfield sites that do not yet support much or any public use. These facts demonstrate that Chicago continues to experience systemic racial inequity when it comes to accessing or creating new green spaces.

- How will you prioritize the creation of new green spaces and parks in your ward? How will you include the community in the planning and development process?

I will create an Arts, Parks, and Green Council in the 44th Ward - a group of residents with real power to suggest and have their voices heard on issues of sustainability and beautification in the community. This council would have input on open spaces, public art, community gardens, and other improvements to public amenities.

- What metrics or factors will you use to determine which communities should receive new green space? What equity considerations will you include in your assessment?

10-minute walk score is an important measure for us. We also need to be creative with options like we were with Donahue, it was an old factory before we redeveloped it.

- The 10-minute Trust for Public Land “walk score” mentioned above includes Chicago Park District spaces (parks, playlots, and beaches) and any green space in the city, including Forest Preserves, spaces managed by NeighborSpace, the 19 boulevards managed by the Chicago Department of Transportation, and privately owned public spaces (POPs). With all these various groups stewarding green spaces, coordination and comprehensive planning can be difficult and complex. How will you sort through the different managers to coordinate increasing access to parkland and green spaces in your ward?

As chief of staff, I have worked with all of these partners before and have experience navigating multiple interests. I will use this experience to coordinate additional parkland and green space plans for our ward.

- The Illinois state standard is 10 acres of green space for every 1000 residents. As urban planning and development occur in your ward, how will you ensure there is adequate green space for the community to thrive?

I will prioritize the preservation and creation of green spaces. From the government side, we will continue to be creative and find new options for green space development. We will also encourage our business community to incorporate private green space into their developments. Then Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center has been a great success in terms of private green space.

- Developers and the City have often tried to assert that publicly owned private spaces (POPs) will always be accessible to the public, just as if they belonged to the Chicago Park District. Historically POPs have not always been equally accessible to all residents as the private owner ultimately controls the space. What is your vision for ensuring true public access to new green spaces being created in mega-developments and other planned developments?

Again, the hospital has been a success for us, and it has been a welcoming space for the public. Additionally, a lot of our schools are park campuses, which are open to the public when not in use. As alderman, in addition to maintaining adequate public spaces, I will ensure that publicly owned private spaces remain open and welcoming to the whole community.

- As the Chicago Park District plans construction of new facilities (pickleball courts, basketball courts, fieldhouses, etc.), how will you allocate resources to address the realities of racial inequity in Chicago and historic disinvestment and neglect of some communities? How will you include the community in determining what facilities and amenities are needed?

We don't have full control citywide from here in the 44th, but we will work with our colleagues in other wards to ensure the best outcomes. We are committed to racial equity and will exercise any power we have to move towards a better world with real solutions. Any project we propose or invest in will have input from all communities in the 44th ward.

- Golf courses count as green space and as park acres for residents, but the use is restricted to those playing a particular sport and paying a fee for service. What initiative do you support to make such spaces dual-purpose or to expand usage to more residents?

Recreation amenities are important to have, maybe golf courses in particular shouldn't count as green space in the same way as a multi-purpose green space.

- As Chicago deindustrializes and closes former industrial sites, like General Iron and Damen Silos, large swaths of land and former buildings can be re-imagined and re-developed. For example, with the recent closing of General Iron in Lincoln Park and the development of Lincoln Yards, neighborhood advocates have asked for the site to be used as part of a new North Branch Park and Preserve. The preserve could expand access to the river for the whole city and decrease the green space deficit the community currently experiences and will get worse with the added residential density proposed for Lincoln Yards. How do you think comprehensively about the opportunity these sites and the transition across the city offers? How will you coordinate a vision across the city using these spaces to increase green space for all communities? How will you prioritize which neighborhoods or communities should experience development of these new de-industrialized green spaces first?

Green space should be a priority as we redevelop deindustrialized spaces. As mentioned above, Donahue was an old factory before being repurposed. This shows our commitment to incorporating green space into our future as a ward.

RESPONSE GREEN SPACE AND CREATING NEW PARKS:

3) LAKEFRONT

Chicago's lakefront is a gem of the city and our city is unique in preserving the lake for all people. Currently, 26 of the 30 miles are publicly available for use and protected for the public, but two miles to the north and south remain cut off from public parks, beaches, and paths.

- What policies do you support to ensure the lakefront remains free and clear for all Chicagoans to enjoy? Please consider both the preservation of space (such as the Lakefront Protection Ordinance and Public Trust Doctrine) and practices that affect use (such as facilities and policing).

We're not allowing any development on park property, including the lakefront. Amenities are important, but if there are proposed changes on the lakefront (i.e. AIDS garden), we will have full community input and a transparent process.

- What efforts do you support to increase access to the city's lakefront by pedestrians, transit riders, cyclists, and people using wheelchairs and other mobility supports?

I am a supporter of the Redefine the Drive project. I would also like to look into dedicated bus lanes or the development of a light rail on Lake Shore Drive. I would also love to look at options to bury the street and connect our neighborhoods to the lake.

RESPONSE LAKEFRONT:

4) ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE

In February 2020, Chicago declared a climate change emergency in response to severe storms and lakeshore erosion. Lakefront parks and beaches across the city suffer a battering of lake waves and the loss of sand and erosion at alarming rates. It is estimated that the storms of 2020 caused [\\$37 million in damages](#) to beaches and parks. Erosion, intense storms, and the failing of concrete revetments, metal girders and rock barriers installed by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have caused [4 beaches in Roger Park](#) to be washed away and closed; revealed infill at Rainbow Beach as sand was lost; resulted lake water levels reached the top of the stairs at Calumet Park Beach House; and led to the permanent closing of a third of the [Northerly Island walking path](#)—merely a year after it was opened in 2015.

The threat is only going to continue. Concrete, metal and rock barriers push higher water to unprotected places. Lake levels have always fluctuated, but scientists believe lake levels will continue to trend higher. Regardless of lake level, the increased severity of storm surges due to climate change place our [shoreline communities at greater risk](#) of flooding and damage.

Nature-based solutions are a resilient, long-term, cost-effective method to manage the impact of climate change along the lake and across the city. This approach uses natural ecosystems to provide protection such as wetlands for flood mitigation; trees and prairie spaces to combat the heat island effect; and mangroves to reduce the impact of waves, storm surge, and coastal erosion. These ecosystems also soften climate impacts, such as extreme weather, and reduce climate pollution by capturing carbon dioxide from the air and sequestering it in plants and soils.

Parkland and beaches are already a nature-based solution. The sand, soil, and plantings provide buffering and absorption that helps manage the fluctuation in lake levels and more frequent and severe storms. These green spaces furnish lakefront with recreational or contemplative areas and habitats for humans and wildlife to enjoy.

- How will you support the preservation or expansion of parkland, native plants, and healthy, mature trees and new tree planting across the city to combat climate change impacts that affect the shoreline and inland communities?

We will keep everything we have, we are not selling off any parkspace. I am a supporter of expanded parkspace and new tree planting, and we will continue to implement these preservation and expansion solutions wherever possible.

RESPONSE ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE:

5) COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PARK ADVISORY COUNCILS

About 200 of Chicago's over 600 parks, beaches, playlots, and playgrounds have recognized Park Advisory Councils (PACs), resident groups of committed volunteers who support their parks through

volunteerism, fundraising and other activities. Many PACs want influence over programs and maintenance and decisions about how parks will be used, but in reality, many feel left out of those decisions. At times, new permits are handed out for large events or art installations and PAC members or leadership don't find out until the event is underway or changes are being made to the park.

- Across the city there is no required or standard process around public notice and community input for park projects. How will you make sure that the public is informed and engaged in development, capital improvements, urban planning, large event or space rentals, and park planning decisions in your ward?
- How will you engage with Park Advisory Councils in urban planning, budgeting, funding decisions, considering capital improvement, determining park programming, and deciding what events or installations are placed in parks in your ward?
- How will you support the formation or the rebuilding of Park Advisory Councils in your ward?

RESPONSE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PARK ADVISORY COUNCILS:

6) PARK PRIVATIZATION AND REVENUE

The Park District generates most of its income from property taxes, and over the last decade, its share of those taxes has declined from 6.1% to 4.7%. The average property tax unit pays \$260 towards the Park District's budget.

To supplement income, the Chicago Park District has increased revenue generating activity – raising fees for harbor and golf courses; issuing permits and renting out parks for private festivals; contracting with more concessionaires or other vendors; adding billboard or advertising; renting space for Amazon lockers; increased renting out park buildings and facilities as special event spaces. Some of these activities close off parkland and public facilities for weeks during the summer and over popular weekends, damage park facilities, and create a distraction for park users who seek tranquility or a natural oasis. While some renters and permit holders repair park damage, it takes months for vegetation to regrow or capital improvements to be finished, impeding park use far beyond the closures.

Some of the most notable examples of these revenue generating activities have been new contracts with Lollapalooza, the NASCAR race planned for 2023, and mega-festivals in Douglass Park. Residents across the city cite a feeling that parks have been commercialized and are no longer public, community spaces for people.

- As park district spaces have refocused on revenue-generating outside events, many community partners and programs have been booted from park district buildings and grounds, or can no longer afford to use the space. What policies do you support to prioritize the use of park space for residents and community groups over revenue generating activities and improve community engagement by private groups seeking to operate for profit in public parks?

NASCAR and other large events and festivals should've gone through the council. These projects, in general, need to be subject to community and council approval. We should prioritize community-oriented events and community input for use of parkspace.

- The income from these events does not go to a specific park, but rather to the Park District budget as a whole, leaving some residents to feel their park bears the brunt of the burden without reaping benefits. How do we ensure the impact and benefits of these rental events or fees are spread equitably?

We need to mitigate the impact on the location that hosts an event, however, revenue should also be used to build a more equitable parks system citywide.

- In the need to find new funding sources or expand programming, the Park District often balances private or non-profit partners and community programming, users, or needs. At times the interests of these different park users can be at odds. One example is a private baseball program that would like to pay for and install new lights at [Welles Park](#), but some community members are opposed. How will you manage the competing interest of various stakeholders when money is involved?

We can often find solutions that work for everyone with good cooperation. For example, the Lincoln Park High School turf field – the high school put money into improving the park so it could be used for their lacrosse and soccer teams. Since completion, it has been open to the public when not in use of the high school. This has worked out for everyone, we need to balance all sides, and not be afraid to make adjustments.

- When permits are issued for large music festivals or events, like the NASCAR race, the Park District does not have to consult alderpeople, but the event requires resources and time from multiple city departments, such as the police department to manage crowds, CDOT to reorganize traffic, and Streets and Sanitation to clean up. What policies do you support to increase coordination between city agencies, community members, and the Park District when determining what large events happen in parks?

We need to be very wary of any privatization of public park spaces and review them on a case-by-case basis. In all public parks, the open space must be for everyone and every time there is a private use it must be well thought out and well maintained with input from the community directly impacted.

- To what extent should the Park District's budget rely on private, revenue generating events, vendors and concession stands, fees for service, advertisements (i.e. billboards), and renting the parks to for-profit groups?

All government budgets are supplemented somehow. I do not know the extent of their budget composition. We need to be reasonable with our reliance on private, revenue-generating events, and there needs to be community input.

RESPONSE PARK PRIVATIZATION AND REVENUE:

7) BUDGET PROCESS AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION

The Chicago Park District's annual budget process offers a public hearing, an online forum for input, and a vote at an open board meeting. It is questionable whether there is adequate space for resident input or sufficient power and influence ascribed to their input. Many park activists are unaware that the online forums exist or how they would have access them and they face barriers to attending the public meetings.

- The Chicago Park District should actively engage park stakeholders across the city in the budgeting process, particularly with the Capital Improvement Projects. Efforts should be made to understand and address any barriers to participation from historically disenfranchised populations. What will you do to help the Chicago Park District find ways to extend more budgetary control to the public and incorporate community participation into their annual budgets?

The Park District should be transparent, they should act as any other government agency, and include community input.

- Each year, the Park District accepts submissions for capital improvement requests from a variety of sources. More than one in three requests from elected officials are approved, while only about one in five requests from the public are approved. As an Alderman, how would you use your influence to support capital improvement requests for parks in your ward and across the city?

I will work with the people of the ward to make sure we are on the same page, we can pursue capital improvement to benefit the entire community.

- Park Advisory Councils have advocated for Menu Money, Tax Increment Financing District Funding, Capital Improvement Programs, Open Space Impact Fees, and Special Service Area Program Funding as resources to supplement Park District funding. As Alderman you have access to and influence over a variety of city funding streams to support projects in your ward. How will you use your influence to support investment and improvement of parks in your ward and the city? What funding priorities would you promote?

I will commit menu money, OSIF, and fundraise to fund investment and improvement of parks in the 44th ward.

RESPONSE BUDGET PROCESS AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION:

8) PARK ACCESSIBILITY, FACILITIES, & AMENITIES

In the South and West sides of the city, larger park or natural areas are not easily accessible by public transportation. Many parks and natural areas typically lack accessibility for people with disabilities, or only a portion are accessible. While some heavily-trafficked areas like the Lakefront trail may tend to have open and clean bathrooms, many other parks have dirty, locked, or no bathroom facilities. Without access to a bathroom, the time residents can spend or activities they can engage in at a park are limited. Some parks lack lights, clear parking spaces, signs at the entrance, multi-lingual signage or signage throughout to identify elements of the park. In some cases, roads leading into parks are blocked with gates and barricades at all hours.

- What steps will you take to ensure our parks, playlots, beaches, and trails are welcoming and accessible places for everyone?

Again, community input is a major priority of mine. The best way to foster inclusion is by listening to community input and not being hesitant to take action and make adjustments.

- Pet owners bring their dogs to parks, playlots, paths, and beaches across the city. Dogs can also be a barrier to other residents' enjoyment or a threat to wildlife. How will you engage with various points of views about dogs in parks?

We need more off-leash areas to designate space for dogs. This frees up other spaces where off-leash dogs are not permitted so the rules will not be broken as often. It is also an issue of enforcement, education, and signage.

- As the Chicago Park District plans improvement and maintenance of fieldhouses, playgrounds, and other recreation facilities, how will you prioritize resources based on historic disinvestment faced by some parks and communities? How will you include the community in the decision-making process? How will a commitment to racial equity impact your actions?

Parks in our ward are not faced with the same historical disinvestment problems as parks elsewhere in the city. We will encourage our colleagues to take action and we will continue to commit resources to citywide initiatives.

- Field houses across the city are often closed on weekends and evenings. These closures mean people lack access to bathrooms, staff assistance or programming. Similarly, park bathrooms outside field house are often locked, or many parks have no bathroom. What will you do to make sure park field houses and the resource they provide can reach more residents?

Bathrooms should be open as much as possible. It is harder for fieldhouses to open the doors because they need to be staffed in order to do so. We should be using all of our resources for programming as much as we can.

- Often, new construction developments are allowed to use developer-owned "publicly accessible" green spaces to satisfy open space requirements rather than Chicago Park District-controlled land. When private corporations dictate the development, management, and public access to green spaces, it seldom leads to park spaces desired by Chicago. These privately administered spaces are subject to different operating hours and rules than local parks. Additionally, when departments in the City government collaborate for new development or capital improvement to be "shared," the park users miss out on access or design of the space. An example is Whitney Young's Sports Complex, funded entirely with tax-increment financing. What is your vision to ensuring true public access to new green spaces, facilities, or amenities that are a funded with public dollars or promise public access during construction? How will you use your position to support that vision?

Privately funded spaces are born of a lack of public funds. We will put everything we can into raising and committing the funds necessary to fully-public spaces. Privately owned spaces should be welcoming to

the public, however, and we have been able to establish positive relationships to secure this vision in our ward so far.

RESPONSE PARK ACCESSIBILITY, FACILITIES, & AMENITIES:

9) PARK PROGRAMMING

Annually, more than 350,000 people participate through the Chicago Park District in thousands of sports, recreational, cultural, and environmental programs across the city. Yet the distribution of programs is often inequitable and mismatched, failing to meet the needs of local communities effectively. Even preliminary research indicates dramatic inequities across the city in the amount of programs and services offered. At times, programs feel dropped into a community without community input or research. In addition, the programs families are looking to for their health, cultural, and recreation may also be financially out of reach.

Work with my colleagues to bring programs into their communities. Youth programming vs. senior yoga.

Where processes existed under the 1983 Consent Decree to ensure equitably distributed and responsive programming, many parks now lack the programs that are culturally relevant and affordable.

- Parks can be essential resources for people of all ages in a community, especially because they offer classes, camps, pools, exercise equipment and facilities, and chances to socialize. What resources will you invest in parks to prioritize use by diverse populations – seniors, families and children, people with disabilities, and teenagers? How will you ensure park programming is culturally relevant to BIPOC communities that have experienced exclusion and disinvestment?

We will continue committing relevant resources to the physical and equitable improvements of our programs. The Arts, Parks, and Green Council will be a helpful tool in finding the most effective and efficient way to invest in culturally relevant programming.

- What will you do to support residents and community groups to have access to park space and programming for no or low cost?

See above. The goal of providing no or low-cost programming is a priority for us, and we are lucky to have an engaged community that prioritizes this goal as well.

- Parks across Chicago do not have the same access to sufficient, culturally relevant, and affordable programs or have space maintained to meet the needs of the community. What will you do to ensure equity in park programming and resources (facilities, maintenance, etc.) for parks in your ward and across Chicago, keeping in mind the historic underinvestment in West and South Side parks?

I think we need a more intentional, formal commitment to a citywide equity plan. I will encourage my colleagues to work with me on committing whatever we can to meet the needs of all communities.

- How will you include the community in program design and program offering in their parks to make sure it is sufficient, relevant, and affordable and to proactively account for external community problems related to public safety and violence?

As a steward for all members of the community, I will make sure that all voices are heard on this front. Relevant, intentional program design is important for a thriving parks community.

RESPONSE PARK PROGRAMMING:

10) SAFETY

Feelings of safety and security greatly shape how park spaces are experienced. While some park users feel vulnerable when parks are too empty, others want quiet, wide-open, empty spaces. Some fear gun violence, and others fear oppressive police presence. Some are worried about playground conditions, and others are worried about vandalism. Some want more lights or call boxes. All of these are important considerations as we address safety concerns.

In the summer of 2022, as a response to the death of Chicago teenager, a curfew was enacted at Millennium Park to restrict event access to the park for young residents not accompanied by an adult or attending a ticketed event. In multiple Listening Tour sessions in different parts of Chicago, we heard similar statements that represent a specific loss of access to park amenities after violence occurred in their parks. If the response to select instances of violence in parks is to close, restrict, or remove certain amenities, this seems like the beginning of a very dangerous trend of the Chicago Park District punishing entire communities for the actions of a few.

- How will you approach safety in a way that does not unfairly punish entire communities for the behavior of the few?

I have demonstrated my commitment to evidence-based solutions to public safety issues. I will create a Safe Streets Council to encourage robust resident participation in public safety in our community. This Council would not only have input into issues of policing and crime in the area but also to help inform discussions with 19th Police District leadership and the newly elected District Council representatives for the 19th District.

- How would you ensure residents of all ages can access public amenities while balancing concerns for public safety?

We need to make sure we have the resources necessary to respond to public safety threats, both violent and nonviolent. That's why I have been an advocate for both expanded officer hiring and a citywide expansion of the CARE pilot program to address nonviolent matters.

- What steps will you take or policies will you support to increase the public safety of Chicago's parks, playlots, playgrounds, paths, and beaches beyond increasing police presence?

Public safety is the number one issue on people's minds in Chicago, including in the 44th ward. Ensuring that people are not just safe in our parks, but that they *feel* safe in our parks is incredibly important, and it will take hard work at all levels and through various approaches to crime prevention. While our

department needs more officers, we do not want to simply increase police presence in our parks, which doesn't convey a feeling of safety. We need to focus on new, evidence-based solutions to make sure our residents feel safe wherever they are in the ward.

RESPONSE SAFETY:

11) PARK DISTRICT OVERSIGHT

- The Chicago Park District is not a department of the city government, but a separate governmental entity. However, the Chicago Park District's Board of Commissioners' members are nominated by the mayor and must be approved by the Committee on Special Events, Cultural Affairs and Recreation. What policies do you support to make sure nominees have **demonstrated relevant experience, background and skills sets related to parks?**

As I mentioned above, Parks District needs to operate more like other government agencies, with improved transparency and accountability.

- How will you use your role to provide oversight to the parks, playlots and beaches in your ward?

As alderman, I will be committed to accountability at all levels. This entails doing everything in my power to provide the best oversight possible to the parks, playlots, and beaches in my ward.

RESPONSE PARK DISTRICT OVERSIGHT: