

Obama must veto Chicago parkland for legacy library



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A legacy is only as sturdy as what it's built upon. That's why President Barack Obama needs to tell his well-heeled Chicago friends they're not doing him any favors.

His new tax proposal is just the latest evidence that Obama wants his presidency recalled for his efforts — successful or not — to help improve the quality of life for the middle class and disadvantaged.

But it's tough to sell the idea that you spent eight years trying to take from the rich to give to the poor when the institution advancing it sits on property taken from the poor to please the rich.

Talk about parks and wreck.

Obama has to make clear to Mayor Rahm Emanuel and others here that appropriating existing city parkland as home for the presidential library they covet is out of the question. Rather than sweeten the deal, it salts the earth as it sends absolutely the wrong message.

One would hope the City Council, the courts or someone would stop this.

But, whatever happens, the president himself needs to say, "No, thank you."

The common man needs an advocate in power as the elite superrich pull away from the rest of us.

That's why Obama is prodding the Republican-controlled House and Senate to raise capital gains taxes and erase several tax breaks available to the wealthiest in order to improve family, education and retirement benefits for those less well-off.

Many wealthy people have lush, sometimes expansive yards, manicured gardens and vacation homes. They can afford to routinely fly to posh resorts and wide-open spaces in far-flung places.

For Chicagoans of much more modest means, the only oasis is the city's public open green spaces and beaches.

And that's what the city wants to carve up and serve on a platter, a sacrificial offering to win the favor of the foundation that's vetting potential library locations here and in New York and Hawaii as a prelude to a final decision by the president and first lady.

In a city of 227.63 square miles, the only suitable site for this thing cuts into Washington Park or Jackson Park? Really?

The Obamas have a number of deep-pocketed friends and the city has plenty of underused space.

It's understandable if some sites — where Michael Reese Hospital once stood, for example — might be inappropriate for a tribute to the president who gave America the Affordable Care Act. But if public parkland is all Chicago's collective imagination can muster, maybe it doesn't deserve nice things.

What's more, if the Obamas' vaunted attachment to the city that was a crucible for their marriage and his career in public service still requires such a concession as incentive to remain invested in Chicago, then they're practically New Yorkers already and this contest is over.

Some say the city can give the Park District other land. But why not have the Obama library people build their own park instead?

If one's actions don't match one's words, none of it matters anyway.

If the Obamas are just spinning a tale, they won't need a big fancy presidential center for scholars and tourists. They'll need a wing at the proposed Lucas Museum of Narrative Art.

Speaking of George Lucas, the "Star Wars" and special effects kingpin recently said that if the deal promised him falls through for the lakefront parking lot, he'll move the whole kit and unbuild caboodle to Los Angeles.

The proper response: Hey, the whole movie industry packed up and moved from Chicago to Los Angeles about a century ago. The city survived.

Chicago needs to work on its proper responses.

The momentum for the city's land grab in the parks came with word last month that the Barack Obama Foundation, the selection group headed by Obama friend Martin Nesbitt, was unimpressed with proposals from the University of Chicago, where Obama once taught, and the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Rival finalists, New York's Columbia University, an alma mater, and University of Hawaii, the state where the president grew up, were said to have their plans better mapped out.

Chicago's insecurities were sufficiently triggered and once again, as when competing with San Francisco for the Lucas Museum, this city was reduced to being that kid on the playground who trades his bicycle for a really nice hat — a little too desperate to be liked or really stupid.

Either way, grown-ups need to intervene.

When prospective Obama library partner University of Chicago was getting started back at the end of the 19th century, thanks to gifts from John D. Rockefeller and others, it didn't ask for or expect a gift from the city that would benefit greatly from its presence. Retail giant Marshall Field donated land along Ellis Avenue to the cause.

Not all presidential libraries demand real estate from their host community. President Ronald Reagan's land was bought and donated by supporters.

Nesbitt and his onetime parking lot business partner, Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker, have some money they could spend, as do other supporters of the president and the library.

That sort of donation is ear-marked to build the facility, but it may be worth thinking about the role of a physical presence in an increasingly digital and wired world.

In the end, the ideas, accomplishments and historical record of the nation's first African-American president will be as integral as whatever glass, steel and stone edifice is built to celebrate it.

If either lacks integrity, it cheapens and weakens the other. The president has to know this.

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