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Friends of the Parks Statement Upon the Passage by City Council of the Obama Presidential Center Ordinance

Public Pressure Ensures Movement Toward a “Park Positive” Outcome for Jackson Park

Friends of the Parks maintains our firm belief that the Obama Presidential Center should not be built in a park. While we welcome it to Chicago and particularly the South Side with which the Obamas have such deep connections, we have consistently called for it to be located on the 11 acres of vacant land across the street from Washington Park.

We have long said that if it must be in a park, we will advocate for a “park positive” outcome, which includes the replacement of all green space taken up by the OPC and the recreational amenities that are displaced.

“Despite the manufactured fears that the Obama Foundation would pick up and leave Chicago if pressured, the details in today’s ordinances demonstrate the importance of public scrutiny and continued conversations to push toward the best possible outcomes for Chicagoans in the midst of what otherwise is a done deal,” said Friends of the Parks Executive Director Juanita Irizarry. **“The limits to private events are key. We have registered with the Obama Foundation our concerns that such uses, along with possible heightened security when President Obama is present, might threaten to interfere with keeping this public land open to the masses. We are convinced that these and other elements of the usage agreements are direct responses to our insistence that if they are going to call the OPC campus a public park, there must be mechanisms in place to ensure that it truly remain open to the public. We will keep the pressure on until we hear acceptable and rock solid answers to other operational questions we have posed in the vein of making sure it functions just like a public park.”**

“There is still a lot of work to do. We don’t yet have a commitment from the Obama Foundation to pay for a new baseball field to replace the one that has to move to accommodate the plans for the OPC,” said Friends of the Parks Board Chair

Lauren Moltz. “And we will not rest until a new location for it is found that does not take up existing green space. As a resident of Hyde Park, I find the National Park Service’s preliminary recommendation that a replacement baseball field be located on the Midway Plaisance to be impractical. A new baseball facility on vacant land near Jackson Park is in order and would go much further to convince Chicagoans that the Obama Foundation is living up to its promise to replace the parkland it usurps.”

“Additionally, the Section 106 and NEPA review processes must be completed appropriately before any of this can become real. We have admonished the Obama Foundation to live up to the highest standards of these federal review processes rather than trying to skirt some steps to move the process more quickly, as seemed to be happening in earlier stages,” said Friends of the Parks Board Vice-Chair Fred Bates. **“Though we are not a party to the lawsuit, discovery materials from the Protect Our Parks legal action have brought to light various examples of lack of transparency and failure to be forthright, thus reinforcing our concerns. To no one’s surprise, there are elements of this process that have been masquerading as true public process. And the Obama Foundation has wanted the public to believe that they were not pulling all of the strings behind the scenes. It behooves the Obama Foundation, the City, and the Chicago Park District to be straightforward and honest with Chicago moving forward.”**

Additionally, in the spirit of being a “good neighbor,” to use the words of the Obama Foundation, Friends of the Parks has encouraged them to pay for a new field house in Jackson Park. It would be unseemly for the OPC to create a new recreational building on its own campus while the Park District’s facility across the street remains run down.

Similarly, we have called upon the Obama Foundation to raise money to pay for all of the new recreational spaces envisioned in the Chicago Park District’s new South Lakefront Framework Plan. The Obama Foundation’s desire to locate in Jackson Park catalyzed a park visioning process which created huge expectation in the community. But what most people don’t understand is that most of the elements envisioned in the new Jackson Park and South Shore plan have no money attached to them. It behooves the Obama Foundation to ensure that the community doesn’t have to wait decades for the realization of new pickle ball courts, an official dog park, tennis courts, lawn bowling area, etc. that are supposedly coming in exchange for letting the Obama Foundation build on public land.

And, many neighbors remain unhappy about the changes to the nature sanctuary that would be imposed based on the latest golf course design, not the least of which is the part where one would risk getting hit with a golf ball while walking a section of the nature sanctuary path. Though the Obama Foundation has tried to claim that the golf course is not part of the OPC campus or project, it has been made clear that President Obama personally called Tiger Woods to ask him to design the new golf course and that the concept was part of the University of Chicago bid. All of the components of the new South Framework Lakefront Plan and the proposed OPC are inextricably linked. We have communicated to the Obama Foundation that they still need to make sure that the nature sanctuary situation is made right.

Friends of the Parks is a 43 year old organization that inspires, equips, and mobilizes a diverse Chicago to ensure an equitable park system for a healthy Chicago.

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