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March 18, 2022 06:30 AM

The next battlefield in Chicago's gentrification war: South Shore

The Obama Center has ignited a fight in South Shore, as anti-gentrification forces square off with homeowners hoping for some long-awaited upside.


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Carol Adams is a 50-year South Shore resident and founder of South Shore Works.

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South Shore is shaping up as the next battlefield in Chicago's ongoing gentrification and development war.

The Obama Presidential Center, set to open in Jackson Park in 2025, is catalyzing a dispute over the neighborhood's future. The center is expected to spur redevelopment, a possibility some residents welcome and others dread.

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Advocates for low-income renters want new protections from the city so they can afford to stay. Area homeowners, by contrast, hope to see their property values rise and want the city to encourage homeownership. Investors, meanwhile, fear any new red tape will curtail the neighborhood's ascent. There's politics at play, too: Ald. Leslie Hairston, 5th, believes one of the leaders of the push for tenant protections intends to challenge her in the 2023 elections.

In other areas where gentrification fears have escalated—like Pilsen and near the western end of The 606 trail—the city has passed rules [designed to protect longtime residents from being priced out](#), including [new fees on developers](#). In Woodlawn, just west of the Obama Presidential Center, a “community benefits agreement” reached between organizers and the Chicago Department of Housing imposed affordability requirements for housing built on city-owned lots. The department also set aside \$4.5 million of its own money and identified \$5 million from other loan programs to help pay

for rehabs.

Now the Obama Community Benefits Agreement Coalition has turned to South Shore, holding town halls, protesting and testifying at City Council meetings. They want a similar CBA arrangement requiring the city and developers to prevent gentrification from displacing low-income residents.

Yet the Housing Department has less direct influence over South Shore's future than Woodlawn's. The city owns half as many vacant lots as it did in Woodlawn, and most are far from the presidential center site. Instead of empty lots, South Shore has a lot of vacant and abandoned buildings, with some owing back taxes, fines and fees that make them costlier to rehabilitate.

Although South Shore isn't a gentrification hot spot, there are signs of growing interest in the neighborhood. The area is attractive not only for its location near the lake, Jackson Park, public transit and the presidential center, but also for attractive housing not unlike the North Side lakefront.

The median price of a single-family home in South Shore has surged 150% to \$186,000 since plans for the presidential center were announced in 2015, quadruple the rate of increase for homes citywide.

Meanwhile, rental supply is falling. The number of rental units in South Shore that cost less than \$900 per month—a standard measure of affordability—dropped by 32% between 2010 and 2019, according to the DePaul Institute for Housing Studies. South Shore also ranked first in eviction filings in 2019, with rates 137% higher than the city overall, according to the Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing.

Dixon Romeo, a lifelong resident of South Shore and lead organizer with the CBA coalition, says his family is one of many feeling affordability pressure. "I've had to help my mother pay property taxes on our house; there was a lien on my house because we could not afford the rising property taxes."

To help preserve affordable housing in South Shore, [Romeo's group](#) wants the city to enact a series of new rules for landlords and developers. These include a requirement that developers make 60% of new units affordable for people earning 30% of the area's median income, and caps on various fees paid by tenants. The group also wants the city to create a \$15 million rental relief pool and set aside all vacant land it owns for affordable housing development. For homeowners, the coalition seeks \$22 million in grants for down payments and rehab costs, but it does not specify where the money would come from.

Such measures could curb investor interest in the area, warns Noah Birk, a partner at Kiser Group, a brokerage [that has sold several South Shore apartment buildings in recent years](#). "Developers might look at red tape—obstacles to building or renting a unit—and they'll say it's not worth my time. What ends up happening is not as many units come online, and the units that are there end up becoming more expensive because there's not as much available."

Some area homeowners worry that their interests will be overlooked in the push to block gentrification. They've organized as the South Shore Community Compact, a confederation of groups including the South Shore Chamber of Commerce, the Neighborhood Network Alliance and South Shore Works.

"There are a lot of long-term homeowners here whose interests need to be protected," says Carol Adams, a 50-year South Shore resident and founder of South Shore Works. "We just insist on speaking for ourselves and not being used for a different kind of agenda."

That "agenda" is Romeo's political aspiration, says Hairston, who is working with Adams and others in the compact. She says he "wants to run for office" against her in the 2023 aldermanic elections. Hairston notes that Romeo is a director with United Working Families, a group founded with the help of the Chicago Teachers Union and a service employees union that has backed progressive candidates in other elections. Romeo denies any plans to run for the City Council.

Dismissing what she calls displacement “theater,” Hairston says South Shore has plenty of affordable housing. A more urgent threat, she argues, is to older condominium and co-op unit owners facing deconversion into more expensive rentals.

The city’s Housing Department agrees: Last week, it announced a pilot program to help condo owner-occupants with repairs and to provide loans to homeowner associations for deferred maintenance. The department also worked with Ald. Greg Mitchell, 7th, who represents the southern portion of South Shore, on an ordinance allowing the city to essentially cancel city debt from building violations on vacant and abandoned homes. The goal is to cut rehab costs and get those homes “into the hands of an owner who can renovate it or rent it out affordably,” city [Housing Commissioner Marisa Novara says](#).

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