

Museums

Obama Presidential Center faces pushback from Jackson Park residents

By Mark Guarino March 23

CHICAGO — Last month, when hundreds of people showed up at a downtown convention center to hear plans for the Obama Presidential Center (OPC), a campus dedicated to the legacy of Barack Obama, the former president himself arrived unannounced and in full campaign mode to do some hard selling.

“This could anchor a transformation of the South Side to create more jobs, more business opportunities, more educational opportunities, more hope. This is our gift. This is us wanting to give back,” he said.

But while Obama is embraced in his home town, the OPC has become a flash point for many of the issues that the former South Side community organizer once railed against: gentrification, affordable housing, government accountability and transparency.

Since it was announced, the OPC has received strong pushback from people who say the Jackson Park location, which borders different neighborhoods, will destroy valuable green space while driving up property values that will displace people who are already living paycheck to paycheck.

Set to occupy nearly 20 acres of Jackson Park, one of Chicago’s oldest green spaces adjacent to Lake Michigan, the OPC is intended not as a traditional presidential library but as a gathering place designed to galvanize young people and to show them how to put their ideas for change into action.

“What [the Obamas] wanted was essentially a center that would serve as a campus, a place for civic engagement and training and inspiring citizen leaders,” said Obama Foundation chief executive David Simas.

The idea to plant roots on the South Side is an easy one for the former first couple, who represent this area’s greatest success story. They still own a home here, and pictures of the Obamas still line the walls of restaurants and barbershops nearby. Tourists can even take a tour that tracks their fabled first date, culminating at a corner of 53rd Street where they shared a first kiss.

The OPC will consist of four buildings: a two-story “forum” for public programming, a museum tower, a library and an athletic center. The foundation is not yet clear about the partnerships or programming that will take place inside the campus, although some features have been tossed around, like a podcast recording studio and a test kitchen. The library will not house the physical archives of the Obama administration but instead will serve as a component of the Chicago Public Library system, although the nature of that partnership is not yet clear.

Future scholars might not even need to travel to Chicago for their research. That’s because the presidential documents and artifacts, owned by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), will not be here. Instead, the OPC plans to digitize all nonclassified documents. “This new model could be the standard going forward,” Simas said. “Our goal is to make the records available in a frictionless way for as many people as possible.”

Displacement controversy

Some of the displacement fear is rooted against the University of Chicago after it pursued one of the largest urban renewal projects in the United States in the late 1950s, a period of demolitions and acquisitions that ended up displacing 30,000 people from their homes and led the neighborhood’s black population to fall 40 percent by 1970.

“That’s not history for us,” said Jawanza Malone, executive director of the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, which operates after-school programs and food pantries for about 6,500 low-income people in the area. He is concerned that gentrification is behind the continued exodus of black people from Chicago. Between 2000 and 2015, U.S. Census data shows, more than 200,000 black people left the city. Its white population fell at a much slower rate through 2000 but has surged upward in recent years. Analysts say the reasons for the loss in black residents are mixed and include rapid gentrification, lack of jobs and stability, the dismantling of public housing and violence.

“For us, the population loss is because of bad public policy. It becomes a never-ending cycle. It raises the questions: Why is this happening, and is it unintentional or intentional?” Malone asks.

Those living near the Obama site are particularly vulnerable. According to a study last year by the DePaul University Institute for Housing Studies, more than 14,000 households living in the vicinity of Jackson Park need affordable housing. About two dozen community, preservation and fair housing groups are pressing the Obama Foundation, the city of Chicago and the University of Chicago to sign a Community Benefits Agreement they say will force them to commit to measures that will prevent the most vulnerable from leaving their homes. The agreement would include measures such as a property tax freeze for nearby building owners, money set aside for low-income housing assistance and weekly monitoring to ensure that local hiring promised during the construction period remains local.

Obama said he won’t sign. “We will not displace residents,” he said, adding that the project will create \$3 billion in economic activity and 5,000 permanent jobs. “If rents go up, [residents] can afford to pay it because they will have jobs.”

Michael Strautmanis, the foundation’s vice president for civic engagement, explained that “it’s not appropriate for the OPC to have a housing strategy for the neighborhood.” “Our expectation is that this very robust community will come together to bring all the parties in place to deal with housing,” he said. He suggested the issue could be tackled by Emerald South, a newly

formed “economic development collaborative” with former Obama Cabinet member Arne Duncan and other heavyweights like Susan Sher, former chief of staff to Michelle Obama, on its board. In March the nonprofit group announced that one of its goals is “supporting an inclusive housing strategy.”

People like activist Anton Seals Jr. say that by not signing the agreement, the foundation is asking for the blind trust of low-income people. “Their mind is, ‘We’ll let the market handle it’. That usually means disaster for black people.”

Preservationists and green space activists say the foundation should have chosen a second site offered by the city: Eleven acres of vacant or underused parcels inland from Lake Michigan are owned by the city, the University of Chicago and the Chicago Transit Authority. They would bring identical benefits as the Jackson Park site — prestige, tourism dollars and investment in a more impoverished side of town that sorely needs economic development. “It is more appropriate to expand on that land to create a beautiful green space rather than take away from parkland,” says Juanita Irizarry, the executive director of Friends of the Park, a watchdog group.

Simas says the Obamas were uninterested in that site because it did not have what Jackson Park does: closer quarters next to the Museum of Science and Industry, Lake Shore Drive and the University of Chicago campus. “It was a real opportunity to ask where could this place have the greatest impact? And so Jackson Park was heads and shoulders above other sites in supporting its mission.”

The foundation is donating up to \$3.5 million to cover the construction of an artificial turf field to replace the athletic field it will displace. Simas adds that an additional three acres of green space will open up as a result of shutting down a six-lane road that runs through the park. However, \$175 million in public money will be needed for the city to divert traffic around the OPC.

A lawsuit filed in February by the Coalition to Save Jackson Park, an activist group, against the Chicago Park District is an effort to see all documentation related to the OPC deal, including information about the transportation project and its environmental impact. Jessica Maxey-Faulkner, a park district spokeswoman, said it was against department policy to comment on pending litigation.

Even faculty at the University of Chicago, where Obama once taught, is divided. More than 180 faculty members have signed an online petition against the OPC, saying “it will soon become an object lesson in the mistakes of the past.”

A counter petition from faculty has nearly 300 names supporting the OPC. Erin Adams, a biochemist at the university who started the petition, lives in Jackson Park Highlands, a community bordering the park. She envisions that the OPC will become “one way of bridging the university engagement with surrounding communities,” which appeals to her as an educator who also happens to call the area home.

“This is really a wonderful vehicle to get that process started,” she says.

 **92 Comments**

Mark Guarino was the Midwest bureau chief for The Christian Science Monitor. He is now a freelancer and a frequent contributor to The Washington Post.