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WBEZ News

# How Will Chicago Use Its Land Near The Obama Presidential Center?

Natalie Moore, Becky Vevea

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Photo illustration by Paula Friedrich/WBEZ

In East Woodlawn, the city of Chicago is the single largest landowner. Much of the property it owns is vacant. As residents worry about what the future Obama Presidential Center means for the area, the city has the most power to reshape the community in years to come.

It's bright inside Robust Coffee Lounge on the corner of 63rd Street and Woodlawn Avenue on Chicago's South Side. The floor-to-ceiling windows give customers a





WBEZ News 00:00 / 00:00

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It’s been that way for decades in East Woodlawn.

Residents have long wondered what would happen to all the open land, so when former President Barack Obama announced in 2016 that he would build his presidential center in nearby Jackson Park, excitement rippled through the community. But people also are cautious: They wondered who would have control over the future of the neighborhood. Many residents are worried that developers will buy up vacant land and build expensive homes, which could contribute to pushing out existing residents who can’t afford higher taxes or rent.

So who owns the property in East Woodlawn?

A WBEZ analysis of 2,430 properties in East Woodlawn — between Cottage Grove Avenue and Stony Island, and from 60th to 67th streets — found that the city and its sister agencies, like the park and school districts, own the most property in the neighborhood. That means the city has the most power to reshape the community in the years to come.

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The city owns most of the open space along 63rd Street, clusters of properties throughout the neighborhood, and two large vacant schools that were closed in 2013. And here’s something else: The majority of the city’s land is vacant.

Some residents have asked for a written contract to protect current residents, but so

far, the Obama Foundation and city officials have rejected that idea. Instead, a city official said, the goal is to prevent a surge in property values that could lead to displacement. But he offered no specifics on what the city plans to do with its land.

Around the neighborhood, which is just south of the University of Chicago, there’s also a diverse array of properties: churches, community centers, rehabbed greystones, three-flat condo buildings, and towering apartment complexes.

Here’s a closer look at who owns what in Woodlawn\*:

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*\*WBEZ concentrated on owners with 10 or more properties for this story.*

What can the city do?

The city can pretty much do anything it wants with its land, with City Council approval, including build on it, rezone it, sell it, or give it away.

For example, the city can think about social good, like using the land to build a park, or economic good, like selling land to get it back on the tax rolls, said Michael Pagano, dean of the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago

But when it comes to East Woodlawn, the city has been pretty silent. City officials haven't made public any comprehensive plans for the neighborhood. It's worth noting that it's not unusual for the city to own so much land in a South Side neighborhood.

David Reifman, who is the commissioner of the city's Department of Planning and Development, said he wants to use the city-owned land to create jobs through "community retail that might be desirable."

He pointed to a new Jewel grocery coming just west of the 63rd/Cottage Grove CTA Green Line stop. He said the city wants to build more retail east of the train station, but would not offer details.

Reifman also said the city wants to use its land to help "buffer against" displacement of current residents as the Obama Presidential Center gets built, but again, he did not give specifics. He noted the city is limited on what it can do to control rising rents, but said officials may consider a property tax freeze for longtime homeowners.



This lot in the 6400 block of South Ellis Avenue is one of the many the city owns in East Woodlawn.  
(Photo illustration by Andrew Gill and Paula Friedrich/WBEZ)

## How to redevelop Woodlawn

While the city remains tight lipped about its plans in East Woodlawn, its track record in the neighborhood might provide some clues.

Woodlawn used to bustle with business activity, but in the 1960s and 1970s, middle-class families and businesses left. Arson destroyed many multiunit apartment buildings. And in 1997, the Green Line branch of the 'L' was torn down and land was cleared along 63rd Street.

Then-Mayor Richard M. Daley sold dozens of vacant lots for \$1 each to local clergy who wanted to build new housing along 63rd Street. In 1999, the city rezoned the area as a **planned development** and signed redevelopment agreements with politically connected developers Leon Finney Jr., Allison Davis, and the late Bishop Arthur Brazier.

In the early 2000s, Finney and Davis built and sold about two dozen homes for between \$250,000 and \$300,000. But the project stalled and then the **housing bubble burst**. The rest of the land around those homes remains vacant today.

Finney still owns a few of the parcels on 63rd Street across from Robust Coffee. Houses were never built there, and the land remains vacant. But much of the remaining land never changed hands and remains in the city's control. Some of it was sold for \$1 to the University of Chicago to build a new charter high school, and

some lots were sold to the Hyde Park Day School.

Most recently, the city helped the housing nonprofit Preservation of Affordable Housing secure financing and zoning for a mixed-income, mixed-use development called **Woodlawn Station** next to the ‘L’ stop.

But the fact that the city can sell land, especially for higher-end development, has the potential to drive up the price of property throughout East Woodlawn.

In 2016, the city sold several properties to two local developers to build high-end homes. Greenline Home and KMW Communities, LLC **each purchased** city land at market rate. In early March, KMW **sold its first home** built on the land it bought from the city for \$599,000. In **Woodlawn**, the median income is well below the city average at \$24,000; the city median income is \$48,000.

Finney, who has a lot of clout in the area, **has donated** to the local aldermen, Mayor Rahm Emanuel, and Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle. He is also chairman of the Woodlawn Community Development Corporation (WCDC), which owns about a dozen properties. WCDC also owns an apartment complex with affordable housing and a large retail strip mall on East 63rd Street, where his family reopened Leon’s BBQ & Grill in March.

“We think this neighborhood will be booming very shortly,” Finney said.

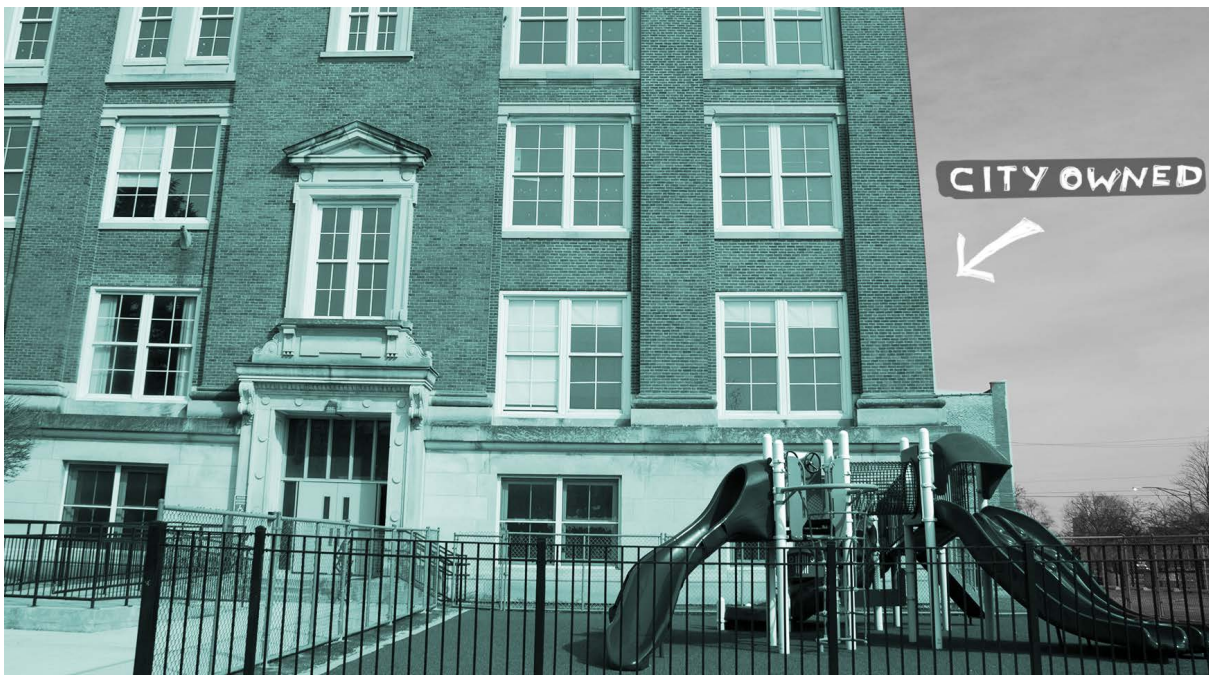
Finney said in April that he plans to buy several acres of land from the city “very soon” to again build single-family homes. This time, he plans to sell those homes for between \$350,000 and \$600,000.

Peter Strazzabosco, a spokesman for the city’s Department of Planning and Development, would not confirm or deny any agreement to sell land to Finney. He said all city land sales go through a request for proposals.

Another clue to what the city will operate in the community:

Earlier this year, the city of Chicago acquired three vacant public school buildings in Woodlawn that were closed in 2013. Two of them are in East Woodlawn. Typically, the Chicago Board of Education issues a request for proposals — essentially bids to develop a property — and identifies a buyer. But in this case, the school board transferred them to the city for “economic development” reasons. When asked what the plan was for these properties, Strazzabosco said the department would issue a request for proposals soon.





The former home of Fiske Elementary is currently owned by the city, but it's unclear what it plans to do with the building. (Photo illustration by Paula Friedrich and Becky Vevea/WBEZ)

## Room for everyone in East Woodlawn?

While Woodlawn has been marked by foreclosures and disinvestment, researchers at the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University **noted** that the “Obama Presidential Center and other ongoing or announced projects have the potential to attract increased investment to these low-cost and moderate-cost areas, but their proximity to high-cost areas also speaks to the possibility of rapid appreciation and lost affordability.”

Mattie Butler, executive director of the nonprofit Woodlawn East Community and Neighbors (WECAN), said displacement should not be an immediate concern because there’s so much vacant land. Her office sits on the ground floor of an affordable apartment building that WECAN owns and where rents start at \$545 a month for a studio.

“If we want to build high-income property, we have enough land to do that and we don’t have to touch people who are in fixed-income housing and low-income housing,” she said. “The only reason people do that is because of greed.”

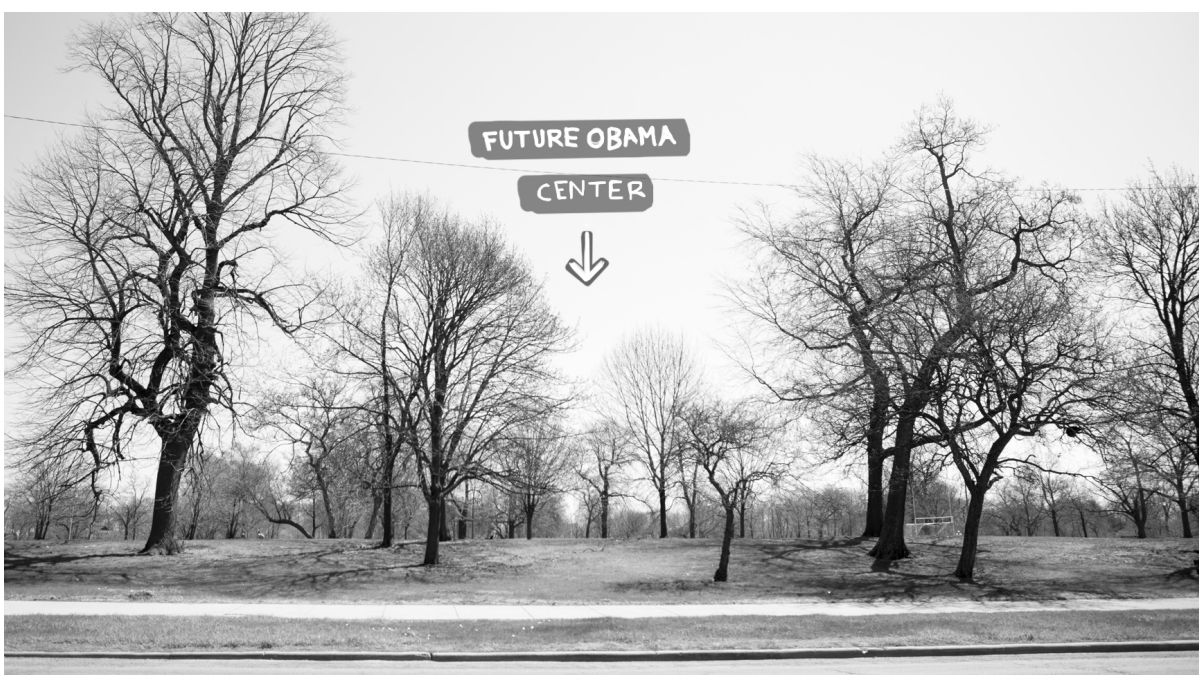
Benjamin Van Horne, founder of **Greenline Homes, LLC** and a longtime developer in Woodlawn, bought city land in 2016 to build single-family homes. He echoed Butler’s point.

“Development without displacement,” Van Horne said. “At a minimum, it means I will

never kick anybody out of their home. Always develop truly vacant properties. Most of these vacant lots have been vacant for decades.”

He bought four city-owned parcels for \$393,500. He plans to develop at least 17 energy efficient homes throughout Woodlawn that will each be listed from \$300,000 to nearly \$700,000. Prior to the recession, he built more than 60 condos in 10 buildings and bought city lots for \$1. Back then, his bread-and-butter market was selling to single, black professional women in Woodlawn.

“It’s a great place,” Van Horne said. “It’s always been undervalued ever since I’ve been working here or a resident here. I don’t mean just a monetary sense but all the other wonderful things plus the obvious things, like access to great amenities such as transportation and the lake.”



The Obama Presidential Center is expected to be built along Stony Island Avenue in Jackson Park. Plans for the center include a Chicago Public Library branch, museum, and forum building to serve as a public meeting space. (Photo illustration by Paula Friedrich and Andrew Gill/WBEZ)

## Preserving affordability

With high-income homes being built, property values — and taxes — are likely to rise. Butler said even if all the affordable housing stays, costs could still increase as property values go up.

She said the city should implement a property tax freeze for owners who’ve been in the community for more than five years.



Reifman, with the city's planning department, said it's something they're open to, but no decisions have been made. He also dismissed signing any formal agreement with the community.

"I don't think we're going to do a community benefits ordinance or a community benefits agreement," he said. "I think it's very important that what we are focused on is community benefits."

Butler said it doesn't have to be signed into law, but the community should be involved in development decisions.

"We would like to have anyone who's developing open land in this community come through a community group who has the ability to say, 'We want you to do X, Y, Z in our community,'" she said.

In all, Woodlawn has approximately 3,000 units of affordable housing, according to data from the National Housing Preservation Database and the Chicago Rehab Network. These apartment buildings have a formal long-term contract for housing assistance from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Renters with limited income live in these apartments.

Many of those affordable housing buildings line Stony Island, a main north-south thoroughfare. Michele Williams, 75, is tenant president at one of them, the Island Terrace Apartments. She is worried that the affordable housing won't stay around if the area is developed with upscale housing, restaurants, and stores when the presidential center opens in 2021.

"They are not putting money in this building," Williams said about management as she pointed to a brown water spot on the community room ceiling. She said she helped negotiate the federal housing contract in 2015, which has been extended to 2035. **Ledic Realty Company**, which manages Island Terrace, said it has no plans to convert the apartments into condos and will maintain the affordable status.

Williams' distrust stems from seeing black residents displaced in her lifetime from construction of the Dan Ryan Expressway, the tearing down of public housing, and construction of Lake Meadows in Bronzeville.

Pagano, with the University of Illinois at Chicago, cautioned that the economic impact of the Obama Presidential Center might wane after three or four years.

"The longer term vision of Obama center has to be understood not in isolation of other factors and activities in that area," he said.

## Data discrepancies and other unknowns

WBEZ conducted its analysis of property records using property tax data from the Chicago treasurer’s office, deed records from the Cook County Recorder of Deeds, the city’s own public data portal, and data provided by the city’s Department of Planning and Development. According to those public records, the city of Chicago was listed as the owner on more than 250 parcels of property between 60th and 67th streets, Stony Island Avenue, and Cottage Grove Avenue.

The Department of Planning and Development (DPD) initially disputed that number, saying the data posted online was out of date. A data set provided by the office showed nearly 100 fewer properties than the public data set, which was labeled as updated in October 2017. WBEZ determined about a dozen of the missing properties were recent sales, another 10 were identified as private property, and the remaining 60 were confirmed as city property by DPD. Peter Strazzabosco, the department spokesman, said they are working to update the public data set.

“[The department] is conducting a complex audit of the city’s vacant land inventory to create a new database of verified, city-owned properties,” Strazzabosco said. He said the city hired a title company to do manual verification of properties acquired by the city prior to 1985 using paper files, microfiche, court records, and tax exemptions.

*WBEZ digital editor Elliott Ramos contributed to this story.*

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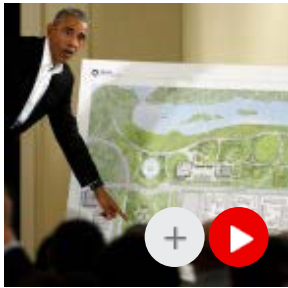
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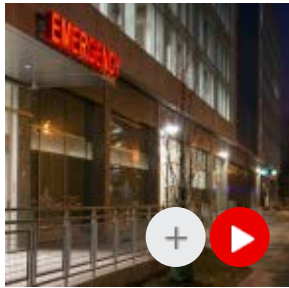
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