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# David Greising: Gentrification is happening near the Obama Presidential Center. What can be done?



The Obama Presidential Center in Chicago's Jackson Park on June 3, 2026. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)



By **DAVID GREISING** | For the Chicago Tribune

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Potentates and glitterati convened in Woodlawn this week to celebrate the opening of the Obama Presidential Center.

Jimmie Williams had his turn a few days earlier. A contractor whose landscaping company, Urban Roots, installed the sod at the 19-acre site, Williams and his wife and business partner, Tiffany, brought their two girls and parents to tour the Obama center campus and inspect Williams' work.

"To be walking the campus with them was humbling, to say the least," Williams told me. "Those trees that were just planted; our kids and our grandchildren will be able to enjoy the shade that those trees will make."

George Washington famously mused about "sitting under my own vine and fig tree," when envisioning his post-presidency. For Williams, the Obama center carries that image forward. He and dozens of other contractors — many also people of color from Chicago's South and West sides — might one day recline under trees they planted, or pay homage to the lawns they laid, walls they constructed and a global tourist attraction they helped build.



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The Obama Foundation, which built and will operate the Obama center, has grand ambitions. Already it has established a global leadership program that has coached 1,320 leaders from 130 countries and a scholars program affiliated with the University of Chicago and Columbia University that has served more than 200 people and provided academic scholarships for students in all 50 states.

The local impact is taking shape, too. In addition to the roughly 4,500 construction jobs, from a strong representation of minority-owned contractors, the center has worked with established agencies such as the North Lawndale Employment Network, Skills for Chicago and St. Sabina Catholic Church's employment center to fill roughly 150 full-time jobs.

The foundation spent around \$850 million to construct the Obama center, nearly three times the original \$300 million estimate. And it's highly likely the financial returns to the area will exceed the estimate first laid out in a foundation-sponsored 2016 analysis by the Deloitte consulting firm. Visitors were forecast to create \$64 million in new spending on the South Side and \$57 million more across Cook County each year, in addition to around \$19 million a year in nonpayroll spending by the Obama center itself.

All this is to the good. But big questions in the Woodlawn neighborhood to the west of the Obama center remain unanswered: Just how big a share will Woodlawn see? And will gentrification homogenize the neighborhood in unwelcome ways? Will new levels of spending and prosperity drive longtime residents out of their homes and the cost of living price them out of the market?

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Community representatives have raised such concerns since Barack and Michelle Obama chose to locate his presidential center in Jackson Park, not far from where Michelle grew up. The Obama Foundation refused to sign a community benefits agreement, rejecting overtures from self-appointed community representatives. That left the city to step in, with a Woodlawn protection ordinance designed to ward off runaway gentrification.

The city was not up to the job.

An investigation by [the Better Government Association's Illinois Answers Project](#) enumerated the most striking failings of the city's anti-displacement efforts. The city has developed only one of 52 vacant lots set aside for affordable housing development, for example. And not one property owner has participated in a pilot program requiring landlords to give current tenants first crack at purchasing multifamily buildings.

A \$2 million kitty to support upgrades to affordable housing units has gone unspent. A \$1.5 million program to help purchase or refinance multifamily properties, in exchange for a 30-year commitment to affordable rents, had no takers, either, so the city reallocated the money.

A few programs have seen improved results lately, but after slow starts, the ineffectiveness of the city's efforts is inarguable. Newly arriving white residents are replacing Black residents in East Woodlawn at a far greater rate than elsewhere across Chicago. "McMansions" have begun replacing affordable multifamily housing units, Illinois Answers reported.

Since the Obamas chose Jackson Park as the site a decade ago, the median sale price for single-family homes in Woodlawn has jumped nearly fivefold, to \$330,000. Less than a third of Woodlawn's housing stock was considered affordable in 2024, half the level 15 years earlier, according to a

With the opening of the Obama center, the Obama Foundation could mark its transition from startup to steady state with a pivot toward a concentrated focus on its own backyard. It could lead the way toward a new effort to remediate the unwelcome consequences of the center's arrival that urban planners and neighborhood groups warned about years ago.

When the foundation declined to engage with self-appointed community spokespeople back in 2017, the former president had his reasons.

"The concern I have with respect to a community benefit agreement in this situation is that it's not inclusive enough because I would then be signing with who?" Obama asked in a video appearance at a community meeting. "What particular organizations would end up speaking for everybody in that community?"

It hardly matters now, because the facts of unconstrained gentrification are speaking for themselves.

The city's efforts clearly are falling short. And it could well be that the organization best suited to lead an effective response is the one with Obama's name written all over it.

The Obama Foundation need hardly operate on its own: The University of Chicago's Inclusive Economy Lab and its Mansueto Institute for Urban Innovation could apply expertise to help guide and leverage the foundation's efforts.

And if these organizations succeed, they could help establish a model for other neighborhoods seeking to protect affordable housing and address the downsides of gentrification. This would be in keeping with Obama's focus on equity and opportunity for all people.

Contractors such as Williams dream of relaxing in the shadows of the presidential center they helped build. Longtime residents of Woodlawn should have a right to seek repose under their own vines, too.

A diverse and inclusive Woodlawn community can still be part of the former president's legacy. And now that the Obama center is up and