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Infiniti Gant: The City Council must protect South Side families from displacement by the Obama center



A sea of dandelions is seen at Rosenblum Park near a row of houses in the 7500 block of South Constance Avenue in Chicago's South Shore neighborhood on April 24, 2017. (Jose M. Osorio/Chicago Tribune)



By **INFINITI GANT**

On Wednesday, the City Council's Housing and Real Estate Committee finally considered legislation to [protect the South Shore neighborhood from gentrification](#) tied to the Obama Presidential Center. On Thursday, the full City Council has a chance to vote on the bill. For nearly a decade, our communities in South Shore and Woodlawn have been sounding the alarm: Without strong, enforceable protections, the very people who have made the neighborhoods what they are will be pushed out before they can see the benefits of this historic development.

The City Council has a choice. It can either allow outside investors to displace longtime Black residents or it can ensure that South Shore and Woodlawn families remain and thrive. The time to act is now.

Since the Obama center was announced in 2016, investor interest in the South Shore neighborhood has exploded. A Zillow [analysis](#) released in late 2022 showed that in the final quarter of that year, 32% of homes in South Shore were purchased by investors. That's double the share in 2015. Data from the DePaul Institute for Housing Studies shows that in 2023 nearly 40% of single-family homes sold in South Shore went to businesses, not families. In the condo market, almost 1 in 3 sales between 2022 and 2024 were to investors. Meanwhile, housing prices continue to soar in the Woodlawn neighborhood.

These are not families putting down roots. These are firms seeking profit, often at the expense of neighborhood stability.

We've seen this story play out in Black and brown neighborhoods throughout the city and country, and we're seeing it in South Shore and Woodlawn now. Investors swoop in, "buy as is" and then hike rents, neglect maintenance, or flip properties at inflated prices. South Shore has been the [No. 1 neighborhood for eviction filings](#) in Chicago for more than a decade, and many residents are housing cost-burdened, with a [median income](#) barely over \$40,000 annually, while Woodlawn's is just \$35,000.

Seniors on fixed incomes face mounting property taxes. Families are priced out by rising rents. Condo associations struggle to keep up with repairs and tax bills. Longtime residents receive constant calls and letters from speculators eager to buy their homes.

At the same time, large institutional investors are expanding their holdings in South Shore. Just last month, New City Property Management [paid \\$26.5 million](#) for a 239-unit building on South Shore Drive. Before that, Pangea Properties, formerly the neighborhood's largest landlord and a defendant in a class-action tenant [lawsuit](#), sold its Chicago portfolio — including dozens of buildings and hundreds of units in South Shore — to a New York-based real estate investment firm.

These are not isolated incidents. They are part of a wave of speculative buying that threatens to push longtime South Shore and Woodlawn residents out. Notably, the quantum computing campus proposed for the former U.S. Steel South Works site threatens to spur the same dynamic at the south end of South Shore, sandwiching the neighborhood between two megadevelopments and the lake. Meanwhile, Woodlawn sits between the Obama center to the east and an expanding University of Chicago campus to the west.

Chicago has already lost 85,000 Black residents between 2010 and 2020 — roughly 10% of the city's Black population, according to the U.S. Census. Housing costs are among the leading reasons cited for leaving. If the City Council fails to act, the Obama center — intended to honor the country's first Black president — could accelerate this exodus, ironically becoming an engine of displacement for Black families on the South Side.

In 2020, Woodlawn won the Woodlawn Housing Preservation Ordinance, but South Shore was written out of the bill and left vulnerable. Since 2021, Woodlawn has continued to fight for affordable housing on designated lots, while South Shore voters have called on the city to pass housing protections in three [referendums](#) passed with overwhelming support. The City Council has an opportunity to heed these residents' call and to prove that Chicago is serious about racial equity, about protecting its neighborhoods and about ensuring that the benefits of the Obama center extend to those who live closest to it.

The City Council must pass the Jackson Park Housing Pilot to protect renters, relieve property tax burdens and preserve affordable units.

This is a defining moment for our city. South Shore and Woodlawn residents have waited long enough. We deserve to stay in our homes. We deserve to benefit from the Obama Presidential Center. And we deserve a future in which our families and homes are not sacrificed to the profits of outside investors. The City Council must pass this ordinance now.

Infiniti Gant is an organizer with Southside Together.

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