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By [Anna Savchenko](#)

Mar 30, 2023, 6:00am CT



The Apostolic Church of God is pushing forward a multimillion-dollar development project near 63rd Street and Dorchester Avenue, where lead pastor Dr. Byron Brazier says the goal is community improvement without displacement. Courtesy of Woodlawn Central



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Since the 1930s, Apostolic Church of God has been an anchor for Chicago's Woodlawn neighborhood.

But over the last three years, a new vision has been brewing in the mind of lead pastor Dr. Byron Brazier — one in which the church becomes an anchor not only for Woodlawn's faith community, but the city's South Side as a whole.



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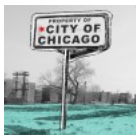
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An anchor that Brazier said would “catalyze the growth of an underserved community.” Or in other words, stop Woodlawn residents from moving away from the area in droves and attract new families to the historically disinvested neighborhood, which has seen its population plummet from 81,000 [in the 1960s](#) to 24,000 residents [today](#).

Apostolic’s plan is to turn eight acres of paved parking space surrounding the church into a megadevelopment called [Woodlawn Central](#): 870 residential units that developers say will include a mix of luxury, low-income and senior housing options. It will also include retail space, a hotel, black box theater and vertical greenhouse.



Along with a mix of housing options, Woodlawn Central will also include retail space, a hotel, black box theater and vertical greenhouse. Courtesy of Woodlawn Central



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The politically connected church, which would retain ownership of the land and allow structures to be built on ground leases, has been moving slowly on Woodlawn Central since 2019. But in early March, Woodlawn Central picked Transwestern as its commercial real estate partner to begin raising the \$895 million that [is still needed](#).



JC Griffin, Transwestern's vice president, said he doesn't think getting the city to greenlight the project will be an issue. Once financing is secured, Griffin said the first step will be to build a parking garage and a senior housing facility.

"I'm optimistic that we're going to see some dirt moving around in 2024," Griffin said. "I think we're going to have extreme mayoral support from either candidate that takes the fifth floor."

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Griffin said Woodlawn Central has also received the support of 20th Ward Ald. Jeanette Taylor, though the alderwoman has denied any such endorsements.

When asked how she feels about Woodlawn Central, Taylor said, "I don't think anything because I haven't talked to the community about this project since 2019."

Taylor added: "[Dr. Brazier] is allowed to do whatever he wants to do on his private land, but it has absolutely nothing to do with me. When it comes to anything that they're asking me of my office, it goes through a community process."

Brazier said the church held a series of public forums to get community feedback on the project over the last several years and the church "had no plans that the community has not been engaged in."

Woodlawn Central is just one of several major projects on the horizon for the South Side neighborhood. Construction of the Obama Presidential Center is underway in nearby Jackson Park. University of Chicago, which is just north of Woodlawn and has historically had a tense relationship with the community, today is promoting faculty buying homes there.

The neighborhood is a community of housing contradictions. Woodlawn is predominantly low income and almost half of all [households](#) made less than \$25,000 between 2016 and 2020. Earlier this month, [a home sold](#) for \$1.2 million, making it the most expensive home sale ever in the neighborhood.

Geoff Smith, the lead investigator at DePaul University's Institute for Housing Studies, said this disparity could make Woodlawn residents more vulnerable to displacement.

Smith said there are already "clear indications that Woodlawn is attracting investment from higher income homebuyers," which is an early precursor to





Woodlawn saw a 109% spike in prices on one- to four-unit properties between 2019 and 2022, with figures soaring from \$157,000 to \$329,000, according to data from the Institute. Similar properties across the city only saw only a 50% rise in sales prices during the same period.

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Over time, Smith said this can translate to rent hikes and higher property taxes for Woodlawn homeowners, both of which may push residents out.



A rendering of what part of Woodlawn Central is expected to look like upon completion. Courtesy of Woodlawn Central

To protect against displacement, the Chicago City Council [adopted an ordinance](#) in 2020 requiring all developments built on city-owned land in the neighborhood to reserve at least 30% of their units for low-income households.

Brazier said Woodlawn Central will reserve about 20%, arguing that they won't displace anyone by building on empty parking lots. In addition, the city owns [297 vacant lots](#) in the area.

“Everyone knows that Woodlawn will gentrify,” Brazier said. “There won't be an African American majority. That is going to be a fact ... because of the Obama Presidential Center. So we're not going to take away. We're actually going to add residential locations that are affordable for the community.”

But some housing advocates are critical of Brazier's approach.



in Chicago,” said

Naomi Davis, the founder of Blacks in Green, an environmental justice and sustainability organization that is also developing residential and mixed-use properties in Woodlawn.

Davis fears the project will exacerbate the displacement of the majority of the neighborhood’s Black residents.

“As long as what they do what is in compliance with regulatory requirements, they don’t need to satisfy the needs of low- and moderate-income people,” Davis said. “They don’t need to concern themselves about the change in the trajectory of the history of the community that will be created by the kind of developments that they’re bringing. They don’t have to account for any of that.”

*Anna Savchenko is a reporter for WBEZ. You can follow her on Twitter [@annasavchenkoo](#).*



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