

NEWS

Plight of Mama Africa's Marketplace highlights South Shore's increasing appeal ahead of Obama Center opening



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Dozens of dancers, drummers and spectators filled Mama Africa's Marketplace in South Shore for a spiritual ceremony in support of the shop and community space.

Between the music and prayer, visitors shopped among the rows of

"I always looked for a space where I can be loved and included," Lakiesha Infarinu Williams, also known as "Mama Africa," said last weekend to ceremony attendees. "To know there's so many people who have found that here just means so much to me."

Williams became Mama Africa to many in her community five years ago when she opened the marketplace in the 71st Street business corridor. Since then, the 43-year-old mother of four said she has cultivated a "neutral space where all people are welcome," and sells African products mostly on consignment from around 30 U.S. and African vendors.

But now, Williams will have to close Mama Africa's Marketplace at the end of the month. According to Williams, her landlord plans to sell the building at 2100 E. 71st St. She's trying to come up with the thousands of dollars needed to either buy the building or move to a new location and cement the future of her story.

Her experience mirrors broader trends in the increasing appeal of South Shore properties, propelled in part by the construction of the Obama Presidential Center just 2 miles away, according to community members and experts.



Lakiesha Infarinu Williams, known as "Mama Africa," unlocks the security gate on the windows of her store, Mama Africa's Marketplace, in the South Shore neighborhood, Jan. 8, 2026. (Eileen T. Meslar/Chicago Tribune)

"This is the first time in decades — or actually, in my lifetime — that I've seen significant investment on the South Side of Chicago, and most importantly, this close to the South Shore community," said Tonya Trice, executive director of the South Shore Chamber of Commerce.

Some residents worry that the increased investment means they'll lose longtime community spaces they can't find anywhere else in Chicago.

The ceremony was the second time Darrell Efundeji Johnson, who just moved to Chicago from North Carolina, had visited Mama Africa's Marketplace. He said he came to the marketplace to practice Ifá, a religion originating from West Africa, as it's one of the few places in Chicago where practitioners can gather.

"I really hate that this space is under threat of no longer existing because of the vital pillar that it is in this particular side of town," Johnson said.

For Williams, the goal of opening a store was never to turn large profits, she said. Rather, it was to provide this type of communal space and "pump the life back into the community."

According to a report from the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#) published in July, the South Shore community is over 90% Black, and the median household income is around \$40,000. About a third of households make under \$25,000 a year. For comparison, the median household income of Chicago is around \$75,000 a year, and around 19% of Chicago households make under \$25,000 a year.

In recent years, South Shore has experienced [increased crime and the loss of many middle-class residents](#), contributing to the area's struggle.

Marquinn McDonald, the 2nd Police District council member on the city's Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability, attended the ceremony as a friend of Williams. He said he remembers a time growing up when his mother and grandmother were scared for him to walk along East 71st Street, but Williams changed the energy of the area dramatically.

McDonald pointed to a history of [Chicago pushing Black residents out of their communities](#) while those neighborhoods [face disinvestment](#) at the same time. He said he doesn't want to see Mama Africa's Marketplace meet the same fate.

"In order to keep these small businesses, we have to support them," McDonald said. "We have to take ownership."

Competition for the property

Williams said her landlord, John Lewis, first told her about the buyer for the building in mid-December, later asking that she leave the store by Jan. 23.

Williams said she thinks the owner is selling because property taxes are now too high. The Cook County treasurer's office website currently shows more than \$37,000 in overdue property taxes for the building. The records also show a 50% property tax increase from the 2023 to 2024 tax years.

Lewis did not respond to the Tribune's interview requests.

County data show South Side neighborhoods were among the many hit hardest by property tax increases. The Cook County treasurer's office [2024 Tax Year Bill Analysis](#) — which analyzes property tax bills mailed in 2025 — shows the total value of South Shore commercial property taxes increased by 15% to 20% between the 2023 and 2024 tax years. By comparison, commercial property tax revenue in the Loop decreased by 10% to 15% in the same time period.

Williams said she was paying \$1,100 per month to rent the space, adding that her landlord had been "extremely generous."

"He's been a blessing for five years, and at this time, if he wants me to leave, I don't want to fight him for that," Williams said.

Williams has experienced other struggles as a renter too. She owes over \$9,000 in rent and is currently facing eviction from the Near West Side apartment she's lived in for 30 years, she said. She is working with her lawyer and landlord to keep her family from being displaced, she said.

The prospective buyer, Eli Williamson, grew up in South Shore and now sits on the board for the South Shore Chamber of Commerce. He said he's buying the building to expand the operations of his Bronzeville nonprofit, Leave No Veteran Behind, to his neighborhood.

The nonprofit focuses on [employment training, transitional jobs and education debt relief](#) for veterans.

Williamson said he approached commercial property owners in the area as he looked to buy a space and eventually met Lewis. Although he said the building needs updates and other repairs, he wanted to take on the renovations to ensure "this property remains a community asset."

The sale will likely be finalized soon, Williamson said.

Williamson said he reached out to his network, asking they contact Williams if they know of a new space for her.

"We want her in the community," Williamson said.

Williams said she requested assistance from the chamber earlier this

Increasing interest in South Shore elicits mixed reaction

The ownership fate of 2100 E. 71st St. illustrates how South Shore properties are becoming increasingly sought after in recent years. This trend is due, in part, to the announcement of the Obama Presidential Center in 2016, Trice said.

The presidential center is under construction in Jackson Park and expected to open this summer, adjacent to South Shore. The city anticipates the center [will attract 700,000 annual visitors and create over 5,000 direct and indirect jobs.](#)

Increased development is also expected to accompany the center. For example, [a 26-story hotel is coming to the Woodlawn neighborhood,](#) a few blocks from the site.

The Obama Presidential Center isn't the only potential driver of increased development in South Shore, said Geoff Smith, executive director and principal investigator for the DePaul Institute for Housing Studies. He pointed out the area's proximity to the lakefront, the University of Chicago and the [construction of Quantum Shore Chicago.](#)

But Smith still expects that the presidential center will lead to private market investment and affect the real estate market, he added.

Phillip Moore, managing director of lending for Community Investment Corp., pointed to a more causal relationship. He said that through his work — lending primarily to local developers of affordable rental housing — he's seen increased activity in South Shore because of the Obama Presidential Center.

"We've seen a lot of investors — both local and out of state investors — see that as an area of, 'Hey, I want to be next to something exciting,'" Moore said.

Trice said she and the South Shore Chamber of Commerce view the presidential center as a positive.

Trice added that the other reason South Shore is becoming more attractive is due to [local efforts to revitalize the neighborhood's commercial corridors](#). The East 71st Street corridor has a 43% retail vacancy rate, Trice said. The high vacancy rate isn't because of a lack of interest in the properties, Trice said, but a lack of high-quality retail space.

Commercial space has become more valuable since the announcement of the presidential center. Trice said yearly market rents on the 71st Street corridor ranged from about \$10 to \$12 per square foot before the center was announced. Now, spaces go for \$16 to \$20 per square foot, and Trice said she expects those numbers to increase due to rising property taxes.

By Trice's estimates, a monthly market rent for a building the size of the one that houses Mama Africa's would fall at \$16,000 on the low end and \$20,000 on the high end.

The chamber is working to renovate spaces along the corridor and recruit businesses, and Trice hopes local businesses will benefit from the foot traffic that will follow the completion of the presidential center, she said.

But others in the community worry the presidential center may push longtime residents and business owners out.

In 2024, investors were the buyers 40.8% of the time in South Shore's single-family home sales — making it the neighborhood with the third-highest percent of investor buyers — according to data from DePaul's Institute for Housing Studies. Investors were the buyers of single-family homes in only 18.3% of total Chicago sales.

Rosondunnii Marshall, a therapist and owner of [The Darkroom Chicago](#), characterized the property grabs by investors as "predatory."

"I'm really hoping that the city of Chicago will respond and protect us in that way so we don't have a repeat of the historical offenses that we've already had in Chicago," Marshall said.

A City Council ordinance [passed in September](#) took steps to preserve affordable housing near the Obama Center in part by allocating up to \$3 million for property tax debt relief in the South Shore, Englewood and

Smith, the housing investigator, said that although investment is beneficial for communities, there are always risks of increased rents when there are investors buying up large amounts of housing stock.

"Investment needs to be balanced with the needs of the community," Smith said. "The community wants investment, needs investment, but in some cases, that investment might trigger affordability pressures."

Rooted in the community

Mama Africa's community space has been home to spiritual ceremonies, African dance and language classes, concealed carry classes, meetings for the Chicago Association of Black Psychologists, and more, Williams said. The store makes some money by hosting community events, but Williams said she never turns away anyone who can't pay.

When there's not an event going on, the room is lined with tables of clothes and shoes for whoever needs them, and Williams said she gives them out during her Feed The People events each Friday as she distributes free meals.



Lakiesha Infarinu Williams, known as "Mama Africa," gets a fist bump from Michael Cain, outside her store, Mama Africa's Marketplace, Jan. 8, 2026. (Eileen

of Williams and the Underground Bookstore owner Yoel Ahmechshadye said he offered to help with \$250,000 of pre-approved credit.

Ahmechshadye said he wants to help save Mama Africa's Marketplace because he's seen how all kinds of people are drawn to Williams' energy and benefit from being around her.

"She wears the 'Mama Africa' spirit on her," Ahmechshadye said.

As she begins packing some of her merchandise, it's hard for her to leave a place where she feels so rooted in community.

Williams said she's looking for other commercial spaces but hasn't found anything promising.

"We don't want to go, but if we have to, we know that we can do the same thing," Williams said. "But it wasn't an easy task. So thinking about doing that all over again is a little stressful, but I know I got what it takes."

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