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Can a new housing development revitalize Bronzeville without displacing residents?

One housing complex can't reverse decades of historical trends—but city officials hope 43 Green can be a model for equitable development.

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Credit: Abel Uribe/City Bureau

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The area surrounding the 43rd Street Green Line stop will look drastically different in the next couple of years and two buildings—one new and one historic—are expected to be the center of that change.

The buildings face each other across 43rd Street and are served by the Green Line stop that bears the same name. The new building is a ten-story apartment tower under construction that developers promise will include affordable homes and retail shops. It's the first phase of 43 Green—a multiphase development project—and it spreads out over four vacant lots the city sold to the developer for \$1 each. The second building is the Forum, a historic assembly hall where jazz and blues legends performed. The venue, which shuttered its doors in the 1970s, is at the center of a fundraising effort led by community members to restore it to its original glory.

City officials and developers have promoted the 43 Green development as one centered on the existing community, whom they hope won't be displaced. A development with new homes and businesses isn't enough to plug the affordable housing need or turn around the decades of disinvestment in the community. But Third Ward alderperson Pat Dowell said 43rd Green, which is part of a new city initiative to bring development near transit stops in the south and west sides, is a step toward keeping Bronzeville a vibrant neighborhood.

"So it's not a one-size-fits-all for Bronzeville," Dowell said. "It's a tapestry that needs to be weaved together and balanced so that we can keep the community diverse in economics. And that's not easy."

If successful, advocates hope more affordable homes and businesses could be built near transit stops in the south and west sides. Those efforts are welcomed by residents, who want new development but worry it might lead to their displacement, according to interviews with more than a dozen Bronzeville residents. The majority of residents didn't know much about 43 Green. Some said they were skeptical of the nebulous concept that is "affordable"

housing. Others viewed the development as positive for Bronzeville.

"I don't want to see it not being affordable for people who have been living here when it was quote-unquote undesirable or a bad place," said Candace Odili, 32, who lives down the street from the development.

City funding

In 2019, residents got a sneak peek of the project design and cost at a [town hall hosted by Dowell](#). The opportunities for Bronzeville residents to weigh in and allegedly drive development led one [Florida magazine](#) to call the revitalization of the community an example of "withintrification," which it defined as development led by the people and local residents. The reality in Bronzeville is a bit more complicated.

The first phase of the project was financed with more than \$38 million from an array of taxpayer-funded programs. The project counts toward two of Mayor Lori Lightfoot's key initiatives—the [\\$1 billion effort](#) to preserve and build affordable housing, and Invest South/West, the [\\$750 million program](#) to invest in ten neighborhoods in the city's south and west sides, including Bronzeville.

The project is also Bronzeville's [first Equitable Transit-Oriented Development](#). For nearly a decade, the city has been using incentives to encourage development near train stations. When the [city analyzed](#) the impact of those incentives, it found that the vast majority of projects supported were built in the north, northwest, and downtown areas of Chicago. To change that, the city created the [Equitable Transit-Oriented Development \(ETOD\) Pilot Program](#), which primarily focuses on communities ignored by developers in the west and south sides.

"Unfortunately, in Chicago it is much easier to build inequitable development and to build car-oriented development than it is to build equitable [transit-oriented development]," said Roberto Requejo, the executive director of Elevated Chicago, a collective of organizers and researchers partnering with the city to support equitable, transit-oriented developments. "Our vision is [that] buildings like the eTOD at 43rd Street should not be the exception—they should be the norm."

Community leaders and organizers [say the work doesn't end when construction starts](#). Developers ought to have an ongoing dialogue with residents before, during, and after construction. To do that, residents must feel empowered to speak up about issues and concerns and developers should address those issues.

"The people who live in the communities that we serve are the experts," Requejo said.

Familiar territory

Bronzeville has gone through a variety of transformations. During the Great Migration starting in the 1910s, it was seen as the promised land for Black people escaping the [Jim Crow](#) south and looking for economic opportunities. In segregated Chicago, Bronzeville, known as the Black Metropolis, was one of the few areas where Black residents were allowed to live. They opened businesses and popular music venues along business corridors, including 43rd Street.

"It's a place with just character," said Sandra Washington, Urban Juncture's director of engagement and partnerships. To Washington, who lives in Bronzeville, the character comes with the neighborhood's history and culture. It's the businesses, the people, the art created here, the block parties, the festivals, and the areas where the community can be seen and felt.

Public [housing developments](#) built to alleviate overcrowding in Black neighborhoods in the 1950s and 1960s housed thousands of families in Bronzeville. This included one of the largest public housing developments: [the Robert R. Taylor Homes](#), which housed close to 30,000 people.

Those residents were displaced when public housing high-rises were demolished, as part of a plan by then-Mayor Richard M. Daley to replace them with mixed-income communities, many of which have yet to materialize. More than two decades after the plan was launched, many of the sites of those public housing high-rises are still vacant.

Between 2004 and 2008, Bronzeville residents and organizers attempted to take matters into

their own hands. They **pushed the city to establish a trust fund**, financed by property taxes, that would build affordable housing on city-owned vacant lots. The effort was led by the **Lugenia Burns Hope Center**, a Bronzeville-based community organization with initiatives that support rent control and affordable housing. The proposal didn't get traction with politicians and ultimately died.

The fight for affordable housing continues.

Roderick Wilson, the current executive director of the Lugenia Burns Hope Center, said he's been displaced twice in Bronzeville—once when an apartment was converted to a condo and another time when friends he was staying with sold their home because they couldn't keep up with property taxes and other expenses.

Wilson said he would like to see developers set aside more units as affordable because many, like the 43 Green developers, cap affordable units at roughly 50 percent. Even at 50 percent, he said, it's not enough because that figure does not take into consideration the need for affordable homes. The county is facing a **shortage of affordable housing of nearly 160,000 units**, according to a 2021 DePaul Institute for Housing Studies **report**.

In mid-July, the Chicago Housing Authority approved the sale of 28 vacant lots that once were part of the Robert Taylor Homes so a developer could build mixed-income housing. **The developer's plan** is to build 28 for-sale units, including at least three affordable homes. Under the proposal, the CHA would allow families with incomes up to 120 percent of the area median income, or about **\$125,000** for a family of four, to qualify for the affordable homes. Community members who attended the meeting and wanted more affordable units questioned the CHA's motives and asked the CHA to do better.

The CHA's CEO, Tracey Scott, said the agency was building strong communities that could sustain themselves in the future. "It's about rebuilding the village where everyone is welcomed," she said.

43 Green

The first phase of 43 Green is well underway. **Developers are building** an apartment tower with 99 units, mostly studios and one-bedroom apartments, and retail on the ground floor. A little more than half of those units will be designated as affordable. City records show the affordable rents are expected to be between \$870 and \$1,080, depending on the size of the unit. Developers and the city are defining affordable as people who make up to **60 percent of the area median income or about \$50,000 for a two-person household**.



43 Green is expected to have 99 apartments, with 50 affordable units. City records show the affordable rents are expected to be between \$870 and \$1,080, depending on the size of the unit. (Photo:Abel Uribe/City Bureau)

Taxpayer-backed financing totaling more than \$38 million is helping subsidize the cost of the affordable units. Funding for the project includes \$5 million in tax increment financing funds, more than \$18 million in Low-Income Housing Tax Credits equity, and a \$3 million multifamily loan. The money would pay for construction, soft costs, professional fees, and a developer fee of \$2 million.

The principal developer is the Habitat Company, a major developer in Chicago, which

partnered with P3 Markets, a minority-owned real estate investment firm co-led by Phillip Beckham III, a longtime Bronzeville resident and a businessman who has contributed to and worked in the local alderperson's political campaign.

Beckham, who was paid \$1,500 in 2007 for outreach and supplies from Dowell's political fund, said his goal with 43 Green is to cater to young professionals—not families. The affordable units, he said, are being built for young people who need a little help starting off on their first apartment.

Beckham and his firm have contributed at least \$2,750 to Dowell's political campaign since P3 Markets was registered with the state in 2018.

Beckham said his previous work with Dowell and campaign contributions did not play a role in the city's support for 43 Green. His work with Dowell, he said, included a stint as a campaign finance director. "Alderman Dowell needs no financial influence to do good things for the Third Ward residents," Beckham said.

Asked about their relationship, Dowell's office said in an email that the alderperson has been a longtime proponent of transit-oriented development and that "Phil Beckham is a long time member of the Bronzeville community who has supported the alderman since her first run for Alderman in 2003."

The expectation from residents and city officials is that the 43 Green development will address some of the community's affordable housing needs to keep residents from being displaced. When all the phases of 43 Green are completed, the developers estimate it will cost at least \$100 million and hold roughly 300 units.

There is fear that longtime Bronzeville residents will be displaced, especially as home values continue to rise. Earlier this year, ***Crain's Chicago Business*** reported that 28 newly constructed homes and townhouses were sold in 2021 in Bronzeville—the largest number of new houses sold in any Chicago neighborhood that year. Some of those homes sold at prices above \$800,000. Overall, homes in Bronzeville sold at a median price above half a million dollars, a figure higher than some popular neighborhoods on the north side, where home prices have traditionally been more expensive.

The land where 43 Green is being developed was once a part of a retail corridor. In addition to providing affordable housing, the expectation from residents, city officials, and the developers is that the housing development, along with the redevelopment of the Forum music venue, will spark a resurgence of that corridor.

Dowell supports that idea. She said the community needs a more vibrant business corridor close to transit stops and envisions the street resembling the amenities and movement of north-side neighborhoods, like the Fullerton or Belmont Red Line stops.

"There's a lot of hustle and bustle activity around those stations," she said. "People live around those stations; that's not the case along the Green Line."

More than just housing



Urban Juncture, a Bronzeville community development organization, wants the Forum to be restored to its original glory, but is having trouble raising the \$25 million it says it needs for the effort. (Photo:Abel Uribe/City Bureau)

Across the street from the first phase of 43 Green, the Forum is still waiting to be fully redeveloped. It opened in 1897 as an assembly hall that once welcomed renowned performers like Nat King Cole and Muddy Waters. It was shut in the 1970s following community disinvestment and later **targeted for demolition**. It was saved by Urban Juncture, a community development organization that bought the building in 2011 to preserve it and is now leading a fundraising effort to support renovations and a reopening. Once restored, the organization hopes it will become a destination and an **engine for community revitalization**.

"It's always been this huge presence on 43rd Street," said Bernard Loyd, president of Urban Juncture. The goal is to reopen the top floors as an assembly hall and event space and house a restaurant and other businesses on the ground floors.

The road to restoration hasn't been easy. It took around ten years for the property to be rezoned from residential back to commercial retail according to Loyd. In 2019, with support from Urban Juncture, the Forum was **entered** in the National Register of Historic Places.



The Forum was entered in the National Register of Historic Places in 2019. A plaque on the building reads, "The Forum became a center of retail, community, and politics in Chicago's Black Metropolis, addressing a culture of segregation which restricted Blacks from shopping, gathering and entertaining in other parts of the city." (Photo: Abel Uribe/City Bureau)

Loyd said the city declined submitting a letter of support in the application. He is unsure why.

But his hard work seems to have paid off. The redevelopment effort is now receiving heavy praise. Experts like Requejo have pointed to Urban Juncture's work trying to save the Forum as being instrumental in the equitable development that's happening in that area. Dowell said she hopes the development at 43 Green will lead to private investment in the Forum.

So far, Urban Juncture has raised \$8.5 million, Loyd said. But the organization still needs more than \$15 million to fully restore the building. And according to Loyd, The Forum hasn't received city financial support despite appeals for support to Dowell. (Loyd and Urban Juncture have contributed at least \$7,200 to Dowell's political campaign since 2002.)

"We're hopeful that the city will step forward to provide some support," Loyd said, especially considering the enthusiasm they've seen from residents.

Dreams and hopes for Bronzeville

During a warm afternoon in June, Loyd and Henry Wishcamper, a codirector of community development with Urban Juncture, guided guests through the interior of the Forum.

The two pointed out an aged mural and the cooling effect of the ceiling. Tiny pieces of the building could be heard hitting the ballroom floor every couple of minutes.



In June, Urban Juncture gave visitors a tour of the venue, including the stage where renowned jazz and blues musicians performed. (Photo:Abel Uribe/City Bureau)

From a side door, attendees were able to get a look at the towering 43 Green development across the street. Though still in its construction phase, onlookers can see some of the early outlines for the units.

Odili, who lives down the street from the buildings, grew excited thinking about the possibilities of the Forum and what it would mean for the arts in the community and Bronzeville in general.

Odili and her family moved to Bronzeville from Albany Park right before the pandemic hit. Prior to moving to the area, she said when she was looking to support Black businesses, she always ended up in Bronzeville. And now she wants to be a part of helping the community preserve its history. She likes the idea of building homes for younger people, but also believes it is important to help lifelong residents stay in Bronzeville and enjoy the influx of investment.

"I just really have a lot of hopes and dreams for Bronzeville," she said.

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