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In the battle against gentrification, Pilsen residents press for affordable housing

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By [Indira Khera](#)

Dec. 21, 2022, 6 a.m. CT

 **LISTEN 6:22**



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Indira Khera / WBEZ



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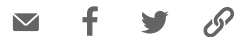
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Felipe Luna walks down 18th Street, sharing stories from his childhood — like how he used to flatten pennies on the train tracks that ran through Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood.

This is a major artery, dotted with bars, restaurants and shops — some old, some new. Brick buildings line the bustling road. But as one walks east the collection of businesses suddenly drops off into a large, vacant lot at 18th and Peoria, which is framed by a set of train tracks, the high-end buildings of University Village rising in the background.



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Luna grew up across the street, in the house where his father still lives. He gestures across the empty parcel. To him, the University Village buildings look out of place, from “a different world” than the lot, Luna says. If done right, whatever ends up on the vacant land could bridge the visual disconnect that he sees there today.

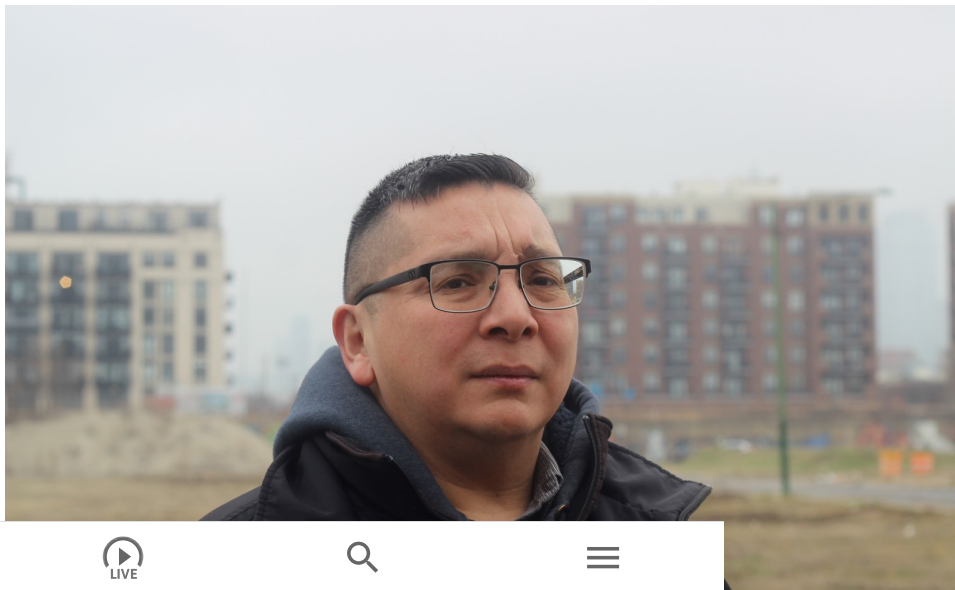
The lot has long represented hope for affordable housing. The property has changed hands between developers for roughly the past 20 years, with community members organizing for affordability at every turn. The city purchased the land this year, promising to build that long awaited affordable housing.

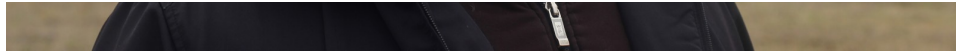
Since September, the city departments of planning and housing — along with their consultants and the office of Ald. Byron Sigcho-Lopez, 25th Ward — have been hosting public meetings. This year’s final public meeting was held last week at Pilsen’s Jungman Elementary, during which the city presented preliminary sketch plans for the development, a culmination of this round of community engagement.



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Felipe Luna stands on 18th Street in Pilsen, at a large vacant lot that he grew up across the street from. The city now owns the lot and has promised to build affordable housing. Luna hopes the development incorporates some art or opportunities for local entrepreneurs. Indira Khera / WBEZ

Titled “Trailhead,” “Linear” and “Pocket,” the sketches vary primarily in where they concentrate open space around the lot. They differ in the types of buildings used — high rises, mid rises and townhomes — and how those are arranged. During the presentation, city officials stressed that the sketches are not final plans; they will be used to guide developer proposals next year. Officials say a draft plan will be released for public comment in January, and the final plan will be released in April.

Each sketch also has a different number of residential units, ranging from 286 to 355. As of now, the city has not said whether these will be all rental units or if some will be available for ownership.

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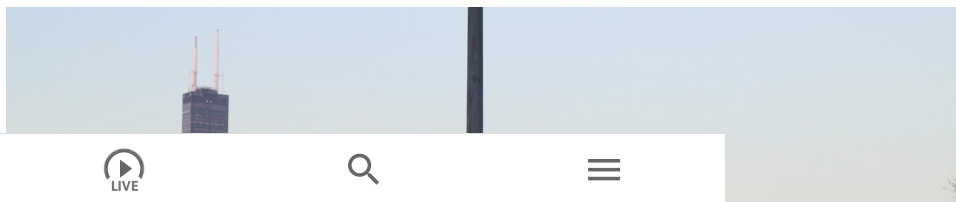
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Nicole Reyes is an organizer with the Pilsen Alliance and sits on the city stakeholder group advising about the lot. She wants the site to have 100% affordable housing. As of now, the city is aiming for majority-affordable but says the mix will depend on resident feedback.

Reyes also wanted to see more units in the development.

“I would like to have received ... a direct plan from the city that says ... we will do our best to incorporate green space but also prioritize high density so that we can have as many units at this site,” she said. “Because that’s what we need: we need housing.”

The promise of affordable housing is much needed in Pilsen. According to the DePaul University Institute for Housing Studies, the share of lower-cost rentals in the neighborhood has declined by about 37 percentage points between 2010 and 2020. In that same time period, the share of households making over \$100,000 increased by about 17 percentage points, while the share of households making less than \$50,000 declined. Within that subset, the biggest losses were in households making less than \$25,000.





The empty lot at 18th and Peoria streets. Indira Khara / WBEZ

As one walks through the neighborhood, the contrast is visible. New townhomes with starkly modern architecture stand next to older, brick and wooden buildings.

The Resurrection Project has been providing affordable housing in Pilsen for about 30 years and hopes to submit a bid to develop the lot. Vicky Arroyo said the nonprofit hears from residents who are experiencing gentrification first hand.

“We hear about the individual that says I had to move out of Pilsen because I couldn’t live there,” said Arroyo, Resurrection’s president and chief operating officer. “We have heard residents tell us that the community is changing because they don’t see children in the parks anymore. They don’t know their neighbor. They used to know their neighbor.”

Pilsen resident Martha Banda lived in a home provided through The Resurrection Project from 1995-2007. Now she and her mother own several apartments around the neighborhood. Banda said they keep their rents low, to create some affordable housing in the otherwise skyrocketing neighborhood.

When the lot is developed at 18th and Peoria, she wants to see green space in addition to affordable housing.

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“I was blessed to have had that opportunity, and I guess I want that blessing to continue for more people,” she said.

But Banda said the community engagement process over the past few months hasn’t been the most clear.



use I am a member

of my community and I have not been properly informed. So please inform the community, look for ways to inform the community,” Banda said.

She was frustrated by a public meeting held on Oct. 29 — the same day as Pilsen’s Day of the Dead run, a huge community event. Banda only found out about the meeting the day before and was involved with the run, so she couldn’t attend.



Martha Banda stands on the lot at 18th and Peoria. She said she wants to see green space in addition to affordable housing on the lot. Indira Khera / WBEZ

Some stakeholders even sent a letter to the city asking for the meeting to be moved to the following week. The city agreed to extend the open house style meeting to capture more residents, but it went ahead on the same day.

Natasha Hamilton works on community engagement for the city housing department and acknowledged the frustration.

“We are again working very closely with the alderman’s office in the 25th Ward, as well as with the consultants regarding outreach. And so we really do want to acknowledge that this engagement process has had its challenges, but it also too it’s a learning process for us all,” Hamilton said.

As for Felipe Luna, 18th and Peoria has loomed large in his life for years — and his motivation for staying involved is clear.

“This is Pilsen, this is always worth fighting for. I think that it’s important that we set the stage. This neighborhood has been one that is boots-on-the-ground working class people, professional people,” Luna said. “Even through our disagreements, we find a way to work together and get things done.”

Indira Khera is a metro reporter at WBEZ. Follow [@KheraIndi](#).

