

NEWS & POLITICS

## 'That land was promised to us'

*Housing advocates fight plans to sell land meant for public housing to private companies.*

by **Debbie-Marie Brown**

September 8, 2023



For years, the Chicago Housing Authority kept the Lathrop Homes mostly vacant and in disrepair while promising to restore the complex to 100 percent public housing. Now it's become a mixed-income community with 400 units of public housing—525 fewer than it used to have.

Credit: Jason Reblando

ne morning in late August, 20 renters and public housing advocates marched in a circle in front of the Chicago I

**O** A protester held a sign that read, “25 Acres of Land for a Billionaire, Really?” Another declared, “We need housing NOT private sports facilities.”

The group was composed of community organizations that span the city, from the Pilsen Alliance to Northside Action for Justice, Access living to the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization. Public housing residents—current and former—from the Dearborn Homes, Wentworth Gardens, ABLA Homes, and Cabrini Green were also present.

CHA recently announced plans to sell off land that belonged to the former ABLA Homes and Robert Taylor Homes—two Chicago public housing projects. One of those land deals is a 25-acre purchase by a **politically-connected billionaire** that will be used to build a **soccer training facility** for Chicago Fire, and the other involves plans to build tennis courts for a **private endeavor** by XS Tennis. The demonstrators were not only opposing those two specific land deals, but the CHA’s entire **2024 Annual Plan draft**, which lists more than 1,180 available land dispositions, or public pieces of land up for grabs by private buyers. The action occurred during CHA’s public comment phase of its draft plan, which closed on August 23.

“We’re here today,” said Roderick Wilson, executive director of Lugenia Burns Hope Center, “because, yet again, CHA is trying to get rid of public housing land.”

In 1995, many of the city’s public housing developments had deteriorated so badly that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) sent its top leadership to take control of the CHA to try to get things back into order. The CHA regained control in 1999, and the next year it launched the ambitious **Plan for Transformation** that would demolish deteriorating public housing and replace it with mixed income housing. The premise was that tens of thousands of African Americans would be displaced while new, habitable mixed-housing was built. But it came with the promise that the displacement was temporary, and would only last ten years. That promise has **remained unfulfilled**. Since then, many people who have yet to be invited back have had to leave the city, move into apartments that eat up most of their income, or have been left homeless.

According to the DePaul University’s Institute for Housing Studies, almost **half of Chicago renters** are cost-burdened, meaning they spend more than 30 percent of their annual income on housing. Between 2015 and 2020, more than 46,000 low-income families moved away from the city, according to **a report** from the University of Illinois Chicago.

Black families have made up most of the public housing in Chicago since the 1960s. But many had to leave the city in the aftermath of the Plan for Transformation because the cost of living became untenable. Even for Black residents who weren’t living in public housing, those who lived in vicinity to it were displaced when

financial speculators gobbled up properties and drove up land values. Locals in nearby buildings couldn't afford to stay and were gentrified out. Today, more than 200,000 people are on the waiting list for public housing in Chicago, including those displaced decades ago.

"We're in year 23 [of waiting]," Wilson told reporters outside the CHA building. "We still have a lot of vacant housing land. But over the past ten years, they've been getting rid of that land for other interests." The crowd behind him yelled back, "That ain't right!" Wilson said there's a housing crisis locally and nationally: evictions are increasing, price gouging for rent and homes has outpaced the wallets of those trying to buy them, and Chicagoans need public housing to combat this. In Chicago, Wilson said, landlords have free reign to raise prices, making public housing one of the few places residents have financial protections.

CHA housing is reserved for residents who meet the agency's **income limit**, capped at 80% of the Chicago metropolitan area's median income. People living in public housing are only required to pay 30 to 40 percent of their wages toward rent. But private landlords can charge as much as they want, and can raise a tenant's rent by any amount for any reason.



Protestors demonstrate outside CHA's downtown office. The agency is under fire for selling off public housing land to private buyers.

Credit: Debbie-Marie Brown

business of providing housing for those who are the most vulnerable, and they have been doing an abysmal job at that. And that's why we're here."

"We know they're not going to do it all, but the audacity to have all of those lots, all the big land for possible land disposition, it's just crazy," Wilson said. "This is our public comment. We're saying we don't want this plan. [CHA's] sending the message that we're not building housing back. We don't want to bring Black people back."

The group accused the CHA of not encouraging real community engagement for building back public housing. Instead, they see CHA as focused on getting rid of the land to "make a quick buck" for whatever public or private endeavors they want. They also want Mayor Brandon Johnson to weigh in on the issue since he promised on the campaign trail he would put a moratorium on selling off public land to private companies.

"Now's the time. He's in power, this is time to do it," Wilson said. "[CHA] is supposed to be about the

HUD requires CHA to list all properties and pieces of land, including public and affordable housing, in its draft plan, or more formally, the Proposed FY2024 Moving to Work (MTW) Annual Plan. As an MTW agency, CHA is permitted flexibility in funding and regulations by HUD for endeavors specifically geared toward increasing low-income housing options and encouraging self-sufficiency from residents. Now that the public comment period for the 2024 draft has closed, the CHA's board and HUD must give their approval. It is customary for CHA to include a list of all vacant public housing land in this draft to give itself flexibility to pursue more affordable housing opportunities that become available over the next year.

CHA shared with the *Reader* that, as outlined in their annual plan, they intend to follow HUD's process to build mixed-income housing at legacy CHA locations like Cabrini Green, **LeClaire Courts**, Harold Ickes Homes, Washington Park Homes, Stateway Gardens, and Robert Taylor Homes. But in order to resume building public and affordable units at these places, the CHA board must approve specific plans.

Currently, 15 housing developments are under construction in the city that include 650 apartments for families on CHA's waiting list, and they expect seven additional developments with over 380 public housing units to close by the end of 2023. That's a drop in the bucket for the more than 50,000 people still waiting for housing under the Plan for Transformation launched two decades ago.

Mayor Johnson's office did not respond to requests for comment.

*“You took the land from ‘em, you threw ‘em out. They had no place to go.”*

Beverly Feagins is a former resident of the Harold Ickes Homes, a public housing complex on the city's near south side that was demolished between 2009 and 2010. She lived there for decades, from the time she was baby until she moved in 2009 to the complex where she lives today, Dearborn Homes. Today, the city plans to build a high school on the land where the Harold Ickes Homes once stood, though the plan has become **mired in controversy** after residents and some elected officials objected to the use of CHA land for the school.

Feagins remembers that growing up, Harold Ickes was a “village,” clean and safe, where everybody looked out for each other. But she witnessed the building’s management get poorer and poorer. Eventually, the buildings themselves started to suffer as well. “They told us we had to move, but we had to move under the promise that we will return back. I haven’t returned back yet. I haven’t gotten in none of the new spaces. I’ve been turned down.”

Feagins worries the city is letting the quality of existing public housing deteriorate, particularly those along the State Street corridor, so it can demolish those buildings and profit off the land. As one of the 200,000 people on the public housing waiting list, Feagins said she witnessed people new to the city offered housing before her and others who were displaced in the years since the CHA launched the Plan for Transformation. Many who could not find an option outside of public housing, folks still on the waiting list, are now homeless.

“Put some money in CHA developments that are already there, bring them up to par,” Feagins said. “You selling land for school and stuff. That land was promised to us. And we are not there. Put apartments back up there. If something is left, fine, but take care of us first. Take care of home.”

Waketa Kleinper is a former resident of Wentworth Gardens, a public housing complex still standing today. She also worked for CHA, in leasing and housing management. Kleinper volunteered with the ***Residents’ Journal***, a newspaper run by CHA residents, and she still keeps track of those archives at the Chicago Public Library. She told reporters gathered at the August demonstration outside the agency’s downtown office that she remembers the promises made and broken in the Plan for Transformation because reported on it herself. She “know they lyin.” Kleinper noted that the CHA has not said how many people have been relocated.

“They just want to get rid of everything and get rid of all the people. But where the people supposed to go?” she said. “You took the land from ‘em, you threw ‘em out. They had no place to go.”

Leone Jose Bicchieri is the executive director of Working Family Solidarity, which unites low-income families of different backgrounds, especially African American and Latinx families on the south and southwest side, to facilitate labor rights education and interracial collaboration for better jobs. He told onlookers at the demonstration that although the organization usually focuses on access to better jobs and job creation, it joined the fight for affordable housing because many of its members are being priced out.



“Whereas our Latino members tend to be gentrified out through the rising property values, the African American members that we have in various places [are] getting pushed out because of the destruction



of public housing,” Bicchieri said. “Latinos are only about 16 percent of the giant public housing complexes, but we’re still being pushed out. And we’re in solidarity with the African American brothers and sisters. “

He said that African Americans and Latinx people are often pitted against each other by the news media and city government for scarce resources like housing and jobs. But he’s here to announce that they’re not going to compete, they’re going to unite.

“And if CHA is not careful,” he added, “CHA is soon going to stand for ‘Can’t House African Americans.’”

Janice Antonio is a disabled and widowed member of Access Living, an organization that serves people with an array of disabilities, and is also run by disabled people. Antonio reached out to their group after a nonprofit responsible for paying her rent stopped doing so, and she was evicted from her home. Before reaching out to Access Living, she tried contacting the City of Chicago, CHA, HUD, and the Office of the Inspector General but got no response about a new, long-term housing situation.

For the past eight weeks, the city put her up in a hotel off Michigan Avenue. She had radio silence concerning her case until four days before the August demonstration, when she learned the city finally referred her case to a case manager.

“Does that make any sense that I’m in a hotel for eight weeks?” Antonio said. “Don’t tell me that a hotel, right off Michigan Avenue too, is cheaper. I know how much things cost and this is not a good use of taxpayers dollars.”

She said that everyone is going to face disabilities as they age, and have things they’re no longer able to do. But even if she were in public housing now and off the waiting list, the CHA elevator functionality is unpredictable depending on where you go.

“There is no way anybody can tell me that it’s cheaper to put people up in hotels than to house them,” Antonio said. “I’m nobody but I am a citizen and I know something is not right.”

The coalition’s next step is to solidify a date to meet with the mayor about their concerns. Wilson, of the Hope Center, says he’s confident they’ll get a meeting, but he’s less confident about what will come of it. They hope Johnson will put a moratorium on public land sales but Wilson is skeptical the mayor has the power to do so

without first removing current CHA leadership and replacing them with leaders invested in salvaging public housing land.

Meanwhile, Antonio and the 50,000 others displaced by the Plan for Transformation are anxiously waiting for the housing promised to them two decades ago.

“I’m on a waitlist and it doesn’t go anywhere,” Janice Antonio told the *Reader*. “Look at how many people are waiting.” 