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As Obama Presidential Center opens, neighborhoods await the fiscal return


Amid worry about displacement, residents and business owners note that the project is just one of several that could bring about change.

By [David Roeder](#) | Jun 9, 2026, 10:32am CDT



Malki Brown, owner of commercial landscaping firm MGE Property Solutions, said his business has been signed for landscape work involving about three dozen vacant lots, as Woodlawn property owners pay more attention to their sites near the Obama Presidential Center. | [Anthony Vazquez/Sun-Times](#)

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For weeks, it has drawn people for a soft opening and now it's ready for its formal debut on the western edge of Jackson Park. The \$850 million project spiffed up a corner of the park and produced a net addition in green space.

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The center is a notable achievement, even if its tower, roughly the size of a 20-story building, conveys more sternness than welcome, relying for ornament on a quote high on its facade that no mortal can read.

The architectural reviews are mixed, but for South Side residents and business owners, the more pressing concern is its economic impact. Acting almost as a hinge between neighborhoods prosperous or struggling, the Obama Center is expected to draw attention and money into areas, such as Woodlawn and South Shore, that can lack both.

Many worry about rising rents and evictions. Displacement is a favorite word of those anxious about impacts. Supporters describe change by addition rather than eviction. They say the Obama Foundation project honoring the nation's

But the center is not in a vacuum. In time, it may be hard to distinguish between what the center brings and what happens for other reasons.

Malki Brown, owner of commercial landscaping firm MGE Property Solutions, said he's enthused about the Obama Center. "We're getting visitors and attention now from people around the country, even around the world," he said.

Brown said Woodlawn property owners are paying more heed to appearances. His business has been signed for landscape work involving about three dozen vacant lots.



Billy "Rap" Brown mows the yard outside of a Kenwood residential building, as Malki Brown, owner of commercial landscaping firm MGE Property Solutions, trims the weeds. | Anthony Vazquez/Sun-Times

His part of the South Side is benefiting from a "trifecta" of good news, Brown said. There's the nascent [Illinois Quantum and Microelectronics Park](#) and a

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Others might add the University of Chicago's South Campus expansion, pushing its holdings south of the Midway Plaisance into Woodlawn. Hyde Park-based UChicago has a long and controversial history in using its might in urban renewal.

"The South Side has been going up since 2006," Brown, once a Realtor, said. Obama was the junior senator from Illinois that year.

As for displacement, Brown said, "I live in South Shore. I'm just not seeing this big push to get people out. I'm seeing the same people on the street that I've always seen."

Restaurateur and South Shore Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Tonya Trice said the Obama Center will help because it's on a busy commercial corridor, and its staff "is intentional about partnering with other organizations."

The center's projected annual attendance is about 600,000, a bit less than half the yearly draw of its Jackson Park neighbor, the Griffin Museum of Science and

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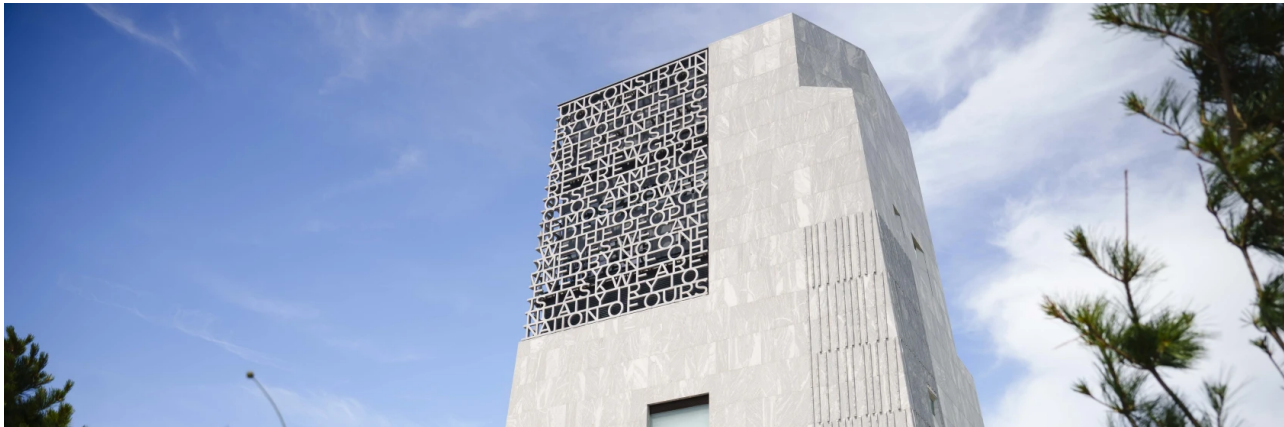
straight home. With a restaurant, library, public gardens and an athletic center, the [Obama Center](#) is supposed to foster sticking around.

Obama Foundation CEO Valerie Jarrett predicted a “tremendous impact” from the project but was cautious about detailed projections. “I would rather wait until we’re a year” beyond the opening, she said.

In the meantime, she highlights the nearly 5,000 construction jobs from the project and the hiring of 150 museum staff, joining the 325 who work for the foundation. She said daily crowds during the soft opening ranged from 1,700 to more than 2,000.

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The Museum Tower at the Obama Presidential Center. | Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

A senior advisor to Obama throughout his presidency and a former city planning commissioner, Jarrett said the center's commitment to work with local groups and the city should ensure fairness in surrounding development.

While there's been a steady increase in commercial rents in Woodlawn and South Shore, Trice said it's mostly due to sharply higher property taxes, common to many communities. Other business owners also blame increased costs for property insurance.

In March, residents of the Chaney Bragg Apartments on East 65th Street said they were trying to stay in their homes after a buyer offered them cash to move out. They attributed the offer to speculators dealing in buildings near the Obama Center. The building is in foreclosure, and residents said it has been neglected.

DePaul University's Institute for Housing Studies documented spikes in multifamily housing values in Woodlawn and, to a lesser extent, South Shore in recent years.

"The Obama Center is a driver, but there's a lot going on there," said the institute's executive director, Geoff Smith. "It's a complex story as you have neighborhoods that haven't seen catalytic investments. When that investment finally comes, the real estate market changes."

The institute has seen prices for single and multifamily homes double since 2019 on the east side of Woodlawn, closest to the Obama Center, in data shared with

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In May, Illinois Answers Project published a report saying city efforts to curb displacement in Woodlawn have been largely ineffective. It's difficult for city government to wrangle the private real estate market, short of imposing rent controls that could be counterproductive. The city's Department of Housing, meanwhile, said it's working with local groups to "relaunch" protections for Woodlawn.

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An aerial view of Woodlawn, with the Obama Presidential Center seen in the background. | Tyler Pasciak
LaRiviere/Sun-Times

Bill Eager, senior vice president at nonprofit developer Preservation of Affordable Housing, said he's heard of no dramatic rent increases in Woodlawn and South Shore. He said while South Shore apartment buildings have increased in value, "I've heard that some investors who went in the last few years are having buyer's remorse. I'm not sure that rents in the market have rewarded their speculation."

Eager said neighborhood upgrades shouldn't mean evictions. "You don't want to see people forced out. You do want to see investment. There's still a formidable amount of vacant property there. There's room to grow," he said.

For the Rev. Richard Tolliver, president and CEO of St. Edmund's Redevelopment Corp., growth means residents must accept change — not always a comfortable prospect. He noted how racially motivated redlining and covenants in land sales segregated much of the South Side, and now people need to accept diversity.

"If a neighborhood is to be viable, it has to be mixed income," he said.

His firm grew from St. Edmund's Episcopal Church as an effort to improve housing in Washington Park, just west of Woodlawn. Tolliver said it has put more than \$100 million into 34 buildings since 1990.

He said the Obama Center is positioned well to encourage the prosperity of Kenwood and Hyde Park to spread south. "It's only natural that development will expand," he said.

Built into that is the hope that interest in Obama, his museum and the messages it delivers about democracy to a new generation will continue through the years.

“Our country has long had an arc of improvement,” Jarrett said, referring to a famous quote of Martin Luther King Jr. about the moral universe and justice. The center’s campus has a sculptural arch by Martin Puryear that references the quote.

The arc is not only long, as King said, but it demands patience.



From the Nelson Mandela Sky Room, a person walks under artist Martin Puryear’s sculpture Bending the Arc at the Obama Presidential Center. | Pat Nabong/Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

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