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POLITICS

What will Obama center mean for nearby home values on the South Side? Wary of being priced out, groups push for housing benefits and protections

By A.D. Quig
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Lee E. Wren, right, signs a petition for an effort to provide community benefits to the South Shore area. (Michael Blackshire / Chicago Tribune)

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Chicago's South Shore neighborhood [is at a crossroads](#), with its high vacancies, preponderance of renters and the looming completion of the nearby Obama Presidential Center that is contributing to rising property values.

Now, frustrated by city efforts that they say fall short in preventing displacement around the Obama site, a group of Chicagoans is trying to place a referendum on the Feb. 28 ballot asking for new housing protections for nearby residents.



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A similar campaign by the same coalition won protections for Woodlawn after a five-year campaign and long negotiations with city housing officials. But organizers in South Shore say they were shut out, and that initial steps announced by the Chicago Department of Housing to help area condo owners did not go far enough.

Over the past several weeks, the South Shore Community Benefits Agreement coalition has been knocking on doors and asking voters to sign a petition calling for city leaders to “prevent the displacement” of local residents with a sweeping list of asks: funding home repairs, increasing home ownership, providing property tax and rental relief, implementing eviction protections, banning application and move-in fees, developing affordable housing on city-owned vacant lots and creating local jobs programs.

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Volunteers Sahar Punjwani, from left, Bethel Kifle, Bronwen Schumacher and Brent Bradford work on gathering petition signatures, aiming to address affordable housing issues in the South Shore neighborhood. (Michael Blackshire / Chicago Tribune)

From “some of the current alderpeople, even the mayor, we keep hearing this thing around: ‘Folks aren’t worried about displacement,’ or ‘displacement is not happening,’ or ‘it’s displacement theater,’” said Dixon Romeo, a leader of the CBA coalition and of Not Me We, a community organization focusing on housing, organization education and mutual aid.

The referendum, which the group aims to get on the ballot in 16 precincts, would help show city officials that displacement concerns are real, “that this is a priority for South Shore and that we need to make this happen as soon as possible,” given the center is slated to open in the fall of 2025, Romeo said.

The coalition is circulating a separate petition asking nearby Woodlawn residents whether the city-owned vacant lot on 63rd Street and South Blackstone Avenue should be “at least 75% truly affordable housing where working families don’t pay more than 30% of their income in rent — to ensure that residents can afford to stay in the neighborhood as housing costs soar?”

The questions would be nonbinding, but backers are hopeful inclusion on the ballot and a “yes” vote would help sway the area’s aldermen to take action. Long-serving Ald. Leslie Hairston, whose 5th Ward includes the biggest chunk of the neighborhood, is retiring at the end of this term. Other aldermen with portions of the neighborhood — Michelle Harris, 8th, and Gregory Mitchell, 7th — are running for reelection on the same February ballot.



Brent Bradford listens to Dixon Romeo, not shown, during an affordable housing volunteering meeting on Oct. 22. (Michael Blackshire / Chicago Tribune)

There has been a loss of lower-cost rental units citywide, but South Shore has seen its share of renter-occupied households with rents under \$900 — a key measure of affordability — drop by 23% since 2010, a slightly larger drop than the city. Households with rents under \$900

dropped from nearly 12,000 in 2010 to roughly 8,000 in 2020, according to census data analyzed by DePaul University's Institute for Housing Studies.

Housing prices in South Shore, meanwhile, have grown faster than prices for the city overall since 2015, when the Obama Foundation announced the center would be located on the South Side.

Between 2015 and 2021, the median sale price of single-family homes grew nearly 200% in South Shore, but by just 50% in the city, according to recorded deed transfers tracked by the Institute. For condos, that number has grown by 117% in South Shore, compared with 9% citywide. Median sales prices for buildings with two to four units have grown by 231% in that span in South Shore, and 67% citywide.

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That's welcome news to current homeowners whose property is worth more now, says Sarah Ware, the president of the Chicago Association of Realtors. Ware has lived in South Shore for 15 years.

"It's nice to see, 'Wait, I got a little equity now?'" said Ware, who describes the neighborhood as a lakefront gem. "A lot of my neighbors, our houses are a large equity builder. It's been disinvested for so many years that we're hoping trends will follow when it comes to retail."





Volunteer Bronwen Schumacher, left, talks with Lee E. Wren about an affordable housing petition on Oct. 22. (Michael Blackshire / Chicago Tribune)

For their part, city officials say they've been actively working on measures to help homeowners and renters. In July, the City Council created a new pilot preservation program that sought to help owners of condo and co-op buildings in South Shore at risk of being converted to high-cost rental units.

The funding, which has not yet been approved by City Council, is designed to help owners pay for deferred maintenance or get loans for fix-ups. Ideally, it would allow longtime residents, "many of them older and on fixed incomes," to stay in their homes affordably, the city said in a release.

Housing Department spokeswoman Samantha Hill said the department has held "over 100 meetings" with homeowners associations in the neighborhood to get their governance set up to set them up to receive the loans. Nearly 150 units in 14 buildings in the neighborhood have "been stabilized or are in process" of being preserved through the city's existing troubled-buildings initiative.

As for the city-owned lot in Woodlawn, Hill said officials anticipate developing "a larger mixed-use planning effort that will include affordable housing" in the area between the Metra tracks and Stony Island Avenue.

"The Department considers this a gateway site to Woodlawn's redeveloping 63rd Street Corridor," and the city will be coordinating closely with the Woodlawn Central Development, the YMCA and Mount Carmel High School Campus, Hill said.

The City Council also recently approved construction of a handful of new affordable homes, and a proposal for an affordable 33-unit building is planned as part of the Thrive Exchange development, Hill said. The city has also provided rental relief through the pandemic citywide, and is providing money for legal counsel for individuals going through eviction proceedings.

But Romeo said the city has not acted urgently enough, especially to address rising rents.

"At this point, the city has a long history of saying things and either doing nothing or doing the opposite," he said. "We want to work with the mayor, alderperson, the Housing Department to get a holistic housing ordinance that encapsulates all the things we've put in our demands, that helps renters, condo owners and homeowners."