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ADVOCATES, COMMUNITY MEMBERS DIG INTO HYDE PARK'S NEED FOR AFFORDABLE SENIOR HOUSING

Emma Janssen, contributing writer

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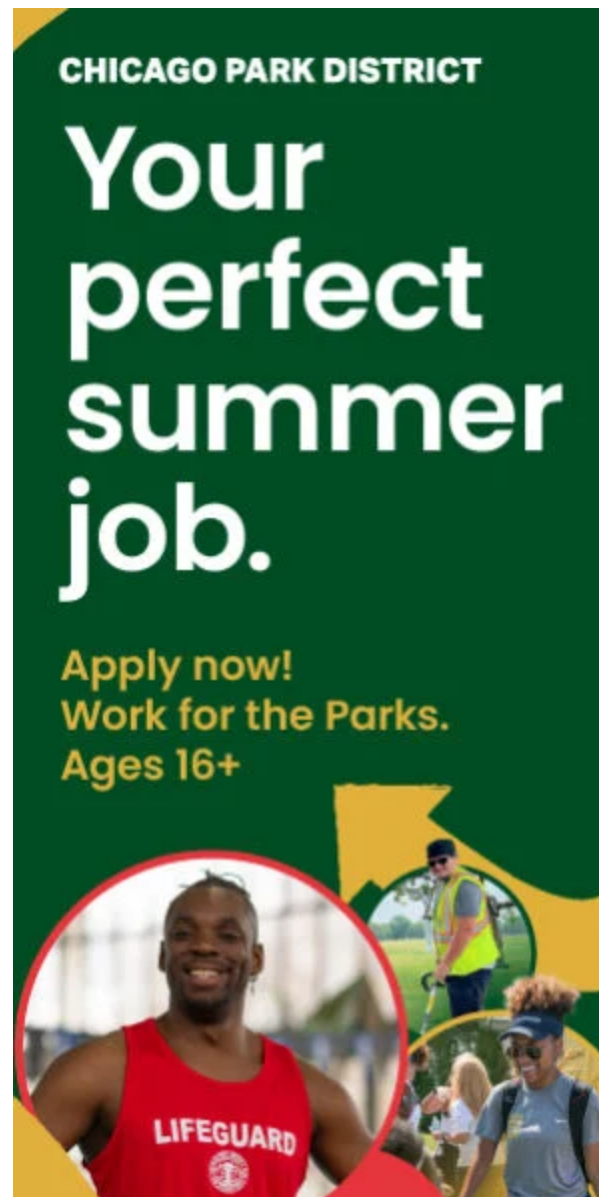
Coalition for Equitable Community Development hosts a community meeting on a project to build more affordable housing for older adults at St. Paul the Redeemer Church, 4945 S. Dorchester Ave., on Saturday, May 11, 2024.

Emma Janssen

The Coalition for Equitable Community Development (CECD), a local housing advocacy group, is working on a project to build affordable, independent housing for adults over 65 in Hyde Park.

In a community meeting on Saturday, the group convened dozens of neighbors, experts and developers to share progress on the project and provide a snapshot of the scarcity of this kind of housing on the South Side.

Leading the meeting in the Church of St. Paul the Redeemer basement, 4945 S. Dorchester Ave., was Linda Thisted, president of CECD; Kemena Brooks, the director of development at The Community Builders; Dixon Romeo, executive director of Not Me We; and Lissette Castañeda, the city's Department of Housing commissioner.



Thisted kicked off the meeting by giving an overview of the project to date. She emphasized that

the CECD's goal for the building is to provide housing for people such as "retired nurses, administrative assistants and lab techs," as opposed to retired University of Chicago professors who may have greater financial security.

"There is a crisis in affordable housing in Chicago, and frankly, every place in the country," said Thisted. "There has never been more of a need for affordable housing advocacy than there is now."

The need is especially acute for older adults on the South Side, Thisted added. According to a 2023 report by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, 14.3% of Hyde Park residents are 65 or older. Citywide, 12.8% of residents are 65 or older.

(According to the CECD, affordability is defined as a household spending 30% of its monthly income or less on all housing expenses.)

Though the project is a long way from completion, Thisted said CECD is deep in the search for a suitable lot for the building. She hinted that the coalition is making progress on a few potential lots, and filled the group in on the lot proposals that got rejected: the Hyde Park Bank parking lot, the Piccadilly building parking lot and the Office Depot building in the Hyde Park Shopping Center all said no.

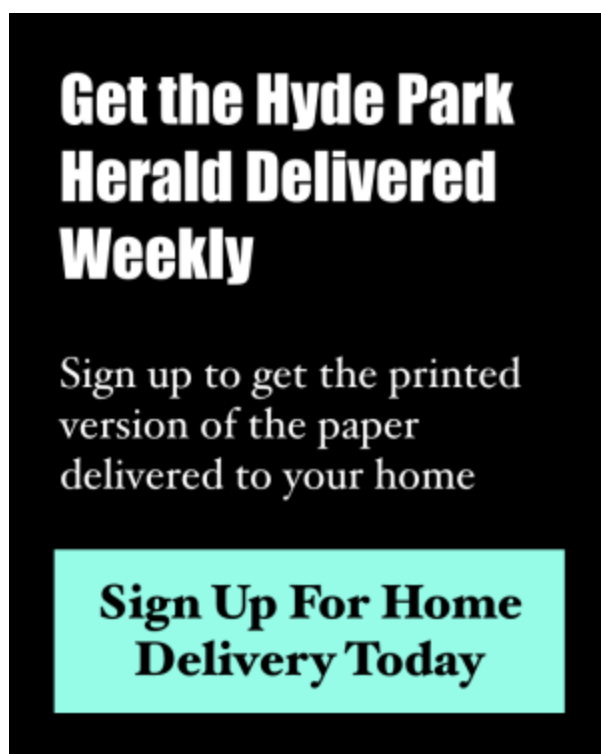
Kemena Brooks, the director of development at The Community Builders (TCB), a for-profit affordable housing developer, gave an overview of the group's success in developing similar projects in Chicago.

"Our mission is to build and sustain strong communities where all people can thrive," said Brooks. "You certainly can see a direct connection with the coalition's mission around creating diverse communities through affordable housing."

TCB was founded in 2000 and has been working in Chicago for 20 years. Its operations are three-pronged: the group develops mixed-income housing communities; provides on-site housing management teams and delivers neighborhood amenities such as parks, wellness centers and small-business units.

TCB has so far constructed 2,531 units in Chicagoland with 178,116-square-feet of commercial space. Its commercial space is often used by family- and Black-owned businesses, Brooks said.

Dixon Romeo, a lifelong South Shore resident and the executive director of Not Me We, provided a larger context to the scarcity of middle- and low-income housing in the area. Not Me We is a grassroots community organizing group that focuses on economic and housing issues on the South Side



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Focusing on South Shore, Romeo described the neighborhood as “overwhelmingly low-income,” which leaves residents susceptible to displacement and gentrification.

The median income in the neighborhood is just \$29,000. According to the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University, 76% of South Shore residents are tenants. The neighborhood has long been considered to be the “eviction capital” of Cook County.

Romeo emphasized the shared struggle between neighborhoods on the South Side, and described how residents priced-out of Hyde Park might move to South Shore, subsequently raising rents and further displacing South Shore residents.

Castañeda of Chicago’s Department of Housing (DOH) noted that the time is now for more affordable development in the city.

“Our mission is to support the creation and preservation of affordable housing,” she said. “We want to make sure that it is affordable, that it’s safe, and that it’s decent.”

Among pending initiatives Castañeda detailed is Mayor Brandon Johnson's proposed \$1.25 billion Housing and Economic Development Bond project, which will give out grants for development projects, fund affordable housing and support small business growth, among other goals.

Several residents at the meeting said that affordable and accessible housing options would make all the difference for them and their family members.

Eleanor Hall, a member of Hyde Park Village, a community group for older adults in the neighborhood, said that Montgomery Place is currently the only independent living option for older adults in Hyde Park.

"I certainly know that it's very, very expensive. And I know a number of people that have moved out of the neighborhood. Probably mainly because they can't afford Montgomery Place," she explained.

Arnold Bradford, the executive director of Crossroads Collective, a transit-focused organization on the South Side, told the Herald that his sister is an adult over 65 who lives in Hyde Park and faces accessibility issues in her current housing, which isn't designed with older adults in mind.

Bradford described one incident where his sister fell down in her apartment and had no way to let anyone in the front door to help her up.

"Thank goodness it was a weekday, so she called a neighbor and the neighbor got people in the office to come up (and unlock her door). But what if it's after hours or the weekend? Those are the kinds of minor issues that aren't minor, they're life and death issues," he said.