Preservation Chicago Unveils the 2018 Chicago 7 Most Endangered...

Jackson Park, Midway Plaisance, & South Shore Cultural Center

Bounded roughly by Lake Michigan, 56th, Stony Island and 71st

Jackson Park, Midway Plaisance, South Shore Cultural Center

Address: Bounded by Lake Michigan, 56th, Stony Island and 71st

Landscape Architects/Architects:
Frederick Law Olmsted & Calvert Vaux (Jackson Park & Midway Plaisance)
Benjamin Marshall & Charles Fox, Thomas Hawkes (South Shore Cultural Center)

Date: c.1893 - 1916

Neighborhood: Hyde Park, Woodlawn, South Shore

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1895 Revised General Plan for Jackson Park Map Credit © Digitalcollections.nypl.org
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Chicago 7: Jackson Park, Midway Plaisance, and South Shore Cultural Center

OVERVIEW:
We at Preservation Chicago welcome the Barack Obama Presidential Center to Chicago’s South Side. We would strongly support a proposal to construct the Center on private land to avoid impacting the Olmsted-designed Jackson Park.

Jackson Park, with its connecting Midway, and South Shore Cultural Center appeared on Preservation Chicago’s 2017 Chicago 7 Most Endangered list. A year later, while a few of the details of the proposals have changed, the overall threat to these important parks remain, so they have been included for a second year.

Jackson Park, Midway Plaisance, and the South Shore Cultural Center, fronting Lake Michigan, are among the greatest historical and natural assets of Chicago’s South Side. Their borders meet at South Shore Drive and 67th Street, and also at Stony Island and the Midway Plaisance. The future of these parks have become more directly intertwined with several interlocking, multi-million dollar, new construction proposals being overseen by the Chicago Park District, city agencies, and an array of non-profit organizations and private contractors.

Jackson Park is the proposed site of the Tod Williams and Billie Tsien-designed Barack Obama Presidential Center (between 60th and 63rd to the north and south, and Cornell Drive and Stony Island Avenue to the east and west) being constructed by the private non-profit Obama Presidential Foundation. One of the most significant recent changes is that the complex will not include the Barack Obama Presidential Library. Instead, the proposed development to be built on public park space will include a private museum, Obama Foundation office suites, event spaces and a variety of community spaces of which only some will be free and open to the public. The planned Obama Presidential Library has been replaced with a local branch of the Chicago Public Library. This change will possibly shift the burden of long-term operating costs of the proposed public library and other related structures from the Federal Government and Obama Foundation to the taxpayers.
Other significant impacts are the closing of Cornell Drive, originally known as West Lagoon Drive and Bridal Path, which is an original Frederick Law Olmsted feature of the park, and which was greatly expanded in 1960, from a modest and beautiful-winding recreational parkway drive and carriageway. This closure if approved for a private entity, would also result in a significant widening of both South Lake Shore Drive, originally called Shore Drive and Harbor Drive in the Olmsted Plans, and South Stony Island Avenue, which will adversely affect the Jackson Park landscape and these other roadways, in addition to being a great cost and burden to the taxpayers with initial costs estimates of $175 million, according to the City of Chicago.

The Chicago Park District has proposed a $30 million plan to combine two golf courses, the Jackson Park 18-hole and South Shore Cultural Center 9-hole golf course into one larger 18-hole course, suitable for hosting PGA Championship games. A private non-profit group, the Chicago Parks Golf Alliance has been selected by the Chicago Park District to fundraise and commission the course design, which is being developed away from public view by private contractor Tiger Woods’ TGR Design firm. This design may also result in the cutting of approximately 2,000 trees, including many old-growth trees, according to initial estimates from the design team. The golf course should be reconsidered for another site in Chicago, perhaps along the south lakefront, from the Lake Shore Drive Extension to the former U.S. Steel Site, thus providing three golf courses for a city the size of Chicago. Additionally, this would result in a unique and spectacular lakefront golf course for Chicago, and extend the park system southward along the lakefront.

Recently, Jackson Park was also the site of improvements sponsored by another private non-profit organization, Project 120, which included a Yoko Ono sculpture installed outside the historic Osaka Garden. Project 120’s website also includes suggested plans for a variety of major changes to the park landscape including a visitor’s center, music pavilion, and others. The combined impact of the proposals would result, not in minor modifications to one small section, but in widespread and major changes throughout Olmsted’s great masterpiece.

In the past year, some of the proposals originally presented by Project 120 have re-appeared in the Chicago Park District’s South Lakefront Framework Plan, the development of which is being conducted largely by private, for-profit design and planning contractors Smith Group JJR.

Because portions of both Jackson Park and the South Shore Cultural Center are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, a Federal “Section 106” review process mandated by the National Preservation Act and was triggered in fall 2017. This review process is being managed by the City of Chicago Department of Planning and many of the proposals it is tasked with reviewing have already been publicly endorsed by high-ranking City officials, raising concerns regarding the ability to conduct a rigorous and transparent review process.
HISTORY:
The historical significance of Jackson Park, Midway Plaisance, and the South Shore Cultural Center are monumental and well-known to most audiences, including national and international scholars of architectural landscape design, historic landscapes, and cultural heritage. Both sites are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and certain features, structures and buildings of both sites are Designated Chicago Landmarks. The 500-acre Jackson Park was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, perhaps the most famous landscape designer of the 19th century and widely considered to be “the father of American landscape architecture.” Jackson Park was also the site of one of the most important events in Chicago’s history and, arguably one of the most important cultural events of the 19th century, the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893. Jackson Park is connected via the Midway to Washington Park and then to Chicago’s Emerald Necklace of great parks and boulevards, forming one of the most magnificent networks of urban parkland in the country.

The Mediterranean-revival South Shore Cultural Center, originally the South Shore Country Club, was designed by the notable Chicago architectural firm of Marshall & Fox and landscape designer Thomas Hawkes, and is one of the most recognizable landmarks on Chicago’s South Side. In its more recent past, it was the site of Barack and Michelle Obama’s wedding reception. Its transformation from a private club to a public park is a major community preservation success story. In 1975, South Shore, Hyde Park and Woodlawn neighborhood activists famously rescued the former private South Shore Country Club from demolition. The Chicago Park District and City of Chicago had the foresight to purchase the grounds from the failing country club, yet plans called for the demolition of the club and supporting buildings. After a lengthy community preservation advocacy effort and under intense community pressure, the Chicago Park District decided not to demolish the historic buildings, and in time renovated and restored the buildings. Ultimately, they supported the Chicago Landmark Designation of most of the former country club structures.

The creation of the South Shore Cultural Center as a public facility open to all visitors represents a victory of diversity and inclusion over the South Shore Country Club’s legacy of exclusion.
THREATS:
The threats to Jackson Park and South Shore Cultural Center are multiple and interrelated. They include the construction of the Obama Presidential Center in Jackson Park, the expansion and total redesign of the golf course, and various other development proposals which appear in the South Lakefront Framework Plan. Additional threats include the removal of Olmsted-designed Cornell Drive, a widening of South Lake Shore Drive, and a widening of Stony Island Avenue to accommodate a privately-run museum. The proposed widening of South Lake Shore Drive will likely impact both Jackson Park and the Lakefront, and impact access to Lake Michigan, the harbors, 57th Street Beach, and 63rd Street Beach.

Preservation Chicago and other advocacy groups remain concerned about the level of influence by privately-held organizations in the management of public parkland, including the Obama Foundation, the Chicago Parks Golf Alliance, Project 120, and Smith Group JJR. As non-profits and private companies, they serve their respective boards of directors and owners, and are perhaps motivated by a different set of priorities and objectives than those of the public and governmental agencies. These private organizations do not directly serve the public and have no obligation to include the public in the planning process. However, Preservation Chicago acknowledges that the Obama Foundation has hosted a series of public and consulting party/stakeholder meetings that have allowed public comments to be provided to the design team. The central challenge is that the control of public lands have been relinquished to private entities.

Without rigorous oversight, the protection of historic landscapes and structures can be significantly compromised. Last year, Preservation Chicago joined a wide consortium of advocacy groups, neighborhood organizations, and community leaders in calling for a transparent, comprehensive, and thoughtful planning process from the City of Chicago, Chicago Park District, Obama Foundation, Chicago Parks Golf Alliance, and Project 120. The South Lakefront Framework Plan was presented as an effort to create an open and deliberate planning process and a way to ensure that the various infrastructure changes being proposed by multiple private organizations would be coordinated under the publicly-accountable umbrella of the Chicago Park District, and to allow the voices of Chicagoleans to be heard and acknowledged in this process. Unfortunately, the South Lakefront Framework Plan has added another layer of meetings, contractors, plans, and organizational timelines and the benefits have been limited.

Community voices at the South Lakefront Framework Plan forums, increased public outreach to community stakeholders from the Obama Foundation, and the tireless advocacy of two local community groups, the Midway Plaisance Advisory Council and Save the Midway, were successful in redirecting the planned multi-story parking garage on the Midway Plaisance to another location.
Furthermore, multiple rounds of community input and design updates have shown key constituent requests largely dismissed to accommodate the programmatic priorities of the Obama Foundation and Chicago Parks Golf Alliance, casting doubt on the good faith and transparency of the public process.

Beyond minor and incremental changes to the plans, specific threats to the historic park landscapes remain. According to the Obama Foundation, approximately 300 trees (many of which are mature old-growth) would be clear-cut, and a major regrading of the site would be undertaken for the construction of the Obama Presidential Center. An additional 2,000 trees would be clear-cut and major regrading undertaken for the new fairways of the expanded golf course. A formal survey of Jackson Park and South Shore Cultural Center trees, detailing type, age, and caliper, should be conducted along with an assessment of which trees will be bulldozed, and the findings released to the public for comment and discussion before any work begins. Also, while an inventory of historic structures in Jackson Park has been approved, there are a number of critical needs for historic buildings that require urgent repair to stabilize and return them to public use.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
Preservation Chicago requests that the City of Chicago and the Chicago Park District take into account the full range of stakeholders in this process and balance the interests of their constituents with the development of private entities. We request that they prioritize an open and transparent process in determining the future of our public lands and green spaces. Additionally, we request that they protect the historic integrity of these nationally and locally significant landscapes, structures and buildings, so they may remain accessible assets for the people of the South Side and Chicago for generations to come. This would include consideration of narrowing the Olmsted-designed historic parkways, instead of closing them and removing them completely, and retaining South Lake Shore Drive, with its current proportions and winding Lakefront Boulevard characteristics, along with Stony Island Avenue as they currently exist. This would render unnecessary the proposed widening of the other roadways and perhaps save hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars.

In 2017, a handful of local community groups had come forward to advocate for changes to the proposed development plans. The number of organizations has grown exponentially, expanding well beyond the local stakeholders to include advocates from around the city and nation. Community organizations leading the advocacy effort include Jackson Park Watch, Save of the Midway, Midway Plaisance Advisory Council, Coalition to Save Jackson Park, Blacks in Green, The Hyde Park Historical Society, among others, and the city-wide parks advocacy organization, Friends of the Park.
Preservation Chicago reaffirms its commitment to providing a constructive, preservation-oriented voice in this large and complex conversation. As a consulting party in the Federally-mandated Section 106 review process, Preservation Chicago will continue to strongly advocate for the importance of protecting historic features, including the historic Olmsted landscapes. We continue to work to ensure that any construction in the historic parks will be conducted with sensitivity to historic features, historic structures, and historic landscapes.

This includes archeologically important sites such as the foundations of the Women’s Building designed by Sophia Hayden, the only female architect who designed a building for the Exposition; the Children’s Building; and other important structures and features from the World Columbian Exposition in 1893, likely hidden below the soil line. Also, construction would impact the Woman’s Garden, also known as the Perennial Garden in Jackson Park, designed by May McAdams in 1937, a noted female landscape architect.
We remain hopeful that the federal review process mandated by the National Preservation Act will reinforce the importance of protecting the important features of the park and minimizing the adverse effects of new construction. Specifically, we want to insure that the South Shore Cultural Center be included in the Section 106 process already underway, or a new Section 106 process be initiated specifically for the golf course expansion project at both Jackson Park and the South Shore Cultural Center.

Furthermore, Preservation Chicago will continue to push for a written agreement from the Chicago Park District that some percentage of the many millions of dollars to be invested in these potential projects will be earmarked for the badly-needed maintenance and rehabilitation of historic park structures, such as the South Shore Cultural Center main building and stables and in Jackson Park, including but not limited to, the Comfort Station, the Iowa Building, the Columbia/Darrow Bridge, public paths and meadows, and ball fields, many of which are crumbling.
**SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. Consider relocating the Obama Presidential Center to another nearby site, outside of Jackson Park, and another location other than the historic Frederick Law Olmsted-designed parkland and greenspace which belong to the people of Chicago. Perhaps this Presidential Center could be considered for a site nearby on property owned by the University of Chicago, or the approximately nine acres of long-vacant parcels next to the Green Line, adjacent to Washington Park.

2. Consider repairing and restoring the Jackson Park Golf Course, said to be the oldest public golf course west of the Allegheny Mountains. This would be in lieu of a major reworking and combining of two golf courses with 27 holes, into one professional PGA-level golf course of 18 holes and destroying approximately 2,000 trees, some of them old growth trees and even predating the Olmsted-designed park.

3. Consider moving the proposed TGR Golf Course concept for Jackson Park southward, to the new South Lake Shore Drive Extension and extending to the site of the former and now demolished United States Steel factories in the South Chicago neighborhood. This would be a third golf course option for a major city like Chicago, in lieu of just one golf course and an economic boost to the South Chicago and the East Side neighborhoods of Chicago. Perhaps a large 18-hole golf course, suitable for hosting PGA Championship games would “green” this former industrial site as part of on-going efforts to retain publicly accessible parks and green-space along this extraordinary and expansive Chicago Lakefront property. This idea would be an amazing and forward-thinking option along South Lake Shore Drive and Lake Michigan and correct missteps and brownfields of the past, in allowing this land for private steel manufacturing industrial use, for more than a century.

4. Repairing and landmarking Jackson Park’s existing historic buildings, structures, paths, meadow, bridges, including the Columbia/Clarence Darrow Bridge; and the South Shore Cultural Center, which have suffered long-deferred maintenance.

5. Narrowing the Olmsted-designed roadways and parkways to their historic pre-1960s dimensions. Widening was considered a misstep by the general public at that time and were part of numerous protests, resulting in the loss of many trees. A narrowing of Cornell Drive, in lieu of total closure could provide a correction of these missteps and help to again restore a tree-lined boulevard, through the park, which everyone could enjoy, including motor vehicles. Everyone should be able to enjoy Jackson Park, by various modes, walking, jogging, biking and driving through this pastoral setting.

6. Commit to retaining South Lake Shore Drive current proportions and winding Lakefront Boulevard characteristics and commit to retaining the current proportions of Stony Island Avenue.
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