

News

Taking parkland for Obama Library is not the only choice

Posted: 02/09/2015, 01:44pm | Cassandra J. Francis and Charles A. Birnbaum



Jackson Park is one of two sites the University of Chicago is proposing for the Obama Presidential Library and Museum. | Photo by Jennifer T. Lacey

The University of Chicago is going too far. The Chicago Park District, charged with the stewardship and management of some of the nation's greatest parks, designed by preeminent landscape architects including Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., Jens Jensen, and others, must step in.

On Wednesday, the Chicago Park District Board will consider whether to approve the confiscation of at least 20 acres of historic Washington and Jackson Parks to support the University of Chicago's bids to secure the Obama Presidential Library. Both parks are rare Midwestern commissions designed by Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. Moreover, Washington Park ranks in significance with New York's Central and Prospect Parks, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is a likely National Historic Landmark candidate.

The Park District Board is considering an unprecedented move that requires great due diligence. As Mary Pattillo, professor of sociology and African-American studies at Northwestern University, recently wrote, there are almost 79 acres of vacant city-owned land in the Washington Park community. Why take land that is being actively used by parkgoers?

The University of Chicago commissioned a study about the library's economic impact; funded a poll showing overwhelming support for taking parkland; and all while controlling an 11-acre site across the street from Washington Park that they would likely develop for commercial purposes. Before considering this momentous decision, here are some questions the Park District Board should ask.

To support this land grab, have University of Chicago officials unequivocally demonstrated that their 11-acre adjacent site is too small for the library, particularly when the only other urban presidential library – Boston's John F. Kennedy Library – is well accommodated on 10 acres?

Has the Park District Board undertaken independent analysis to corroborate the economic benefits a university-funded study claims would accrue to the South Side?

Is the board aware that the university's recent poll about taking parkland never asked the community whether they would support putting the library solely on the university's 11-acre site and did not take public parkland?

Have university officials shown that confiscation of parkland would prevent the displacement of South Side residents (as claimed in the document currently being circulated by their Department of Civic Engagement)? If yes, have they demonstrated that residents would be displaced if parkland confiscation was not approved?

The university has crafted the conversation to support an otherwise unprecedented request that makes the confiscation of parkland seem reasonable and even sensible. *Is it really all or nothing?* Imagine if Columbia University demanded 20-plus acres of Central Park for their bid? The outrage would be immense. So why are city officials so accepting of the university's demands based on vague justifications, unsubstantiated claims, and misleading polling?

President Obama's achievements include the protection of more than 260 million acres of land and water – more than any other president since 1906. The implications of endorsing the confiscation of historically significant Chicago parkland are national, and could tarnish this legacy. *Cassandra J. Francis is president and CEO of Friends of the Parks/Charles A. Birnbaum is president and CEO of The Cultural Landscape Foundation.*