PARK PLANNING & POLICY

Obama Presidential Center Charges Ahead Despite Community Concerns

Friends of the Parks has communicated strongly and widely our stance against using parkland for the Obama Presidential Center, encouraging instead the use of 11 acres of vacant land across the street from Washington Park. When the Obamas announced that the presidential library would be located in Chicago, we publicly expressed our pleasure in having our city host the library on the South Side, but also voiced disappointment in the plan to build on public land in Jackson Park. We have continued to advocate against the use of parkland and for minimizing damage to the integrity of our historic parks, replacing lost green space, and establishing a robust community engagement process.

FOTP is glad the City has listened to our calls for a comprehensive planning process, but we remain concerned that the planning process is moving too quickly for true, transparent, inclusive decision-making. The Park District originally set a deadline of October to create a framework plan for Jackson Park. Among other things, the plan was to outline how the Obama Presidential Center would fit into the park before the center’s own plans started moving through the City’s approval process in November. Furthermore, the Golf Alliance has expressed hope of beginning construction on their proposed PGA-level course in the new year.

These developments threaten to destroy existing natural areas, sports fields, and other park amenities that are important to the local community. Furthermore, area residents face reduced access to the park due to higher fees at the new golf course and the possibility of multiple road closures. Finally, in August, the Obama Foundation announced plans to build an aboveground parking structure on the site.

Annual DuSable Commemoration Celebrates Park Progress

Friends of the Parks joined fellow DuSable Coalition members on Saturday, August 26 for our annual commemoration of the death of Chicago’s first non-native settler. The lively event included speeches and a tour of the DuSable Heritage Corridor. This year’s commemoration was extra festive thanks to news of the City’s recent progress on remediating DuSable Park—a cause we’ve been championing for decades!

Jean Baptiste Point DuSable, a black man of Haitian and French descent, settled at the mouth of the Chicago River in the late 1780s and soon after established a successful farm and trading post. Two centuries later, in 1987, Mayor Harold Washington honored DuSable’s role in the city’s founding by dedicating a park in his name at the confluence of the Chicago River and Lake Michigan. However, more than 30 years later, the 3-acre parcel of land remains closed to the public due to the presence of radioactive pollution.

The fenced-off site is contaminated with thorium from a gas lamp factory that closed in the 1930s. The Chicago Park District received EPA funding in 2012 to remove the affected soil from the site, but further remediation remained necessary. Under a 2014 legal settlement, the gas lamp company’s successors agreed to pay $6.8 million toward cleanup costs, and this July, the Chicago Park District Board of...
Fiscal Sponsorship Program Helps Park Groups Grow

For more than a decade, Friends of the Parks has served as Fiscal Sponsor to a vast array of groups who protect, preserve, improve, and promote Chicago’s parks. Through our Fiscal Sponsorship Program, we help Park Advisory Councils (PACs) and other park partner organizations by agreeing to receive charitable funds on their behalf. These organizations do not yet have the capacity to obtain 501(c)(3) status. And because individuals often want their contributions to be tax deductible, fiscal sponsorship of these groups increases opportunities to advance their park projects.

Friends of the Parks currently serves as Fiscal Sponsor to 44 groups, including the Clarendon Park Advisory Council (CPAC). CPAC is an all-volunteer group that meets regularly to promote the Clarendon Park and Community Center in Uptown. They have developed the park’s community gardens, connected the park community with the lakefront, and even partnered with the Park District and many others last year to put on the Clarendon Park Centennial Celebration event. “[FOTP’s] Sponsorship has been a big help to our park and helping us grow, especially around some of our green, sustainable practices, like our many beautiful community gardens,” says CPAC President Katharine Boyd. “We are very glad to have this collaboration.”

Some of the PACs we sponsor are focused on a challenging, long-term effort: to build new park fieldhouses. For example, the Brown Park Advisory Board is advocating and fundraising for a fieldhouse in Chatham’s Brown Memorial Park, which currently has no fieldhouse. The advisory board also organizes the annual Brown Park Community Picnic honoring Sydney Brown and other African-American firefighters who have died in the line of duty in Chicago. More than 200 attendees participate each year.

Similarly, the Euclid Park Advisory Council has set its sights on replacing the park’s one-room fieldhouse with a larger facility to meet the needs of the Longwood Manor community. The PAC is also focused on providing health screenings, educational programs, and other social services to the community. This past summer, they hosted the Black Rodeo Cowboys and served jerk chicken prepared by a Le Cordon Bleu chef at their annual Euclid Park Neighborhood Festival.

In Memoriam

It is with great sorrow that we mourn the passing of Marshall Matz, M.D., former FOTP board member and 2016 Volunteer of the Year. We extend our deepest sympathies to Dr. Matz's family and friends.

"Marshall was a thoughtful, gentle man dedicated to his community and to the mission of Friends of the Parks. He took tender loving care of his local park and made the neighborhood a bit brighter for all."

~Lauren Moltz, FOTP Board Chair

May he rest in peace.

Thank you to all those who donated in Dr. Matz’s memory:

Nature Along the Lake Program Introduces Students to Their Big Backyard

The 2016-2017 Nature Along the Lake program was a great success, with a total of 902 students from 14 schools and 33 classrooms participating. This important program, coordinated by Friends of the Parks Environmental Educator Nicole Machuca, brings Chicago Public School students to the lakefront to learn about our city’s natural wonders.

Nicole works with teachers in K-8 schools across the city to develop customized fall, winter, and spring field trips that comply with state science standards. The field trips engage students with the Lake Michigan coastline, specifically the ecologically rich 14-acre public nature preserve at Montrose Beach. During the fall, students learn about Chicago geography and introductory environmental topics, such as lake ecology, terrestrial habitats, and predator-prey relationships. In the winter, students learn about the seasonal adaptations of local plants and animals. In the spring, students participate in a fishing clinic with staff from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

Nature Along the Lake is one of the ways FOTP is growing the next generation of environmental stewards. This hands-on program is designed to inspire children to ask questions about their local environment and learn how they can make a positive contribution to the planet while enhancing their exposure to rigorous science education. With your support, we hope to continue sharing the wonders of our lakefront with Chicago’s youth for many years to come!

Summer Earth Team Teens Tackle Tough Park Projects

We had a great summer with our Earth Team teens at the Dunning Read Conservation Area (DRCA). These 16 eco-apprentices kicked off the season by learning about one another and getting their hands dirty tackling some pesky invasive species. They also had the opportunity to hear from guest speaker Rick Karmik, administrator of the Chicago Read Mental Health Center—the official landowners of the DRCA.

Over the course of the next several weeks, the teens started work on an art-based beautification project, which they selected through a participatory decision-making process. Together, they chose to purchase and paint park benches, which will be used by visitors to the DRCA as places of rest and contemplation. These busy teens also took a field trip to Montrose Point, where they got to see other examples of restoration work and learn about aquatic invasive species.

By the end of the summer, the teens:
- Learned to identify native and invasive flora and fauna species.
- Cleared the DRCA walking trails of invasive species.
- Laid down fresh mulch on the forest paths.
- Planned and implemented their park bench beautification project.
- And, after much searching, spotted crayfish in the DRCA stream!

In early August, the neighboring community had a chance to meet the Earth Team in person and learn more about the DRCA through two community tours of the conservation area led by these extraordinary teens. We are so proud of the many accomplishments of these youth, and we know they will continue to be great advocates for open spaces and the environment!
Obama Presidential Center (continued from p. 1)

Midway Plaisance, which would result in sacrificing more parkland and hundreds of mature trees.

Area residents have taken note, showing up in large numbers to public meetings about the City’s plans for Jackson Park. Many of these residents are asking the Obama Foundation to put its promises in writing by signing a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA). For example, in September, the Obama Library CBA Coalition camped out overnight in front of the Hyatt Regency McCormick Place prior to a public meeting held there by the foundation. The coalition wants to ensure that the touted benefits of the new park developments accrue to the local community. Specifically, they want the Obama Foundation to commit to written guarantees that it will hire local employees, replace parkland used by the presidential center, safeguard affordable housing, strengthen neighborhood schools, support minority-owned businesses, and make other investments in the community.

For our part, FOTP is stepping up the fight for green space and joining forces with allied groups. Specifically, we are collaborating with the CBA Coalition around their “Sustainability” pillar, which calls for the replacement of all green space and recreational amenities displaced by the Obama Presidential Center. We are encouraged by the fact that, in response to pressure from our organization and others, the Chicago Department of Transportation

DuSable Commemoration (continued from p. 1)

Commissioners at last approved a $1.4 million remediation contract. Work began in August, just before the commemoration.

The Park District expects the initial cleanup to be completed by the end of the year. This phase of the project includes excavating the contaminated soil, grading the site, and planting native grasses. Any remaining funds from the legal settlement will go toward the second phase of the project, which includes replacing a seawall that protects the site from wave damage. The Park District hopes to begin designing the new seawall early next year, but construction could take up to six months. Furthermore, it remains uncertain whether additional funding will be necessary to complete this phase.

The third phase of the project involves the development of park facilities. Dozens of plans have been proposed for DuSable Park since it was first dedicated three decades ago, but no plans have yet been approved. Any design must consider recent changes to the area, including the ongoing construction of the Navy Pier Flyover, a nearby bike and pedestrian path. Although much remains to be done, we are encouraged by the City’s decision to move forward with remediation of the site, and we are optimistic that DuSable Park will soon become a reality.

This is truly a historic moment. Thanks to all of you who have added your voices to the chorus of citizens urging the city to remediate this important public space. Thanks also to the volunteers, speakers, and attendees of this year’s DuSable Commemoration. The event would not have been as lively and celebratory without you. Lastly, stay tuned for continued updates on the long-awaited actualization of DuSable Park!
2017 Parks Ball: A Night of Inspiration and Celebration!

Many thanks to the nearly 200 of you who joined us on the campus of Loyola University Chicago in September for our annual Parks Ball!

The theme of this year’s gala was “Growing the Next Generation of Environmental Stewards.” We were delighted to honor outgoing Loyola Chancellor Michael J. Garanzini, S.J. and the Loyola Sustainability Team as part of our event. Under Fr. Garanzini’s leadership, Loyola was named the 4th greenest university in the country by the Sierra Club. Loyola has also been recognized by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District for its highly sustainable campus. Furthermore, Loyola’s Institute for Environmental Sustainability houses the university’s nationally recognized sustainability programs, which prepare students to become leaders in environmental research, policy, and justice.

Gala attendees had the opportunity to see Loyola’s impressive environmental accomplishments firsthand through sustainability tours of the campus. They also enjoyed an advance screening of the short film “Lungs of the City.” Created by Loyola undergraduates Oliver Czuma and Harrison Swanson in partnership with the university and FOTP, this powerful film explores the relationship between Chicago and its greatest natural resource, Lake Michigan. We are thrilled these young filmmakers are using their talents to engage fellow Chicagoans in conversations about the past, present, and future of the city’s lakefront.

Throughout the evening, FOTP staff, board members, and supporters attested to the impact of their local parks on their lives. Executive Director Juanita Irizarry spoke of how Humboldt Park serves as a gathering place for her family and friends, as well as a cultural center for the larger Puerto Rican community in Chicago. “I’m very moved just thinking about how much my park means to me and my community,” she said. “Interestingly, we often are not even fully aware of the ties we have to one another and our parks—and all that means for our social fabric.”

Nicole Machuca, Director of Neighborhood Parks and Environmental Education, recounted the rare but meaningful encounters with nature she experienced as a city kid and challenged us all to think about “the millions of Chicago kids growing up in our city. What kind of memories and relationships and world do you want them to have? What do you want them to care about?” Her inspiring testimony was followed by eloquent words from one of our Earth Team teens, who testified about the impact of FOTP’s youth programming on her. Both speeches fueled our commitment to growing the next generation of environmental stewards.

Thank you to everyone who helped make the 2017 Parks Ball a success! Funds raised by the event support our signature education, advocacy, and stewardship programs, so we truly could not do our important work without you. Special thanks to the live performers, who created a vibrant, celebratory atmosphere: Opera-Matic, the SRBCC Afro-Caribbean Youth Ensemble, Enrique Calderon y su Orquesta, and Danny Irizarry of Chase Park’s youth theater production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream.
Battle over Parkland Continues in North Branch Industrial Corridor

In July, the City Council approved a sweeping rezoning plan that allows for the development of offices, apartment towers, hotels, and retail space on a 760-acre stretch of largely dormant industrial land along the North Branch of the Chicago River. The decision came after the City held six simultaneous community meetings in one night in order to rush a vote on the matter. The whole goal seemed to be to bypass the community’s call for new parkland in an area that is nearly devoid of green space. The council members keep saying that we should trust them to include parkland on a one-off basis as they approve developers’ plans for new riverfront buildings. Those of us fighting for green space know better.

As a July 31 Chicago Tribune editorial notes, “The North Branch redevelopment plan that the Chicago City Council approved requires developers to ensure the creation of a total of 10 acres of park space. Dive deeper into the details, however, and it becomes clear that those 10 acres do not have to be contiguous. They could be a swatch of green here, a tot lot there. That’s not going to cut it for a part of the city already park-starved.”

Alderman Michele Smith of the 43rd Ward has been leading the charge, demanding a minimum of 15 acres of contiguous parkland in the North Branch plan. “What tangible lasting benefit is guaranteed to the public when this land rush is over along our priceless riverfront?” she asked on the day of the City Council vote. “Concrete bike paths, pocket parks for 10 to 20 toddlers, and private green rooftops? Is that adequate? Where do families relax? Where do kids play sports?”

Chicago might seem park-rich, but the city has only 4.6 acres of park space per 1,000 residents. This places it 92nd among America’s 100 largest cities, according to The Trust for Public Land. We can—and must—do better.

Purchase Agreement for South Works Site Presents Opportunity for Last 4 Miles Initiative

In August, European developers Barcelona Housing Systems and Emerald Living announced a purchase agreement for U.S. Steel’s long-dormant South Works site. The developers envision a new harbor and as many as 20,000 homes, along with retail, office, and park space, on the 440-acre lakefront site. This plan is of particular interest to Friends of the Parks because, in keeping with Daniel Burnham’s vision, we have long advocated for the establishment of complete, uninterrupted public access to Chicago’s lakefront. Our Last 4 Miles Initiative aims to create public spaces along the final four miles of privately controlled land that currently disrupts our city’s park-starved landscape— including the South Works site.

FOTP Deputy Director Sandra Del Toro grew up in South Chicago, so she knows well the complex context in which we are advocating for the completion of Chicago’s lakefront park system. Moreover, she knows the many plans that have been proposed—and pulled—for the South Works site over the years. In an August 11 letter to The Chicago Tribune, she writes, “Residents are wary because of so many empty promises. And though they want nice things—most important, jobs—they also want affordable housing and green spaces that are safe, accessible, and well-maintained.”

FOTP has been engaging with the local community through listening tours. We are also participating in the Southeast Side Coastal Zone Initiative, a community planning process for the Illinois Coastal Zone from Rainbow Beach on the north to Calumet Beach on the south. The initiative, involving 250 residents, fosters greater engagement with the lakefront and Calumet River area. This will help clarify resident desires for Coastal Zone parks, beaches, and open spaces, as well as facilitate the formation of new Park Advisory Councils (PACs) and increase participation in existing PACs.
Thank You!

Special thanks to Charles and Susan Schwartz for their generous $10,000 matching donation during the month of August. And thanks to all of you who helped meet the ambitious challenge set by Mr. and Mrs. Schwartz!

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The new member will receive our quarterly newsletter, as well as periodic email updates on important park advocacy issues and volunteer opportunities. Members also receive invitations to special events, such as our annual Parks Ball and our free Netsch Lecture series, as well as discounted rates on park tours.

For more information, please contact Sarah Hess at HessS@fotp.org or 312-857-2757 ext. 3.