

Oh, the irony: Mayor Rahm's allies call Lucas Museum opponents elitists

The coded language at the heart of the lakefront fight.

by Ben Joravsky

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For the past few weeks, Mayor Emanuel's allies have been trying to bully Friends of the Parks into dropping its opposition to the Lucas Museum's lakefront site by relentlessly lambasting the group as a bunch of elites who want to deprive "black and brown children" of a world-class facility.

As if that's what this fight's all about.

A recent salvo came in [a letter to the *Sun-Times*](#) by Norman Bobins, a retired banker and Mayor Daley school-board appointee, who called Friends "an obstructionist, visionless and disruptive group of volunteers who should not have ultimate control over decisions affecting the future and vibrancy of our great city."

Sounds like something I might say about the mayor's appointed school board, though I don't imagine Bobins will be joining the elected-school-board movement anytime soon.

Anyway, in an attempt to offer an alternative view, allow me to wade into this fight by introducing you to Juanita Irizarry, the executive director of Friends of the Parks. She's frequently quoted in the press, though people like Bobins don't seem to know much about her.

Irizarry is, in her own words, "a Puerto Rican girl from Humboldt Park." Raised at California and Armitage, she's a graduate of Kelvyn Park High School, class of '85. (Go Panthers!)

For almost 30 years she's worked on low-income housing with various not-for-profits such as the Hispanic Housing Development Corporation, Bickerdike Redevelopment, and the Chicago Community Trust.

In 2007, she earned her master's degree from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. And last year she ran for alderman of the 26th Ward, coming 140 votes shy of forcing the incumbent, Roberto Maldonado, into a runoff.

The Friends of the Parks board, meanwhile, is an interesting mix of power brokers—like the legendary near-west-side developer Oscar D'Angelo—and activists from all corners of the city, including the south and west sides. And if we're taking a more historical approach, let me remind you that Friends of the Parks [teamed up with the U.S. Justice Department](#) back in 1982 to file the suit that forced the city to spend more money on parks in black and Hispanic neighborhoods.

In other words, the power struggle over the Lucas Museum isn't being driven by some group of elites (read: rich white people), and it has nothing to do with race—though that won't stop the mayor and his pals from invoking it.

In many ways, the mayor and his allies are following a script written by Emanuel's predecessor—Mayor You-Know-Who—when he tried to [cram the Children's Museum into Grant Park](#) or turn Chicago's parks into construction zones for the [2016 Olympics](#).

Call it a four-step process.

Step one: The mayor announces, *Great news, Chicago! You're getting something you didn't know you wanted.*

In this case, the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, assembled by *Star Wars* creator George Lucas.

Step two: The mayor pressures his oversight boards and bodies to approve the deal without anything resembling serious oversight. In this case, that means Emanuel got the Plan Commission, the City Council, and the Park District board to enthusiastically approve putting the Lucas Museum on the lakefront.

Step three: The mayor gets scions of civic and corporate Chicago—always willing to oblige—to praise the plan. Usually they quote Daniel Burnham, who's not around to defend himself since he's been dead for more than a century.

Finally, if there's any resistance, the mayor brings out the heavy artillery—often Father Pfleger—to denounce the opposition as elitists.

Thus Father Pfleger wrote on his Facebook page May 3: "How dare this Elitist Group of Unknowns decide they control Chicago. . . They are friends of NOBODY, especially not of JOBS AND CHILDREN!!!!"

And Melody Hobson, an investment strategist and George Lucas's wife, wrote in a statement: "As an African-American who has spent my entire life in this city I love, it saddens me that young black and brown children will be denied the chance to benefit from what this museum will offer."

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Let's give Rahm credit here. You've got a white banker, a black businesswoman, and a radical priest all teaming up to cram a building on the lakefront. Don't tell me there's no diversity here.

Ordinarily I'd say that race has something to do with just about everything in Chicago. This may be the one thing that doesn't.

This is a land-use fight. On one side, you have an organization dedicated to keeping development off the lakefront—as it's the only lakefront we've got. And on the other side, you have a group of successful and well-connected people who're used to getting what they want. When they don't, they claim a higher purpose. Suddenly, they're Rosa Parks. No pun intended.

The Lucas lakefront fight had been going on for more than a year when Irizarry took over Friends of the Parks last September.

By then, Friends had forced Emanuel to abandon the original site—a parking lot just south of Soldier Field—with a federal lawsuit that threatened to delay the project for more years than Lucas wanted to wait.

In April, the mayor proposed a second option: spending about \$1.2 billion in public money to put the museum on the current site of McCormick Place's lakefront center, and build new exposition space to the west.

Soon after the mayor unveiled the plan, Hobson contacted Irizarry and asked for a meeting.

That meeting, which Father Pfleger also attended, went a little like this: Hobson and Pfleger urged Irizarry to endorse the second proposal because it would be a great for black and Hispanic kids to have a world-class museum to attend. Plus it would create construction jobs.

Irizarry said both goals could be achieved if the museum were moved off the lakefront, say to the old Michael Reese Hospital site.

Which we, the taxpayers, own, after Mayor Daley spent \$120.7 million in TIF money to buy the site for his Olympics. Hobson said, essentially, *We can't put it there because George wants the museum on the lake.* And Irizarry asked, *Well, who made George the king?*

Actually, I'm sure Irizarry's way too polite to say anything like that.

So ended that meeting.

Lucas and Hobson have started looking elsewhere—San Francisco's Treasure Island, for starters. In the meantime, the mayor's forces have been pressuring Friends board members to drop their opposition.

The pressure's so intense that a Cook County judge named Fred Bates took to his Facebook page to ask that people stop bugging him about the issue, because he's not the same Fred Bates who sits on the Friends of the Parks board.

To which one of Judge Bates's Facebook friends responded: "At least they're not confusing you with Norman." So far, that wisecrack's probably the best thing to emerge from this grim affair.