

# Letter from Faculty Concerning the Obama Center

We members of the University of Chicago faculty who sign this letter support the idea of establishing the Obama Center in our neighborhood, in the South Side. However, as details of the plans have become public we share concerns expressed by neighborhood groups throughout the South Side. The neighborhood groups are diverse. They include the Community Benefits Agreement Coalition whose active members include the Black Youth Project 100, the Bronzeville Regional Collective -- which itself includes Blacks in Green -- the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, the Poor People's Campaign, the Southside Together Organizing for Power, UChicago for a CBA, the Westside Health Authority and Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights; and whose allied members include the Chicago Teachers Union, Chicago Women in Trades, Friends of the Park, Metropolitan Tenants Association, Woodlawn East Community and Neighbors, Chicago Jobs Council, Chicago Rehab Council, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council and many others. Other groups opposed to the current plans include the Midway Plaisance Park Advisory Committee, Save the Midway, Jackson Park Watch, and South Shore Nature Sanctuary. The concerns of these groups are different. But taken together they form an intelligible whole.

First, there are concerns that the Obama Center as currently planned will not provide the promised development or economic benefits to the neighborhoods. Because the current plans place the Center next to the Museum of Science and Industry and across the street from the University of Chicago campus, there is no available adjacent land in which to start a new business, set up a new café or restaurant, bring another cultural center to the neighborhood. It looks to many neighbors that the only new jobs created will be as staff to the Obama Center, hence the widespread support for a Community Benefits Agreement.

Second, the current plan calls for taking a large section of an historic public park and giving it to a private entity for development. Jackson Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, is on the National Register of Historic Places and is one of the most important urban parks in the nation. Construction of a permanent architectural monument violates Olmsted's vision of a democratic urban park. On the current plans the intrusion into the park is huge: twenty-one acres, the size of two large city blocks. At a time of increasing complexity and pressure in urban life, Chicago should be dedicated to preserving our public parks as open areas for relaxation and play for all its citizens. We also note that the Obama Center has abandoned its original plans to be a Presidential Library. It will be a private entity with no official connection to the National Archives.

Third, because of the planned location of the Obama Center, the Obama Foundation plans to take over a section of another historic, public park -- Midway Plaisance, also designed by Olmsted -- and turn it into an above-ground parking garage. They have to date rejected many pleas of neighborhood groups to place the garage underground. The planners say they need the parking lot there so that visitors can walk directly across the street to the Obama Center, but that raises problems of its own. (1) The planners also intend to close Cornell Avenue to traffic, thus making Stony Island Avenue the only major north-south thoroughfare on the South Side, other than the Interstate Highway. So every visitor who comes by car or by Metra will have to cross the busiest street on the South Side. And those of our neighbors who depend on driving north or south for their livelihoods will inevitably be significantly held up. This is a traffic-jam in the making. (2) Those who can walk straight across the street to the Obama Center can also walk straight back to their cars and go home. Given the location, if they do any visiting at all it is overwhelmingly likely they will visit those areas that are already well developed, the Museum of Science and Industry and the University of Chicago campus. (3) A parking lot, of course, privileges cars and those who can afford them. Parking is expensive, and though public lands are being given away, all the profits from this parking lot will go to the Obama Foundation. None of the funds will go back to the City to improve train lines and public transportation infrastructure. Overall, this is a socially regressive plan (4) Again, this is a precious, historic urban park that ought to be preserved for future generations not given to a private entity for development into a parking lot.

Finally, it is the taxpayers of Chicago who are going to be forced to pay hundreds of millions of dollars for this project, according to estimates by the Chicago Department of Transportation. The required widening of Lake Shore Drive alone is estimated to be over \$100 million. Not only are public lands being given to a private entity but the public will pay to have Cornell Drive closed and Stony Island Avenue and Lake Shore Drive widened. We are concerned that these are not the best ways to use public funds to invest in the future of Chicago.

We University of Chicago faculty who sign this letter are ourselves a diverse group and different issues will matter more to some of us than to others. But we share with so many of our neighbors the belief that the current plans need significant revision. We are concerned that rather than becoming a bold vision for urban living in the future it will soon become an object-lesson in the mistakes of the past. We urge the Obama Foundation to explore alternative sites on the South Side that could be developed with more economic benefits, better public transportation, and less cost to taxpayers. We would be pleased to support the Obama Center if the plan genuinely promoted economic development

in our neighborhoods and respected our precious public urban parks.

(Please sign below. The list of signatures will be updated each day.)

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Jessica Stockholder, Professor, Visual Arts  
Rosanna Warren, Professor, Social Thought  
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First

Last

**Title \***

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