



January 11, 2018

OPINION

Obama or no, Chicago's public parks should not be free for the taking

By: CHARLES A. BIRNBAUM



It's a great honor for **Chicago to host the Obama Presidential Center**, which could bring exceptional benefits to residents and businesses alike. But it's disgraceful and undemocratic to confiscate 19-plus

acres of nationally significant, historic Olmsted & Vaux-designed parkland, listed in the National Register of Historic Places and held in public trust for nearly 150 years, for the purpose.

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Three years ago, Chicagoans mobilized to secure the Obama presidential library, which the National Archives—a federal agency—was to administer. They faced competition from proposals in New York and



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What's more, instead of getting a presidential library, Chicagoans are now getting a privately operated entertainment complex on public land featuring a 235-foot-tall monolithic tower visible throughout the park, a recording studio, auditorium, sports facility and other amenities. And it's all being sold as honoring Olmsted's vision and legacy.

Well, here's what Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., the father of landscape architecture, said. In a May 7, 1894, letter to the South Park Board president, Olmsted wrote that the Museum (of Science and Industry) was to be the only "dominating object of interest" and that "all other buildings and structures" are to "be auxiliary to and subordinate to the scenery of the park." At the time, Olmsted was developing a plan (his third, after those of 1871 and 1892) to heal the park following the impact of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, with its 25 million visitors, and the subsequent fire that left the site a charred ruin. That plan, modified in places (most egregiously

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widening Cornell Drive to six lanes), has withstood the test of time.

What's sorely lacking in this conversation is comprehensive planning for the entire Olmsted & Vaux-designed South Park system, the only system they designed outside of New York state. The South Park system includes Jackson and Washington parks and the Midway Plaisance, yet there are separate plans for the presidential center, the lakeshore, the golf course consolidation, road re-alignments and other changes—as if everything is happening at different sites. All these sections of the park have interrelated natural, scenic, cultural and ecological systems, and therefore planning needs to be holistic, not piecemeal.

This makes a transparent public review process very important. The revised plans for the Obama Presidential Center will come before various city entities, where they should be closely scrutinized. The project is also subject to federal-level reviews under the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Historic Preservation Act, specifically Section 106 of the latter, a process that began last month. **The Section 106 compliance review**, to which the Cultural Landscape Foundation is an official consulting party, will identify and assess the adverse effects posed by the presidential center and the extent to which they can be mitigated, or whether the collective negative impact is too much for the park.

If the Obama Presidential Center's proponents want to honor Olmsted, they might wish to reflect on something else he said: "The Park is a ground appropriated and arranged for the enjoyment of all classes that inhabit a great city."

The current proposal would not create "great additions" to the park but "deductions from it." Olmsted also wrote that such additions, "would take much from its value as a park. They would be worth more to the

city if they were elsewhere." Keep the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago, but not in a historic park.

*Charles A. Birnbaum is CEO of **the Cultural Landscape Foundation**.*

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