

**Comments of Anne Neal Petri, President and CEO  
National Association for Olmsted Parks, November 12, 2021**

Good morning! I am Dede Petri, president and CEO of the National Association for Olmsted Parks. Based in Washington, DC, we are the only national organization dedicated solely to advancing the life, work and legacy of visionary landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. We work with countless Olmsted parks and landscapes across the country including Central Park, Prospect Park, Lake Park, Washington Park, Atlanta's Linear Park.

The Obama Presidential Center is clearly an asset to the community. But sacrificing historic Jackson Park is not the answer. I am here today to lament the court's decision to reject three amicus briefs which outlined why the public interest demands that the Obama Presidential Center be sited outside Jackson Park. I will very quickly outline arguments in our brief.

Olmsted Parks are not luxuries that are expendable. They are critical green infrastructure --places of historical and ecological importance. To serve the public interest, public health and well-being, it is incumbent on all of us to save these natural spaces as the pandemic has surely made clear.

Today, of course, we take public parks for granted. But parks were not always public assets. Before Olmsted, most parks were private property – the domain of wealthy and privileged individuals. Because of Olmsted, parks became places where all people could come together – of every race, class and gender.

That is why we have objected since 2015 to the appropriation of 20 acres of public parkland for a privately owned and operated facility. There are many locations – never seriously examined – that would permit an inviting presidential center and at the same time save Jackson Park which is one of Olmsted's most beautiful and iconic parks. Those alternatives should be explored.

By allowing construction to proceed, the court and the city are setting a distressing precedent. The message will now be that public lands are up for grabs by powerful political interests.

In our amicus brief, NAOP also expressed concern that planned construction in Jackson Park will have a deleterious impact on the ecological health of Chicago.

Long before climate change was a term, Olmsted understood the need for thoughtful and resilient design. Jackson Park transformed a fetid wetland into a magical space that invited wildlife, birds and people into its picturesque, pastoral and restorative setting.

The Park is positioned between the lake and dense urban areas to the north, east and west. As temperatures increase, it serves as an antidote to heat islands and degraded air that challenge human health and productivity.

As early as the 1890s, Olmsted was so concerned about frequent flooding and varying fluctuations in the level of the Lake that he had assistants compile a list of annual water levels from 1859- 1892. He found that the water levels varied as much as three feet. (FLO Papers, Vol 9, p. 781, fn 4 and 5). His design, therefore, used thick plant masses with native dune grasses, sages and sedges to protect park edges when flooded during storms.

By helping soak up water from the sky and the lake, the park operated like a green sponge helping to address the inevitable challenges of storms and water runoff, now only worsened by climate change. The vision and effectiveness of Olmsted's green infrastructure were just graphically demonstrated in Boston where his Back Bay Fens and Muddy River, both constructed to address flooding, were able to withstand the ravages of Hurricane Ida.

It is noteworthy that both the New York Times and the Washington Post have recently written extensive pieces about the serious challenges Chicago faces because of climate change. Allowing construction to proceed in such a sensitive area without a comprehensive and honest environmental impact assessment is counter to the public interest.

Final point. Plans to alter Olmsted's historic roadways in Jackson Park will severely disrupt accessible and workable circulation.

The circulation system through Jackson Park is an integral part of the Olmsted design created to provide easy access to nature for all people.

By closing Cornell Drive and other internal roadways, the OPC will cut off travel routes intentionally designed by Olmsted to facilitate efficient movement, access, and pleasurable circulation. While some contend that the drives should be closed to add greenspace, this argument ignores both the historic and functional roll of the drives.

By any calculation, the area will be inundated by more traffic in a section of the City that is seriously underserved by public transportation. The proposed reconfiguration will potentially separate communities rather than bringing them together – undermining a fundamental purpose of Olmsted’s parks.

Like President Obama, Olmsted explored the themes of urbanization, civic infrastructure, and social justice as a foundation for the enrichment and empowerment of American society. He believed, fundamentally, in the democratic nature of parks and the capacity of nature to improve health and bring people together by keeping them free of building.

We fervently hope that Jackson Park and its unobstructed vistas to the lakefront can be saved. As Olmsted knew, the value of a park is the ability to transport urban dwellers to a cooler and restorative space. Once open space is filled with buildings, it is lost forever. Thank you.

