Groups ask aldermen to protect residents from being displaced by Obama Center

Kyana Butler, member of the Obama CBA Coalition, chained herself to a fence to prevent traffic from passing through South Woodlawn Avenue to protest the lack of a community benefits agreement that safeguards residents living near the site of the Obama Presidential Center from rising rents and property taxes. | Carlos Ballesteros
Sixteen-year-old Tiyjalauma Tidler, a junior at Hyde Park Academy High School, has lived on the 6500 block of South Woodlawn Avenue her entire life.

She’s torn about the Obama Presidential Center coming into the neighborhood.

Tidler’s excited about the Obama Center being a 15-minute walk from her house and just across the street from her high school.

But she fears the center will push her family out of Woodlawn.

“My stepdad doesn’t talk to me about finances, but I know what’s going on. Property taxes are going to go up once the [Center] comes in, and we might have to move out,” she said.

Tidler joined dozens of protesters Monday in Woodlawn to demand the City Council introduce an ordinance that would prevent the displacement of the neighborhood’s black families who would face mounting rents and property taxes as the Obama Foundation prepares to break ground on the presidential center in Jackson Park next year.
Chicago police arrested two protesters who chained themselves to a fence to block construction traffic between 60th Street and 61st Street along South Woodlawn Avenue at around 11:30 a.m. Both have been released, according to police.

The coalition also urged the University of Chicago to support their efforts to get a “community benefits agreement.”

Patricia Hightower, a resident of Woodlawn and a member of the Obama CBA Coalition, said in a statement via email, “The University of Chicago is benefiting from the Obama Center. They are building a luxury hotel, dorm, and conference center; meanwhile, rents are rising and people are being pushed out.”

Ald. Leslie Hairston (5th), who represents constituents living in Hyde Park and Woodlawn, could not be reached for comment. The Obama Foundation did not respond to a request for comment.
In a statement, the university said it has “a strong commitment to working with the city and local partners to ensure that its activities benefit the community in many ways, including strong minority and local hiring goals, which are well beyond city requirements and were expanded in 2017.”

The Obama CBA Coalition organized Monday’s rally. The group comprises members from 19 community organizations including Black Youth Project 100 and Southside Together Organizing for Power.

Organizers emphasized they are glad the Obama Center will be in Jackson Park.

“The Obama Center coming to the South Side of Chicago … is something that we want, that we think is a beautiful thing, but we want to make sure South Side residents aren’t displacement from the South Side of Chicago,” Parrish Brown, an organizer with Black Youth Project 100 said Monday.

Two weeks ago, the City Council unanimously passed an ordinance that approves the Obama Foundation’s right to occupy, use and maintain a little more than 19 acres of land in Jackson Park. The ordinance includes language that calls for monitoring displacement, but activists say it isn’t enough to protect residents.

The coalition is seeking an ordinance that would: (1) set-aside 30 percent of new and rehabbed housing for low-income and working families; (2) a property tax freeze for long-time residents; and (3) investment in workforce development and affordable housing.

Hightower said aldermen would be “responsible for the continued displacement of black families from Chicago” if they fail to pass the ordinance.
The Obama Center isn’t set to open until 2022, but property values in and around Woodlawn are already on the rise. Last year, a study by real estate website Redfin found property values in Woodlawn shot up by 23 percent (https://www.redfin.com/blog/2017/08/hot-or-not-hottest-neighborhood-predictions.html) between February and July 2017.

Earlier this year, the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University found (https://www.housingstudies.org/research-publications/state-of-housing/2018-state-rental-housing-cook-county/) there is an undersupply of nearly 16,000 affordable housing units in Woodlawn, Hyde Park and Bronzeville.

In May, three months after President Obama balked at the idea of signing a community benefits agreement, the Obama Foundation released a laundry list (https://chicago.suntimes.com/columnists/obama-foundations-new-promise-package-still-snubs-community-benefits-agreement/) of promises to “support policies” and “neighborhood stabilization efforts” that promote small businesses in the area and affordable housing developments.

But many demonstrators on Monday said they need more than promises.

“We don’t trust these greedy developers. We need the City Council to step up,” Tidler said.

Carlos Ballesteros is a corps member in Report for America, (https://chicago.suntimes.com/rfa/) a not-for-profit journalism program that aims to bolster Sun-Times coverage of issues affecting Chicago’s South and West sides.