

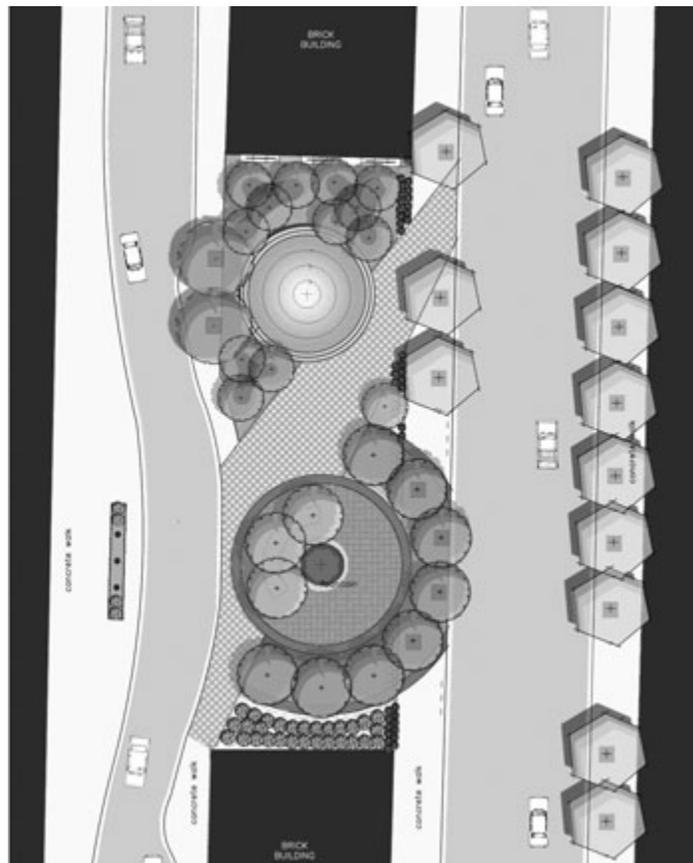
South Loop parks lurch forward

From Printers Row to the Prairie District

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Editor



A rendering of the long-awaited Printers Row Park

After delays and litigation, work is beginning on two new parks in South Loop. The city, meanwhile, has purchased other parcels in the neighborhood to develop another park sometime in the future.

Printers Row Park

A new park covering the space between the Rowe and Transportation buildings in

Printers Row, an area in the middle of the block on Dearborn between Harrison and Polk, was originally slated for completion for the end of 2008. But the Chicago Park District had difficulty hiring a contractor to complete the work.

Park district spokeswoman Michelle Jones told Chicago Journal last summer that during a request for bids, a single firm responded, and their proposal was 200 percent higher than the district wanted to pay. Jones declined to say what the expected budget for the park was in the interview.

Betty Finkbeiner, who lives in the Transportation Building, just north of the new park, likes with the idea of a park covering the parcels, particularly since the area's homeless population has diminished with Pacific Garden Mission's move to Canal Street.

"I feel it's better for the neighborhood itself — it makes it a neighborhood," said Finkbeiner, who has lived in Printers Row for 24 years. "There aren't many children here but there are a lot of babies. It's a place for mothers to go and have a respite, for kids to actually see some grass, as opposed to walking all the way over to Grant Park or Dearborn Park."

Mary Ivory, who also lives in the Transportation Building, said that after months of delay, she senses residents are amazed construction will actually be starting. "It's very exciting. I think people are in a bit of a state of disbelief it's finally happening," she said. "It's very hopeful the city's able to move forward and do it."

Much of the park will be built upon a plaza with a fountain with benches on its perimeter and two access roads leading to and from Dearborn and Federal streets. A vacant parcel north of the fountain makes up the other part of the park.

Park district spokeswoman Zvezdana Kubat said the park is scheduled to be finished by Sept. 15.

Fine Line BT Corp. will be paid \$741,144 to build the park.

A field house for the Prairie District

Last Friday, the City of Chicago purchased 1801 S. Indiana and deeded the three-story building to the park district.

The structure, which has hosted the National Vietnam Veteran's Art Museum since 1996, will be converted into the South Loop's first park field house.

Kubat wrote in an e-mail that the district will start remodeling the first floor of the building in June, with the space open by January 2010 for winter programming.

Under the terms of the deal, the museum will move to the third floor of the building, with the option of staying rent free in the 10,000 square foot space for up to three years.

Jim Holtzmann, the museum's board treasurer, said the group will get around \$950,000 in the transaction, \$750,000 of which will go toward paying off the museum's debt. The remainder of the funds will be used to pay operating costs over the next three years.

The group will use the time to raise money, find new board members in anticipation of others leaving and seek out a new space for the museum. The museum will store part its collection in part of the third floor, and continue to show exhibits. With the negotiations with the city finished, the next period gives the museum time to refocus.

“We can focus exclusively and entirely on being a museum again,” Holtzmann said.

The group might even broaden its scope and re-brand itself the National Veterans Art Museum.

On the first floor of the building, Jorge Armando has reached terms with the park district to continue operating Café Society, his restaurant and coffee shop.

Armando said he agreed to the two-year lease even though it increases his rent by \$400 each month — a difficult proposition in this economy, he said.

“I believe the park district will support Café Society as the community requested,” he said.

Armando estimated that, since October, his business is down 40 percent over the same period last year.

“We are seeing a little bit of improvement, especially on Sundays, but the rest of the week is kind of dead,” he said.

A survey conducted by the Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance found that 57 percent of 512 respondents imagined the new field house as focusing on arts and educational activities, with 43 percent understanding it as a space primarily offering athletics and exercise space.

Eventually, a park near 16th and Wabash

According to the 2007 Near South Tax Increment Financing District annual report, the city has purchased 1611-29 S. Wabash, parcels which are listed on the park district’s 2009-2013 capital plan for eventual development into park acres.

It’s not clear how much the city paid for the parcels. A list of all vendors paid more than \$5,000 during 2007 notes that \$9,478,000 was paid to 1615 Wabash LLC for the land.

A separate section about property acquisitions made in the TIF district lists the cost of the parcels as \$11,506,690.