

GAZETTE

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South Loop meetings discuss area events, developments

By Marie Balice Ward

A variety of South Loop issues were discussed at several community meetings in June.

The **Chicago Children's Museum** is no longer being considered for a site at Monroe Street and Columbus Drive, said O'Neill, because a coalition of downtown organizations believe a building there would encroach on the park. The museum is therefore once again considered the park's east Randolph Street area. Relocation there would allow major expansion for the museum and provide a new Grant Park field house for the public. Local residents are fairly evenly split between opposition and support, so public meetings about the museum's future site will continue.

Sage Hospitality Resources and Lucien Lagrange Architects have nearly finished renovating and restoring the **Blackstone Renaissance Hotel**, 636 S. Michigan Ave. The landmark hotel will reopen in October and celebrates its 100th anniversary soon thereafter. It was built between 1908 and 1910 by Tracy and John Drake and named after Timothy B. Blackstone, a prominent railroad executive and founder of the Union Stock Yards. His mansion previously stood at the hotel's site.

The Blackstone's architecture is known as classic revival or the modern French style of the Beaux-Arts. It became known as "the hotel of the presidents" as it hosted many presidential visits to Chicago over the years.

"There are many features [of the Blackstone] that are landmarked," said Lagrange, "including the lobby." The Blackstone is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and its restoration and renovation are following preservation guidelines. When the work is complete, the hotel will contain 330 guest rooms and more than 12,000 square feet of ballrooms and meeting space. The renovation was made possible by a tax increment finance agreement with the City, historic preservation tax credits, and new market tax credits from the federal government. JP Morgan Chase Bank and Sage Hospitality Resources are the equity investors, and Prudential Insurance is the project lender.

The **X/O** development at 1712 S. Prairie Ave. is well underway, with 75% of the first of two towers already sold, said Lagrange, who is this project's architect as well. "Dancing figures in the sky moving away from each other like tango dancers," is how Lagrange describes the ultramodern design of the two X/O towers. Groundbreaking is anticipated in winter 2008, with move-ins expected in 2010. The development team also includes Frankel & Giles and Kargil Development.

Lagrange acknowledged the controversy the project created, with some community members preferring a modern design and others a historical one. Much controversy remains, and legal input has been sought, stated Jeffrey Ayersman, treasurer of the Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance (PDNA), at a recent meeting.

The development will consist of 525 dwellings with 600 garage spaces. Two glass-clad towers, one 45 stories high and the other 35 stories, will be built in tandem behind a row of townhouses, which are designed to harmonize with Prairie Avenue structures such as the Glessner House located across the street. Prices range from the high \$200,000s to more than \$1 million.

“No two units are alike,” said Lagrange. The building will provide a spa, an environmentally friendly “aqua grotto” on the roof, movie screening room, fitness center, and one-quarter acre park.

Other Prairie District developments include Rockas Tower at 21st Street and Prairie Avenue, proposed as a 37-plus story tower with seven townhouses in front. The PDNA stated at its June 19 meeting that the tower exceeds the community’s height limit, and the community is seeking input with involvement by 2nd Ward Alderman Bob Fioretti.

At the PDNA meeting, Fioretti confirmed his campaign pledge not to take any money from developers, saying, “We have refused \$100,000 in donations from developers.” He acknowledged the height of proposed structures in the Prairie Avenue District is getting taller and has requested all developers doing business in the area to meet with him in advance to review plans for new projects.

Other proposed projects include a two-story height increase for Central Station’s Museum Park Place II at 14th Street and Indiana Avenue; HomChicago, another highrise at the northeast corner of 21st Street and Prairie Avenue; 33 condominiums with four townhouses at Prairie and Cullerton Avenues; a nine-story building, Prairie 21, on the southwest corner of Prairie Avenue and 21st Street; and the Prairie District Lofts Condo building, 1727 S. Indiana Ave., which is being converted from rental to ownership.

At the PDNA meeting, Fioretti said each “project must bear its own burden,” meaning infrastructure changes, traffic studies, and other factors need to be addressed by the developers of new structures.

Tina Feldstein, PDNA president, said her group is seeking to re-route drivers leaving McCormick Place who currently take short cuts through the Prairie Avenue District. Many streetscaping solutions already are in effect, and more can be implemented, Ayersman noted, including cul de sacs, traffic circles, and curb bumpouts (sections of the curb that extend into the roadway, funneling traffic into a single lane).

The PDNA is taking an active role to address quality of life and environmental issues including traffic, parking, sewer systems, public transportation, stoplights, and signs. The association’s service area runs from the railroad tracks north of 16th Street south to Cermak Road and from the west side of Indiana Avenue to Lake Shore Drive. The PDNA also is working with a merchants association to bring a select group of

retailers to the area, said Feldstein. She added that the PDNA is working very closely with Alderman Fioretti on several issues.

South Loop neighborhood gatherings. Other upcoming South Loop events include the Dearborn II Annual Block Party on Sat., Sept. 8, from noon to 6 p.m. announced Michael Hernandez, president of the Dearborn Park Advisory Council. This event is a joint effort of the Dearborn I and Dearborn II associations and residents and will take place on Plymouth Court south of Roosevelt Road.

Another block party will be held in the Prairie District on Sat. Sept. 8.

Bash on Wabash, a block-long extravaganza of entertainment and food, will be held Sat. and Sun., Sept. 1 and 2. on Wabash Avenue just south of Roosevelt Road.

Other events take place regularly at the Clarke House Museum, and tours of Glessner House are offered on a regular basis. For more information about the Glessner House tours, contact Vana Kikos at (312) 217-0300 or the PDNA at (312) 401-2688 or e-mail: pdna.chicago@gmail.com.