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Prairie Pointe thinks about leaving park management Space considered for parking

By Micah Maidenberg
Editor

The open space at the northeast corner of 16th Street and Indiana has never been formally named. There is no signage welded onto the black, wrought-iron fence that surrounds the pie-shaped park. Inside the fence, much of what was supposed to have been a lawn area was denuded of grass on a recent day, and weeds have carte blanche.

The park, which is not part of the Chicago Park District, holds the perhaps unique distinction of being maintained-or not maintained, as some say-by the condominium association at **Prairie Pointe**, just south of the park at 1600 S. Prairie. The space was created in a "planned development," a city ordinance that established **Prairie Pointe**'s units, parking spots and other elements, including open space.

Now, with the park languishing, the board at Prairie Point is considering an offer by United Services, a staffing firm with a South Loop presence, to build a 20-car parking structure at the west end of the parcel in exchange for installation of park improvements and maintenance.

Jeff Key, president of the Prairie Point condo board, said the condo association would lease 15 percent of the park to United Services in exchange for a plaza with pavers, a water feature, benches and other amenities. The parking structure would be covered with a pergola, Key said, a kind of roof open to the sky that accommodates vines. United Services did not return Chicago Journal calls or e-mail asking for comment.

"It would turn kind of an eyesore into a pretty spectacular-looking park, very useful for residents," Key said, noting the structure would provide off-street parking for residents and guests on the weekend and a medical practice that wants to move into a nearby building during the week.

For the parking structure to be realized, the **Prairie Pointe** condo association would need to change the planned development, something that Peter Scales, a spokesman for the Department of Planning, said planning staff would not support.

"I can say definitively the planning department does not support changing this planned development from open space to parking," he said.

Key said the condo association was forced to consider United Services' offer because the park was not completed when the developer, Gammonley, turned the parcel over to the association.

A bed of grass seed did not take, he said. A landscaper the association hired to do "minimal" maintenance at the park estimated it would cost \$40,000 to \$50,000 to get the rocks in the soil

out, plant grass and eventually be able to cut it.

"No one wants to face a special assessment much less a special assessment to make it a spectacular park," Key said. "No one wants file a lawsuit to get the developer to do this."

But Richard Gammonley, vice president of Gammonley, the developer, claimed the park was "done, finished, weeded and turned over to the association" in January of this year and that the condo association failed to maintain it.

"They just don't want to pay for the maintenance," Gammonley said. He accused the association of allowing the park to deteriorate so they could justify getting the maintenance off their hands.

Gammonley admitted his company's seeding did not take, but said once the parcel is turned over to the association, "there's nothing we can do about it."

Key said, however, about maintenance, "It's not clear what's required. What we were supposed to receive is a finished park. That's not what we received."

Another possibility Key said he is exploring is turning the land over to the Chicago Park District. The park is included in the district's acquisition's list in the 2008-12 Capital Improvement Plan but so are dozens of other sites around the city.

He said he was told the **Prairie Pointe** parcel, a portion of the St. Charles High Line and Mark Twain Park, a privately owned parcel north of the railroad tracks, would be tucked together by the district. A spokesperson for the district did not return calls for comment as of press time.

Another conundrum about the parcel, Key said, was that his condo association "gets nothing from the neighborhood" to improve the park, yet it must be open to the public.

But some neighbors do not want to see any building on the parcel and believe the space is being wasted.

"It's been sitting underdeveloped for three years or two years or whatever, and it looks terrible," said Michael Murphy, real estate broker who lives near 17th and Prairie. "It's the gateway to the Prairie District. I think it should lend itself to that"

From his north-facing unit at 1601 S. Indiana, Chris Rubel can see directly into the park, which he described as being in "sad shape."

"If it's zoned a park it should stay a park," Rubel said. "If the association is on the hook for maintenance, they should maintain it."

John Paul Jones, director of neighborhood parks at Friends of the Parks, said his organization wants to improve how open space build-outs are included in planned developments.

"We want the city to better measure how they agree to these and have the park district much more involved with them," he said.

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