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Controversial Lincoln Park running track in Park District budget

By Felicia Dechter, Staff Writer; [Skyline \(Chicago's People Newspaper\)](#) - 2007

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Community members and Ald. Vi Daley's (43rd) office were caught off guard last week by news that the Chicago Park District is resurrecting plans for a controversial running track/athletic field on the south end of Lincoln Park.

"Last week we were told, the issue was on hold for the time being," said Chuck Eastwood, spokesman for Ald. Daley. "We didn't even know it was going to be considered."

"Vi always said we need to talk to the community. This still will be a community process."

Meetings regarding the track, proposed for the area just north of North Avenue, stopped last summer after opponents – which included an ad hoc group that formed because of the issue, Keep Lincoln Park Public (KLPP) – started an all-out campaign to draw attention to the proposal.

The athletic field with a running track – plus basketball and volleyball courts – would be build on a 4-acre parcel of Lincoln Park. The approximately \$2.1 million project would be funded through a three-way partnership between the Chicago Park District, Latin School, whose students would use the athletic field, and another funding source, possibly the Chicago Public Schools, whose students could also have access to the track.

Evelyne Girardet, spokeswoman for the Latin School, which is across the street from Lincoln Park said, "We are still standing by our commitment to the project."

Although Katherine McGuire, spokeswoman for the Park District, confirmed that the tract was in the district's 2003 capital budget, she said it's "still in the planning stages," and she had no answers to questions such as who made the decision to resurrect the plans, costs, whether the track would be real or artificial turf, how many trees would come down, and why the community was not notified. McGuire did say, however, that the community meetings will be held in the future.

Kurt Uhler, of KLPP, didn't appreciate that no community meetings were held before the district put the track into its capital budget. "I am appalled that the Park District would approve this running track without any public meetings on the plans (in the last year), without notifying the community, and without concern for the thousands of people from the Chicagoland area who use this area of the park on a weekly basis," he said.

The original plans called for a 195-by-360-foot oval-shaped field/track with an eight-lane, 400 meter track made of artificial-turf. One of the park's existing paths would be relocated, and an earthen berm would be built along Cannon Drive. In addition, a seating/viewing area would be built, as would an area for shot-putting, high jumping and pole vaulting.

The plan also included two volleyball courts and a basketball court, all surrounded by a 4-foot fence. Construction would take between 90 and 120 days, and nine trees would be relocated and 40 new ones planted, under the original plan.

Opponents have cited concerns of congestion, noise, traffic, environmental issues and the fact that the district is partnering with a private enterprise, Latin School. However, for a similar facility built in River Park, on the Far North Side, the district partnered with North Park College. It also partnered with the University of Chicago for an ice-skating rink at Hyde Park's Midway Plaisance.

Eastwood said the project doesn't need the alderman's approval, but she can strongly recommend against it. That's what Sharon O'Brien, of Old Town, would like.

"With the way (Mayor Richard) Daley is chopping up Meigs and now this thing swooping in on us, whatever happened to democracy?" asked O'Brien, a member of KLPP. "Is everything happening covertly? Do we not have

any say in the way our parks or public land is used?”

Nearby resident and KLPP member Domenica Devine said that when she heard the news: “I felt like I had the win knocked out of me. I have been effectively removed from the community.”

“I’m sad and I’m mad. The example set here for the children of the Latin School parents, is if someone doesn’t agree with you, so what, you can buy your own way or use the influence you have cultivated by attending an exclusive school. Use any means necessary to get what you want. There is no need to negotiate, no need to compromise, no need to take a larger view of the world.”

Others say nothing can make up for the loss of green space and access to the park for Chicagoans.

“Our great city remains a mosaic of different cultures, many still flocking here to experience the American dream,” said Gold Coaster Brad Kovaly, also of KLPP. “The city has an obligation today, just as it did over a century ago, to provide open spaces for these families to enjoy time together as they struggle to find their place.”

“Those of us...who live in the ivory towers surrounding the park and who have the money and influence to send our kids to private schools should remember that not too many generations removed, it was our immigrant families that sought out the park to breathe fresh air and experience an open vista of trees and fields. A running track in Lincoln Park does not serve the greater good of Chicago and it’s people.”