



October 5, 2018

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter serves as official notice that Friends of the Parks does not plan to pursue any legal action against Chicago Public Schools, Chicago Park District, the City of Chicago, or the Northwest Side Housing Center over the development of the new Belmont Cragin Elementary School proposed to be located in Riis Park.

While Friends of the Parks does not support the construction of non-park related buildings in Chicago's public parks and is deeply distressed when public green space is taken from the community, there is legal precedent for public schools to be built in Chicago's parks. Though this situation, along with the current effort to build the Obama Presidential Center in a park, has prompted us to begin to investigate strategies to enact legislation that will make this harder in the future, our legal and risk analysis suggests that a lawsuit to stop this project at this time is not a wise use of our organization's resources.

We certainly do understand the importance of a new school building for the overcrowded Belmont Cragin community and all that it means for the parents and the youth. As we have been in conversation with a number of the parents and representatives of the school through the leadership of the Northwest Side Housing Center and the Riis Park Advisory Council over the last year or so, we have come to be very impressed with their organizational skills and dedication to their community. And we have appreciated their responsiveness to our concerns as we have shared with them our mission and vision regarding the important role that parks play in the health of our city. They now better understand our deep concern about the erosion of park space in Chicago and our intolerance of the suggestion that constructing a building in a park is an appropriate response to the years of disinvestment in both capital and programming that has been perpetrated upon parks in Chicago's low-income communities and communities of color for decades.

Over the years we have written many letters of opposition to the construction of school buildings in parks, and the City and Chicago Public Schools have proceeded over our opposition. Though our opinion on that issue has not changed, we have chosen to engage the Belmont Cragin school advocates in a partnership relationship to pursue the creation of 3.3 acres of replacement park land for the community somewhere very close by in the Belmont Cragin neighborhood. We appreciate that the Northwest Side Housing Center leadership has committed to work just as hard to make this a reality as they have worked to make a school a reality, and we will hold them accountable to that. We appreciate that they

have brought The Trust for Public Land to the table as an additional partner to pursue the creation of the replacement park land.

We will expect the Trust for Public Land and the City of Chicago to make just as high a commitment to the replacement of this Riis Park green space as they did to the development of The Bloomingdale Trail/The 606. In fact, we will demand a higher level of commitment, as we have expressed our concern that there are two feeder parks on the west end of The Bloomingdale Trail/The 606 that remain uncompleted by The Trust for Public Land and the City of Chicago, which we see as a huge equity concern, especially as the City promotes development that espouses further development of The Bloomingdale Trail/The 606 on the east end.

In fact, we see in this project a systemic challenge that must be addressed with much more comprehensive planning in the future. The gentrification that has been accelerated in the neighborhoods around The Bloomingdale Trail/The 606 by the approach taken to its development has actually contributed to the overcrowding in Belmont Cragin which now leads to the call for the construction of a school in a park.

Just as we have told the Obama Foundation that we will not stop saying that the Obama Presidential Center should not be in a park while we work with them behind the scenes to promote as much green space as possible and the replacement of all displaced amenities, we will apply a similar approach here. While we work with the Belmont Cragin school partners to find the most realistic win-win within the current reality, we will actively call out and work against the systemic injustices that work to the detriment of healthy parks for a healthy Chicago.

Sincerely,



Juanita Irizarry  
Executive Director



Lauren Moltz  
Board Chair