



McKinley Park needs affordable housing AND clean air

Neighbors for Environmental Justice Statement

on Proposed Redevelopment of 2139 - 2159 W. Pershing

Let us cut to the chase: McKinley Park needs affordable housing. It does not need MAT Asphalt. The problem with affordable housing is that there is not enough of it; the problem with air pollution is that there is too much. There is a simple, equitable solution: the city should support affordable housing in McKinley Park and stop supporting MAT Asphalt, which can be closed, relocated, or simply defunded, because it runs almost entirely on city contract money.

We reject the false framing that asks us to choose between affordable housing and clean air; instead we call on the city to choose both. Any vote to build this housing must also be a commitment to stop the polluter next to it.

McKinley Park is a majority Latino and Asian working class neighborhood that needs affordable housing. But we also need clean air. As long as a polluting factory is operating in McKinley Park's historic Central Manufacturing District - on an expired permit, with sparse inspection and virtually no accountability - the building next door should not be targeted for affordable housing. Deliberately zoning for and locating low-income housing directly adjacent to a petroleum processing plant is the very definition of environmental racism.

Neighbors for Environmental Justice wholeheartedly welcomes the proposed affordable housing and adaptive reuse development at 2139 and 2159 W. Pershing on the condition that the hot mix asphalt plant at 2055 West Pershing (sometimes listed as 4010 S. Damen Ave) be shut down or relocated a safe distance from residences, parks, and schools. Further, we call on the city to commit to robust, transparent environmental justice review processes to ensure that no new development jeopardizes the health or quality of life of the most vulnerable Chicagoans.

On Thursday, May 20th, the Chicago Plan Commission will hear a proposed planned development at 2139 and 2159 W. Pershing Road, iconic former industrial buildings at the heart of the Central Manufacturing District. The applicant is seeking to rezone the property from "light industry district" to "neighborhood mixed-use district" and then to a Residential-Business Planned Development. The proposed redevelopment would create 120 affordable housing units at 2159 W. Pershing Road, and 39 units of housing plus commercial or office space at 2139 W. Pershing Road. A shared amenity space between the buildings and 141 parking spaces would also be constructed. With [plans](#) for a green roof, courtyard, and alignment with the community-informed [McKinley Park Neighborhood Plan](#) released by CMAP last year, this is exactly the kind of investment that McKinley Park residents are calling for and deserve.

But last year, the same housing and mixed-use development was [denied City funding](#) due to environmental concerns stemming from MAT Asphalt, a hot mix asphalt plant next door to the site. A [2018 Environmental Justice Screen Report by U.S. EPA](#) analyzed the area within a half-mile radius of MAT Asphalt, which includes the site of the proposed redevelopment. When compared to the state and EPA region as a whole, the environmental justice index for the area ranked in the 90th percentile or higher for every selected variable - including 98th regional percentile for diesel particulate matter, and 97th regional percentile for air toxics cancer risk. Both types of contaminants are linked to hot mix asphalt production and the associated trucking operation, which may have exacerbated these factors as MAT Asphalt has been operating since 2018. The Illinois EPA environmental justice review, which is a required part of the permitting process for asphalt plants, [was never performed](#) ahead of MAT's establishment in the neighborhood.

While we are glad to learn of additional funding and persistent appetite for affordable housing in McKinley Park, we remain gravely concerned about the implications of siting affordable housing next to an asphalt plant and along a major road with significant diesel truck traffic associated with the plant. During our June 2020 meeting with Housing Commissioner Novara, she indicated that she "was not interested in putting low-income people at a higher risk." What has been done to ameliorate environmental conditions connected to MAT Asphalt? If pollution concerns were significant enough for the city to deny funding for affordable housing on this site, why would the Plan Commission support zoning for affordable housing there without addressing the underlying problem?

After all, it was [City's Committee on Zoning, Landmarks and Building Standards](#) that, in 2017, re-zoned property next to the plant (Planned Development No. 934, immediately next door to the proposed redevelopment and listed as "under renovation" with future use pending in slide 6 of the submitted [presentation](#)) from "residential" to "neighborhood commercial." This rezoning, with the help of 12th Ward Alderman Cardenas, was specifically designed to make room for MAT Asphalt, which otherwise would not legally be allowed to operate that close to residential parcels. The ordinance that established this zoning change [became part of MAT Asphalt's basis for seeking approval](#) for the manufacture of petroleum products on the neighboring site. The same 2017 letter from MAT's attorneys assures Chicago's Department of Planning and Development that the asphalt plant was over a mile away from the nearest residential district, despite its close proximity - within 1,000 feet - to McKinley Park, residences with a population of nearly 5,000 people, a kindergarten through 12th grade school, and the National Latino Education Institute (which, by the way, has submitted a [strong complaint](#) about the odor nuisance created by MAT).

We urge the Plan Commission not only to think holistically about the redevelopment of the Central Manufacturing District and to center environmental justice in its decision, but also to work with other City departments, City Council and CMAP to align processes, ensure transparency, and honor the community's vision for its future. That future must include affordable housing, clean air, green space, and good governance, prioritizing the health of our community over polluting industry.