

www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/ct-obama-library-community-met-20140716,0,6104185.story

chicagotribune.com

Community groups pin hopes on Obama library

Library seen as way to generate jobs, effect change in struggling neighborhoods

By Dahleen Glanton, Tribune reporter

July 16, 2014

In a small garden in the South Side's Washington Park neighborhood — blocks from a site proposed for the Obama presidential library advertisement — 18-year-old A.J. Jones has found solace tending organic leeks, asparagus and dinosaur kale.

"I used to always be going to parties and doing things with my brother that I shouldn't have been doing," said Jones, walking among rows of fresh fruits and vegetables that are harvested by young people and sold cheaply to neighborhood residents. "This gives me peace. It's a place where I can think and relax."

The Chicago Botanic Garden operates three urban farms in Chicago, but Sophia Shaw, the garden's president and CEO, has bigger dreams: What if the Obama presidential library had an urban garden, one inspired by the garden first lady Michelle Obama planted at the White House?

Across the city, groups that work with troubled and disadvantaged youths are joining campaigns to draw the library to their neighborhoods. Not only do they see a presidential library as an economic engine that would generate jobs and revitalization, they view it as a catalyst for social change, a means to curb violence and instill hope.

Some groups are approaching the library campaign with the same expectations and vigor they had during the 2008 presidential election. At that time, many African-Americans believed that the first African-American president would create an economic and cultural renaissance for blacks.

Now, faced with an onslaught of youth violence and dwindling money for their organizations, some are betting that Obama will repay a debt to the Chicago communities that launched his political career and landed him in the White House.

"He gave them a feeling of hope for the future, that education, jobs, safety and all of those kinds of residential things would be more available," said Timuel Black, a Chicago historian and longtime Obama supporter. "He owes the library to the people of Chicago, particularly those on the South Side."

Each group has its own vision for how the library could help it help the city's youths.

For the Chicago Botanic Garden, "The possibilities are endless," said Shaw, who has partnered with the University of Chicago to try to lure the presidential library to Chicago's South Side.

The educational gardens it already operates — in Chicago at Washington Park, in Lawndale on the city's West Side and at Gallery 37 in the Loop, plus one in Waukegan in Lake County — have taken hundreds of disadvantaged youths off the streets and taught them new skills.

"Can you imagine an expansive and thoughtful gardening program as part of the Obama presidential library that incorporated both beauty, nutrition and education?" Shaw said, adding that the botanic garden also would be willing to work on landscaping and design with any institution or group that lands the library.

The Barack Obama Foundation, the group responsible for examining bids and raising money to build the library, has said the library would be an extension of the president's vision for economic opportunity and would cultivate a strong relationship with its surrounding community.

If Chicago is chosen to host the Obama library, there is a good chance it will be built in a low-income, predominantly African-American community.

While the president and first lady will make the final decision, the University of Chicago has proposed sites in Washington Park, Woodlawn and South Shore. Developer Dan McCaffery has proposed a site in South Chicago, on land that once housed U.S. Steel mills. A community group has proposed the site of the former Michael Reese Hospital in Bronzeville. And the University of Illinois at Chicago has proposed two sites, one on its Near West Side campus and one in North Lawndale.

The University of Chicago, UIC and Chicago State University — which proposes to build the library on its South Side campus — have all enlisted the support of neighborhood organizations to bolster their bids.

In Bronzeville, a coalition of community groups, the Barack Obama Presidential Library and Museum Campus Foundation, has begun a grass-roots online campaign at obamacampus.com to raise \$100 million — \$99 each from 1 million people — to purchase the city-owned Michael Reese land.

But some economic experts said expectations for the library are too high — just as were the hopes for Obama's impact on the lives of African-

Americans after he became president.

Even if the library is located on the South Side, its scope likely will be limited to the immediate area surrounding the facility and will not directly affect communities like Englewood where residents are in dire need, according to Alvin Tillery Jr., an associate professor of political science at Northwestern University.

"We think of Woodlawn and Washington Park as satellites of Hyde Park. They are ripe for redevelopment. Even if it is located in South Shore, these are not the most marginalized communities we have," said Tillery, who also serves as chairman of the American Political Science Association's task force on race and class inequality. "I don't see a presidential library being a big job-creating mechanism."

According to Tillery, all one has to do is look to the limited impact the United Center has had on the West Side. The stadium's presence has not led to widespread job creation, and gentrification stops at the point where the majority of residents are African-Americans, he said.

"It won't happen without a broad economic development plan," Tillery said.

Still, he said Obama could include that kind of economic development as a central theme of his library.

"Presidential libraries are whatever the president wants them to be. Will closing the racial and economic gap be a signature of his library? Only he knows that."

Meanwhile, community groups have a lot of hopes riding on the library.

"To have the Obama library nearby creates an opportunity that used to be make-believe a reality for young minorities who are growing up on the South Side of Chicago," said Torrey Barrett, executive director of KLEO Community Family Life Center on East Garfield Boulevard. "We already have a pool of young people that are motivated and ready to become engaged."

The KLEO center — where 75 percent of the 450 youths served are minority males who have a history with the criminal justice system — sits on the dividing line between two rival gangs in Washington Park, according to Barrett. A sign on the front door says: "Put the guns down. Things have got to change."

The center is a peace zone that links young people to jobs and offers music programs, tutoring and other enrichment programs. Young men pass out canned goods from the food pantry, then team up for a game of basketball in the parking lot.

On Tuesday nights, young people pack the building for "open mic" night, reciting lyrics to the beat of hip-hop music. The program is run by an organization called LYRIC — Let Your Rhymes Inspire Creativity — that provides mentoring while encouraging young people to express themselves through spoken word, music and dance.

"Suppose the library was a place to showcase talent like that, where community people could not only go to learn about the president but to participate in programs and activities they already are accustomed to?" Barrett said.

The KLEO center is one of at least a half-dozen organizations, including the Boys and Girls Clubs of Chicago, the Museum of Science and Industry and the XS Tennis and Education Foundation, that has teamed up with the U. of C. to garner support for its library bid.

"Community engagement has been the central feature in our effort to put together this proposal," Derek Douglas, vice president for civic engagement at the U. of C., said in a conference call before the bid was issued. "It has provided tremendous insight and ideas that helped shape the ideas we put forward to the president and first lady in our proposal."

Farther south in Roseland, Diane Latiker, founder of Kids Off the Block, said the presidential library not only would help struggling organizations like hers but would be a reinvestment in a community that has not seen investment in years.

"We all know that the root cause of violence is poverty, economics and hopelessness," said Latiker, whose program serves at-risk young people. "If you talk to young people, especially those 16 to 24, the consensus is that nothing good is going to come to Roseland. The name, Obama Presidential Library, would be an investment in the community and the children for years to come."

Latiker, who signed a letter of support included in CSU's bid, acknowledged that the spark Obama ignited in young people with his election has faded — but the library could reignite hope.

"We always let our young people know that President Obama got started here in Roseland. That kind of gives them a little proud look," Latiker said. "But to put that library here, to say, 'Wow, our president came back, he didn't go somewhere else' — it would send a powerful signal to young adults that they are not forgotten."

Obama began making a name for himself as a community organizer in the Roseland and West Pullman neighborhoods on the South Side in 1985, setting up job training and tutoring programs and organizing public housing tenants to stand up for their rights. A decade later, in 1996, he was elected to the Illinois Senate representing the South Side. In 2004 he was elected to the U.S. Senate.

Timuel Black, who also serves on the U. of C.'s citizen advisory board for the library, said it was the people of Chicago, particularly those on the South Side, who helped push Obama into the political limelight.

But organizations on the West Side also want a piece of the pie.

"North Lawndale offers the president the largest opportunity to make the biggest immediate impact. There is no one single institution or community that made the president who he is," said Marcus Betts, spokesman for a group of community leaders that has partnered with UIC to bring the library to North Lawndale.

"If you took all the entities that have vied for this library, North Lawndale would look most like a young, ambitious Barack Obama with potential."

dglanton@tribune.com

Copyright © 2014 Chicago Tribune Company, LLC

Â«

Chicago Botanic Garden's urban farm



(Jose M. Osorio, Chicago Tribune / July 16, 2014)

Oluwapelumi Ajayi, 15, waters vegetable beds at the Chicago Botanic Garden's urban farm in Washington Park last month. Sophia Shaw, the botanic garden's CEO, hopes the Obama presidential library will settle on the South Side and include a garden.

 E-mail  Twitter  Facebook

Share

TODAY'S FLYERS



Hundreds Of Everyday Low
Prices
(Family Dollar)



Great Savings on
Footwear!
(Sports Authority)



New Styles, Cool Prices
(Target)



Save on Your Summer
Workout!
(Sports Authority)