

# Residents confront park district board

## *Lincoln Park Advisory Council also votes to support protesting residents*

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Several members of the Committee to Keep Lincoln Park Public showed up at the Chicago Park District board meeting March 12 to voice opposition to the \$2 million soccer field being built by the private Latin School, 59 W. North Blvd., in the south end of Lincoln Park. Additionally that same day, the Lincoln Park Advisory Council voted to support the committee's actions.

At the park district meeting, about 50 opponents showed up, some holding signs that read "Hands off Lincoln Park," and "Unfair 'Secret Deal.'" Committee member Peter Zelchenko - a Latin School alum who played on the school's soccer team - addressed the board on behalf of the group.

"We ask you to please take a closer look, as soon as possible," Zelchenko said. "We're fully prepared to pursue legal action on behalf of thousands of people who want it retained as park and open meadow"

Construction on the field has already begun,

but Zelchenko said the board was issued a cease and desist letter to immediately halt. He added that his group loves soccer and thinks there should be more of it in the city

"But not in the last open meadow in Lincoln Park," Zelchenko said, asking the board to review the "giveaway of space."

Zelchenko also mentioned that, in September 2006, three months before the deal was finalized, the park district went before the Lincoln Park Advisory Council and told members of a soccer field plan. But, he said, the park district failed to inform the group that the proposal included Latin School.

After the board meeting, the committee asked the advisory council to formally oppose the field and support the cease and desist letter. Additionally, the committee asked the council to put the issue before the community through a public process. The advisory council voted to back the committee.

Jill Niland, president of the advisory council, said the park district not only failed to inform the advisory council of Latin's involvement, but also said the field would be funded by an increase in fees.

"This is a reaffirmation of our negative opinion on this," said Niland. "We never liked the process...we were lied to and shut out"

Spokeswoman Michele Jones said the Park District had no comment on Niland's accusations.

Niland added that when the park district broached the council, members didn't object to

the concept of a field used by all. She said the area is not underused—as some say—and there is pedestrian traffic, and people recreating in the park. It should be an open space, Niland said, "for people to hang out and do whatever."

At the board meeting, Park District Board President Gery Chico called the situation a "very difficult issue."

"We understand your position," Chico said to committee members. "Nobody wants to take parkland away...this is a tough, tough choice between two competing interests."

Attorney Herb Caplan, also a member of the committee, reminded Chico that the contract has an opt-out clause. Chico said he would get in touch with Caplan at a later date to further discuss the situation.

"I can't say anything more right now," Chico said.

Grant Park Conservancy President Bob O'Neill spoke on behalf of the project. O'Neill said there are many public-private partnerships in the city that provide green space, culture, and opening of public land.

"This is a win-win situation, but it also requires compromise and you have to be reasonable in the compromise," O'Neill said. "Incredible things are happening and we're getting a lot of green space in public-private partnerships."

Jason Erkes, president of the Chicago Sport and Social Club, also backed the field.

"The day this park' and field opens, com-

panies like mine will be lining up and the Chicago Park District will make money from day one," Erkes said. "It's great for the community. Kids get to use it after school and it's great for the adult athletes. The end result will be a phenomenal athletic playing area in a grossly underused part of Lincoln Park."



Photo by Felicia Dechter

Siblings Skyler, 6, Shane, 8, and Kate Byrne-Slepicka, 10, protest the Latin School-Park District agreement at the district's March 12 board meeting.