



Soccer for all?
Or soccer for some
more than others?

TURF WAR

A band of hard-charging Lincoln Park activists scuttled the Latin School's deal for priority use of a new soccer field on public parkland. But, in the end, did anyone really win?

BY DEBRA PICKETT

IF YOU'VE EVER WALKED ACROSS THE SOUTH END OF LINCOLN PARK, headed for North Avenue Beach, you've probably seen the battleground. Before the war, it was just a patch of grass, low and mostly flat, though those who remember it fondly now say it was a "meadow." For months, it stood as a big, weed-covered mound of dirt, partially obscured by a windscreen fastened to a chainlink fence. A large sign on the fence declares it to be the "Chicago Park District South Lincoln Park Athletic Field," but the smaller signs, hung all around it, tell more of the story: "Keep Out" they say. "If unauthorized individuals are seen on site, please call 911."

This virtually inconspicuous four-acre expanse of scrub is the central front of the Great Soccer War of 2008. In it, the city became locked in a seemingly endless battle with a scrappy neighborhood group that had sued to block what it characterized as a sweetheart deal hatched in darkness between the general superintendent of the Chicago Park District, Tim

Mitchell, and one of Chicago's elite establishments, the Latin School. The deal to build a soccer field on the site, said its opponents, amounted to a land grab in which powerful government insiders took \$2 million in exchange for giving priority use of the field to Latin and its soccer teams. The city defended the arrangement as a creative financing package that would have had rich people footing the bill for amenities everyone could enjoy.

The conflict underscores not only the scarcity of prime parkland but also the odd confluence of issues necessary to whip up Chicago citizens into a state of outrage. After all, had it been in any other neighborhood involving any other school, would anyone have cared? The controversy surrounding the soccer field has now dragged on for more than two years, and the whole mess has emerged as a kind of object lesson in how to win—and then lose—against city hall.

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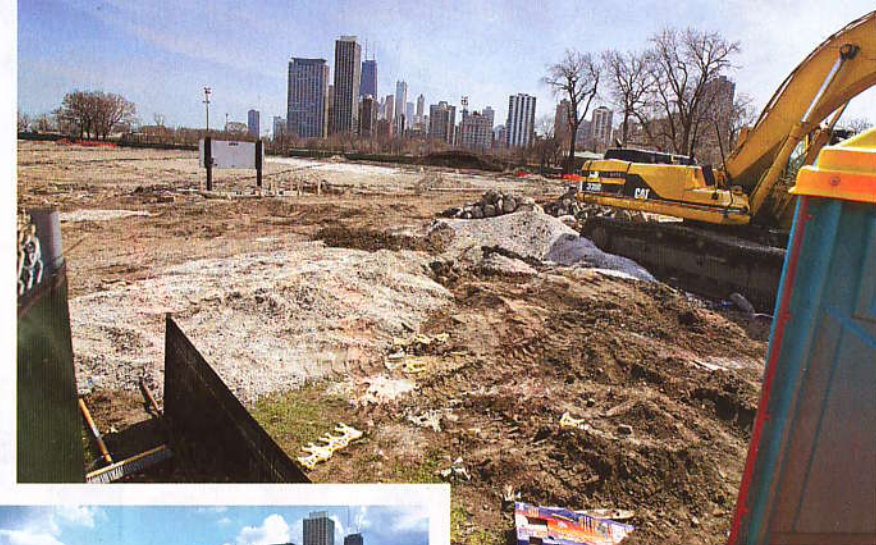
THE WAR STARTED, AS THESE THINGS so often do, with a man on a mission. Back in the late fall of 2007, Tom Tresser was still reeling from an unusually nasty city council election. The candidate for whom he worked as a volunteer campaign organizer, Michele Smith, had narrowly failed to oust the incumbent, Alderman Vi Daley. In Tresser's view, Daley was a stooge for the mayor (no relation), having voted with him 90 percent of the time in the past five years, and to Tresser the argument against her was cut and dried: Either you had a problem with the corruption and mismanagement in city government, or you didn't. Tresser had a hard time accepting that most people in his neighborhood, the city's affluent 43rd Ward, just didn't.

So he and a handful of other former Smith campaign workers formed the rather grandly titled Greater Lincoln Park Democracy for America, a citizens' watchdog group. Tresser and his cohorts were eager to organize the community but quickly realized that they lacked a signature issue. Then Tresser got wind of the soccer field, a brewing conflict he was certain would galvanize the ward.

"Latin was a real magnet for anger in the community," Tresser recalls. "They were not considered a good neighbor." Latin was a longtime source of myriad daily irritations, car congestion chief among them, to the Gold Coast high-rise dwellers around it. Tresser figured that the residents would rise up to stop the school from getting what it wanted—in this case, more than its fair share of park access. In fact, the neighborhood already had, four years before.

Far back in its history, the use of this now much-disputed piece of land was straightforward. It was a cemetery. But by the late 1860s, the bodies were being removed and the field was gradually being filled in to take shape as a grassy meadow. Since then, various master plans for the park have described the area in different terms, but it remained largely undeveloped—and undiscussed—until 2002.

That year, the Chicago Park District, along with the city's board of education and a single private institution, the Latin School, proposed building a sports venue, including a running track and soccer field, at the site. Though the shared financing arrangement, with each of the three entities contributing to the construction costs, was unusual, David Doig, the park district superintendent at the time, did not anticipate



In a controversial—and some say secretive—deal with the exclusive Latin School, the park district has been trying for two years to turn this patch of Lincoln Park into a state-of-the-art soccer field. Neighborhood protests blocked the partnership but not the building of the field, which opened on November 1st.

much controversy over the joint venture since the area was largely ignored except when used as staging area during the city's annual Air and Water Show.

Still, in keeping with the park district's practice of soliciting public comment on all proposals, a series of community meetings took place. Alderman Daley showed up at many of these gatherings, and even helped organize a handful of them, positioning herself as a sympathetic onlooker to the proceedings. Patricia Monahan, a resident of the Sandburg Village complex, a few blocks southwest of the site, remembers that "the public outcry was tremendous." Monahan worked with the Committee to Keep Lincoln Park Public to formally protest the proposal. The group argued that the plan was little more than a public subsidy for the Latin School, which would get a large athletic facility in its backyard while paying only one-third of the cost of its construction, at the time estimated to be \$2.2 million. Though the project plan indicated that Chicago Public Schools would also have use of the field and track, its location—so far from even the closest public school that students would have to be bused there—was seen as evidence that the wealthy private school was getting preferential treatment over the cash-strapped public schools.

The 2002 plan never came to fruition and Monahan and others believed it was



"defeated by public outcry," though the park district and Alderman Daley say that the proposal was scrapped simply because the board of education didn't have enough money to pay its share of the costs.

Four years later, after Doig left the park district and was replaced by the current superintendent, Tim Mitchell, neighbors were surprised to hear about a strikingly similar deal: an artificial turf soccer field, with bleachers and lights, planned for the same site and funded largely by the Latin School, which would, in exchange for its financial support, have priority access to the field during certain peak times.

"I had signed one of the petitions in 2002," says a nearby resident, Coleen Blake, "so I just thought this was ridiculous. I figured Friends of the Parks or someone would fight it. I mean, it had already been decided that the community didn't want it."

But at Friends of the Parks, the advocacy group formed in 1975 to oppose political patronage in the management of the park district, the organization's president, Erma Tranter, was having a hard time gearing up any sort of fight against the new proposal.