



October 31, 2022

Re: Comments sent to Chicago Park District for code change related to special event permits 45-Day Review & Comment Period

Friends of the Parks advocates for equitable investment, transparency, and public access to our park lands and the governance of parks. Our advocacy is grounded in the belief that Chicago's park system is one of the city's unique features and most incredible gifts. We believe that Chicago residents want unfettered access to this public amenity as a key part of the fabric of healthy communities and a healthy Chicago.

We understand that the Chicago Park District needs financial resources to deliver and maintain parks for all neighborhoods. At the same time, we believe that residents should not bear an unreasonable burden in hosting mega-events in parks for the sake of revenue generation for the park district and/or the City of Chicago, especially when the immediate park and community do not derive much direct benefit all while their day-to-day use of the park is interrupted. This is even more important in communities that historically have experienced disinvestment yet are being required to host activities meant to bolster city-wide budgets without direct remuneration to the park or neighborhood in question. As such, we support the notion that the park neighbors should have the opportunity to have a voice in the process of determining appropriate uses for public parks in terms of mega-festivals, including but not limited to the opportunity to make their concerns known to the Chicago Park District Board of Commissioners.

To be clear, Friends of the Parks does not have an official position against all commercial music festivals or other large events in parks. Certainly, many of us enjoy concerts in parks. One of the great things about living in Chicago is to revel in such events for free on a beautiful summer evening. Community-led or culturally appropriate events tend to be beloved by Chicago residents. But our enjoyment can make it easy not to be aware of area neighbors' burdens in making these concerts available for all of us.

Per issues voiced by various communities over the better part of the last decade, Friends of the Parks has concerns about the timing, size, scope, and impact of some events and the decision-making process through which these events come to our parks. One big equity concern arises

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when the cost to enter the gates to mega-festivals is prohibitive to the majority of residents of the surrounding neighborhood. Other concerns arise when the concert in question is not derived from community efforts or is not culturally relevant to the surrounding neighborhood. These legitimate complaints are exacerbated by the common reality that local residents' access to their local park, including programming for which they have paid, is displaced or disrupted altogether by mega-events. Additional concerns include but are not limited to how the host community is policed while the same standards are not applied to concert-goers.

Therefore, Friends of the Parks supports the proposed change to the Chicago Park District Code to require board approval of permits for special events in parks that would host 10,000 or more people per day. This is a step toward greater transparency and accountable governance of our parks. We affirm the idea that the Chicago Park District CEO should not be able to override the board's vote on the issue. But we also suggest that the board ensure that racial equity impact assessments are conducted and that space is made for consideration of community benefits agreements as part of the decision-making process about the use of public parks for mega-events.

Also, festivals at the scale of Riot Fest should operate in venues that don't inhibit neighbors' everyday use of public parks and don't strain infrastructure that was not intended to support the needs of mega-events. The City and the Chicago Park District ought to use this moment to pursue the idea of a dedicated festival space like the one in Milwaukee. One such venue could be Soldier Field and its surroundings; the likely departure of the Bears and the exploration of new ideas for Lakeside Center and the Museum Campus create a unique moment to reimagine the space. Festival grounds can generate revenue and tourist activity and bring concerts to Chicago without burdening communities that don't receive many direct benefits.

Again, while we support the proposed change the Chicago Park District Code, we hope to see more steps taken in the future to address the burden community residents feel regarding when large swaths of public parks are rented out, and too often. We ask the Chicago Park District to prioritize resident and general public use of park spaces over high-priced revenue-generating activities AND to consider how to bring benefits to the community beyond revenue generation for the park district at large.

Friends of the Parks appreciates the opportunity to state our concerns, dream about paths forwards, and state our long-held desire for large special events to be approached in a way that could be a win for everyone.

Sincerely,

Juanita Irizarry
Executive Director

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