

Proposal for South Parks Oversight Committee

The much-needed South Parks framework plan is intended to drive decades of development for these three important parks. Involved in this process are the residents of multiple wards spread across a large geographical area, as well as a number of government bodies and private entities. As evidenced by the growing tensions, there appears to be no overarching local decision-making body able to accommodate the many interests. Ald. Hairston and Mr. Michael Kelly are correct in asserting that the public should be in charge.

In that spirit, there should be a special oversight committee for this process, composed of appointed community representatives and others, whose task is to poll constituents, to listen at any meetings, to make decisions in case of conflict, and to compile this input into the developing South Parks plan. It could also serve as a center for local project execution planning, fundraising, and information after the plan is put into place.

One might argue that it is the PACs that should be serving this purpose. Although their stewardship of the parks -- and particularly Louise McCurry's and Cecilia Butler's tireless efforts -- is quite admirable, PAC members are not the only taxpayers, and as we are witnessing at these meetings, their opinions sometimes differ with those of other longtime stakeholders. Naturally, PAC members would be ideal candidates to serve on the committee, but there are many interests outside of the PACs that must be taken into account.

As is done with PACs, I think it might make sense for such a body to be initiated through authority of the Park District president and/or board. It could include one appointee each chosen by aldermen of the 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 20th Wards; one from each PAC; one from the University of Chicago; one from Friends of the Parks; one from the Hyde Park Historical Society; one from HPKCC; and one from Project 120.

The body would meet monthly and members should be expected to attend the relevant public meetings. The first order of duty should be to choose officers, and organize a subcommittee for each park. It should be provided with all contact information collected at prior and future meetings, authorized to use them for polling and for presenting information. A modest online presence would facilitate this work. The sooner such a body is in place, the better.