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Chicago Residents File Complaint with U.S. Department of Justice to Challenge Discriminatory Practices of the Chicago 2016 Olympic Committee

Chicago (October 1, 2009). The Chicago Park District, The Chicago 2016 Olympic Committee, and Chicago Mayor Daley have demonstrated a pattern of racial discrimination in the development and design of their Olympic Bid,” said Valencia Rias, who is a South Side community activist.

As a result, Rias and eight other Chicagoans filed a civil rights Racial Discrimination complaint today with the U.S. Department of Justice, charging that:

- Chicago’s strategy for carrying out the Olympics (as stated in Chicago’s Olympic bid) relies heavily on the “donation” of major Chicago parks for the clear majority of Olympic ceremonies and competitions, even though the Chicago version of the Games has been advertised as “privately funded”).
- Most important, three major public parks with the heaviest burden for the Games (especially Washington Park, but also including Douglas Park and Jackson Park) serve communities that are nearly 100% African-American and among the poorest in the city. These communities will be substantially deprived of the use of a significant part of their parks for periods of two years or more, while major venues (such as the temporary 80,000-seat Olympic Stadium at Jackson Park) are constructed and then torn down after the Olympics.
- These three parks are almost the only resource that many young people and adults have available in their communities for recreation (especially organized and informal sports that keep young people out of trouble, but also including jogging, and picnicking).

- For example, Washington Park is a 98% African American 65% low-income community on Chicago’s South Side. Washington Park will become the site not only of an 80,000-seat stadium, but also five swimming pools.

After being denied access to Washington Park for two years, residents will watch Olympic spectators arrive on shuttle buses, enter the stadium and pool sites through fences surrounding them, and then return to their hotels—once again by shuttle bus.

Washington Park has virtually no full-service stores. They have no major restaurants or other businesses that are to attract people who come to watch the Olympics. The Chicago Olympic bid itself does not include concrete and substantial funds to help Washington Park and other venues with the major economic development commitment needed to turn them around.

- The Rio bid makes the long-term development of the communities where the Olympics will be held central to their bid. With no similar funds as part of Chicago’s bid several Chicago foundations are establishing a fund to aid the communities where the Games would be held in Chicago.
- The three African American communities in which these parks are located had no say in whether or how their parks would be used for Olympic events. The decision to “donate” their use to the Chicago Olympic Committee was made by the Chicago Park Board, which is appointed and totally controlled by Chicago’s Mayor Richard Daley. (The Mayor’s former Chief of Staff, Gery Chico) is now the Park Board’s President.)
- Of the more than 50 public parks larger than 100 acres in Chicago, only one park in a predominantly white community is being required by the Park District and the Mayor to bear a somewhat similar burden, by serving as the site for tennis, with some new courts to be built.

“I think the Chicago 2016 Olympic Committee has stolen parks in low-income African-American neighborhoods because they think we will just be quiet and take it—while white and more affluent neighborhoods wouldn’t tolerate it,” says Michael Johnson, an active parent who coaches a youth football team in Washington Park.

A map of where the city’s parks are located clearly indicates the Committee could have had set these different competitions up in a wide variety of communities that are still close to the Olympic Village,” said Rias.

“The Olympic Committee has talked about using parks that have breath-taking lakefront views, but only one of the three parks in the African American community is actually on the Lake Michigan. Chicago has a real lakefront park that extends along nearly the entire lakefront on Chicago’s North Side, but this park is in the wealthiest part

of the city and would never tolerate extensive shutdowns and construction,” said Toni Stith, another signer of the Department of Justice complaint.

Parents also question why a city that faces a record \$500 million deficit for the coming fiscal year can shell out millions for the Olympics. Due to both city and state budget deficits this year, many social service and health care workers were laid off. “I would rather have a good teacher in my son’s classroom than watch the Olympics through a fence,” said Crystal Crokett, another parent who signed the federal complaint.

Michael Scott, Mayor Daley’s appointed head of the Chicago Board of Education and a member of the committee seeking to bring the Olympics to Chicago, bet that real estate prices would go up around the Douglas Park Olympic venue on the West Side, when he bought run-down real estate near the park, where the Olympic bicycle-racing track will be built. When a journalist exposed Scott’s activities, Scott dropped his ties to this land purchase.

Chicago’s precarious financial position and the sense that insiders will be the primary beneficiaries, if the Olympics come to the Windy City, have helped contribute to a sharp drop in public support for the Chicago 2016 bid. Last February, 67% of Chicagoans supported holding the Games here, according to the *Chicago Tribune*. This percentage dropped to 47% in September, with 84% Chicagoans saying that no public money should be used to support the Games. The level of public support for the Olympics is one stated standard that the International Olympic Committee uses to judge competitors’ bids.

“This percentage could sink even lower after lengthy Olympic construction forces families to curtail the use of parks in low-income African American communities, after these communities have been required to “donate” their parks for Olympic competitions in 2016.” said Rias.

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