

The East Lincoln Park Neighbors Organizing Committee
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Laura Flores, Chair
Chicago Plan Commission
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City of Chicago
121 N LaSalle St., Room 1000
Chicago, IL 60602

We are writing on behalf of East Lincoln Park Neighbors, a neighborhood organization representing the interests of the 4,000 residents of the area bounded by Fullerton Ave., Clark St. Sedgwick St., Armitage Ave., and Lake Michigan.¹ We are writing to respectfully urge you to reject the application of Francis Parker School (“Parker”) to amend Planned Development 697 and the application filed under the Lakefront Protection Ordinance (together “Application”) dated June 17, 2026.²

The proposal reflected in the Application centers around: (i) adding lights to the Parker athletic field and (ii) tearing down a vintage 15-unit apartment building on Belden Ave. in the center of a two-block residential neighborhood, displacing the families that live there.³ Parker proposes to replace these homes with an institutional classroom structure to potentially accommodate additional enrollment of 125 students and 30 staff, which has notably not been shown to be an achievable goal.

If approved, the proposal would result in profound changes that negatively impact the neighborhood directly adjacent to Parker’s six-acre+ campus and the broader Lincoln Park community. Over 2,100 community members, including over 1,400 43rd Ward citizens, signed a petition opposing Parker’s proposal, and hundreds have written letters opposing the proposal to Alder Timmy Knudsen.⁴ Two neighborhood associations, Mid-North Association and Sheffield Neighborhood Association, as well as Preservation Chicago, have also expressed their strong opposition.⁵ Residents of the adjacent Shakespeare Building Co-op are also opposed and will be

¹ Census tract 714 had a population of 4,448 in the Census Bureau’s 2024 American Community Survey.

² <https://chicityclerkelms.chicago.gov/Matter/?matterId=B9358B34-F264-F111-A823-001DD80071EA>

³ A map of the site is attached to this letter as Exhibit A.

⁴ A list of petition signers is attached to this letter as Exhibit B.

⁵ The Mid-North Association’s public letter in opposition to the Application is attached to this letter as Exhibit C.

immediately impacted by the proposed field lights and proximity to the proposed Belden Ave. expansion site.⁶

There are two dispositive reasons why the Application should be rejected now to avoid wasting City agencies' and their personnel's time and resources:

1. The Application fails to comply on its face with several key provisions of the applicable Chicago Zoning Ordinance and the Lake Michigan and Chicago Lakefront Protection Ordinance; and
2. The Application and related materials contain false statements and misrepresentations that improperly preclude an objective assessment of the proposal's defects, which require its rejection.

THE STATUTORY CONTEXT

The Chicago Zoning Ordinance's purposes include:

- Promoting the public health, safety and general welfare,
- Preserving the overall quality of life for residents and visitors,
- Protecting the character of established residential neighborhoods,
- Promoting rehabilitation and reuse of older buildings, and
- Maintaining a range of housing choices and options.

The Application does not discuss or address any of these provisions. For the record, no materials or representations that either Parker or the Alder have produced demonstrate that the Application can meet the Zoning Ordinance's purposes. The reason for the omission is obvious. The Application flies in the face of each of those critical objectives.

The Application also fails to address or satisfy comparable provisions of the Lakefront Protection Ordinance with which it must comply. The Statement of Purpose of the Lakefront Protection Ordinance provides that applications must: "promote and protect the health, safety, comfort, convenience and the general welfare of the people." This overarching statement is reflected in several specific requirements, which include: "minimize conflict with existing traffic patterns," "minimize and mitigate traffic congestion," and "provide safe and ample access for emergency" vehicles.

THE FALSE STATEMENTS AND MISREPRESENTATIONS

The Application acknowledges that if any of the information provided is "false, incomplete, or inaccurate, any contract or other agreement may be rescinded or be void," and the "City may

⁶ The Shakespeare Building Corporation's letter in opposition to the Application is attached to this letter as Exhibit D.

pursue any remedies.” Parker has violated this prohibition, which is intended to ensure honesty, candor and transparency, in several material respects.

Field Lights

An essential element of the proposal involves seeking approval for the installation of lights on the athletic field, which would be available for use for 14.5 hours each day between 6:30 am and 9:00 pm. Although not disclosed by the applicant, Parker made a similar request for the installation of field lights in 2011/2012, which was ultimately unsuccessful because the field is embedded in a dense residential neighborhood. The 43 Ward alder at the time introduced an amendment to the applicant’s planned development ordinance, subsequently passed by City Council, prohibiting lights on Parker’s field. The amendment stated:

“No permanent lighting will be permitted on the athletic field.”⁷

Because Parker chose to omit this material fact, it did not explain what has changed over the last 14 years and why what was prohibited in 2012 should be permitted now. The only “justification” Parker provided was set forth on School and Neighborhood Improvement webpage as follows:

“Parker’s proposal includes installing a lighting system that will result in a DarkSky-certified athletic field to give students additional practice and game time.”⁸

First, Parker has not shown that DarkSky will certify their field and they do not know whether they would be able to maintain such certification. Parker has provided no evidence that they have engaged DarkSky nor are their proposals consistent with DarkSky’s values and position statements. Second, Parker does not acknowledge practice and athletic venues in Lincoln Park within a short walk of its campus. Some are directly across the street from Parker, and other publicly available fields nearby have lighting for early morning and evening activity. The availability of these facilities makes the professed need for field lighting a misrepresentation.

Parker’s School and Neighborhood Improvement webpage then proceeds to falsely state the following:

“Leadership at Lincoln Park Zoo...*has expressed support* for the field lighting proposal because...it protects local wildlife.”⁹

This assertion is not true. While Lincoln Park Zoo acknowledged that DarkSky lighting guidelines can reduce the ‘ecological impact’ of light pollution, it plainly did not support Parker’s lighting proposal. Instead, it stated:

⁷ The amended ordinance passed by City Council on June 6, 2012 is attached to this letter as Exhibit E.

⁸ <https://www.fwparker.org/about/school-and-neighborhood-improvement-proposal>.

⁹ Ibid.

“Lincoln Park Zoo does not have a stance on the project proposed by Parker...The zoo does not endorse nor object to the project at large.”¹⁰

A senior Parker administrator certified under oath that the “statements contained in the documents submitted herewith are true and correct.” This brazen misrepresentation of the Zoo’s position —standing alone—is grounds for rejecting the Application. To make matters worse, Parker focuses solely on wildlife impact and ignores entirely the adverse impact on the quiet enjoyment of hundreds of residents living directly adjacent to the athletic field who would be subjected to the intrusion of field lighting any time the school chose during a 14.5-hour period, seven days a week. This callous disregard for the well-being of its neighbors is simply unconscionable. It also ignores the various City rules and regulations designed to mitigate light pollution. The June 2012 prohibition on field lighting was a significant protection that recognized the importance of respecting one’s neighbors. Parker’s effort to eliminate it should be unequivocally rejected.

Not content with misrepresenting the Zoo’s position, Parker has misrepresented the “community-friendly” nature of DarkSky lighting. At Alder Knudsen’s March 31, 2026 community meeting held to introduce Parker’s proposal, Parker included a slide of DarkSky lighting at a university stadium in Nova Scotia - a representation totally irrelevant to field lighting in a densely populated area like East Lincoln Park.¹¹ What Parker chose not to disclose is that there are no DarkSky-certified athletic fields in Chicago and only two in the entire State of Illinois. One is located at softball fields in Ackerman Park in Glen Ellyn, a 65-acre recreational facility. The other is located at a pickle ball complex at Centennial Park in Champaign, a 69-acre recreational facility.¹²

In stark contrast, the proposed field lights would directly impact many of the 186 families living directly across the street from the field in the 14-story Webster House, its neighbors in the low-rise apartments to the west and residents on the south side of the Shakespeare Building - all directly adjacent to the Parker athletic field. Parker’s supposed commitment to allow the local public school student access to their field three times per year and potential access to their auditorium in exchange for field lights is neither a meaningful nor significant contribution to the community. Further, they will only allow access if the facilities happen to be available, which hardly makes this compromise significant.

¹⁰ An email from Lincoln Park Zoo’s public relations department is attached as Exhibit F.

¹¹ Parker’s March 31, 2026 presentation can be found here:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rzk1OF4OvRxb_VaGoC0tfg3874bKKbn_/view

¹² <https://darksky.org/what-we-do/darksky-approved/outdoor-sports-lighting/darksky-approved-outdoor-sports-lighting-projects/>

Traffic and Parking

Other aspects of the proposal are equally problematic. The Application takes the position that there will be “No Meaningful Impact on Traffic and Parking.”¹³ The assertion is based on an outdated 2023 ‘study’ that purports to support this position. The ‘study’ is not provided and could not conceivably support Parker’s specious assertion. Lincoln Park and specifically the neighborhood around Parker are widely recognized as among the most congested areas for traffic and parking in the City. The area is home to beautiful parks, lakefront access, the Zoo, the Nature Museum, the Conservatory, the Lily Pond and various special events (e.g., Zoo Lights), all of which are major draws for foot and vehicular traffic. During the school year, Parker shuts down Webster Ave., a two-way street, and allows parents to double park along Lincoln Park West, Sedgwick St. and other streets Monday through Friday to facilitate drop-off and pick-up by car. Residual gridlock and other traffic and safety woes are everyday consequences.

Commercial and residential developments immediately add to existing traffic congestion and parking scarcity. Holding athletic events in the evening will only serve to exacerbate these issues. Without acknowledging these obviously verifiable facts, the Application claims that the ‘study’ also “surveyed available parking within a reasonable walking distance to Parker and found ample parking available to accommodate both the expansion and the field lighting.”¹⁴ This assertion is not only unsupported but defies the everyday experience of the thousands of residents and visitors who will be adversely impacted. Further, according to Alder Knudsen, traffic mitigation will only be considered 90 – 180 days after lights are installed, at the alder’s discretion, and parking will not be considered at all. This approach does not align with the public’s interests.

Destruction Of a Historic, Multi-Family Residential Structure

As noted above, the Application seeks approval to tear down an existing multi-family, vintage residential building at 327-335 Belden Ave. Notably, this building was included in an application to the City to establish a courtyard building landmark district, which Preservation Chicago has supported since 2016.¹⁵ Samuel Nichols Crowen, a noted architect of the time, designed the building. The building was recognized for being a classic example of early twentieth century residential architecture and is the earliest building in the proposed landmark district. Parker seeks to raze this historically significant building and replace it with a new institutional structure. Parker has advertised they have agreed to leave another vintage multi-family residential building they own outside of its planned development for 30 years; however, the Plan of Operations and

¹³ O2026-0026090 Application.pdf, p. 7
(<https://occprodstoragev1.blob.core.usgovcloudapi.net/matterattachmentspublic/a4909452-8d79-48c2-adac-fd1e9c6e50b5.pdf>).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The Lincoln Park Courtyard Building Landmark Proposal is attached to this letter as Exhibit G. See page 16 for information on 327-335 Belden Ave.

Community Benefits between Parker and the 43rd Ward Alderman's office states that the 43rd Ward Alder may agree to an expansion of Parker's Planned Development at any time, invalidating the commitment to residential use of that building.¹⁶

The Application not only violates the purpose and intent of the Zoning and Lake Michigan Ordinances "to protect the character of established residential neighborhoods." The Application also flies in the face of the emphasis on the preservation of historically significant structures in the 43d Ward. Alder Knudsen himself recently said of historic buildings that "preserving them helps maintain the historic character and neighborhood feel that residents feel deeply about."¹⁷ The Belden building stands out as a prime example of a residential structure that deserves and requires protection. This protection is particularly appropriate because Parker can provide for its aspirational expansion within its existing six-acre+ campus.

Expansion Can Happen on the Current Planned Development

To be clear, East Lincoln Park Neighbors does not object to Parker expanding its facilities on its current planned development campus to accommodate future growth. Despite repeated requests, no verifiable explanation has been provided for why the expansion cannot be accomplished within the existing six-acre+ campus. Data show that across the City, Parker is in the top two schools for land per student ratio. The community pointed Parker and Alder Knudsen to a parking lot within the current planned development at the corner of Webster Ave. and Clark St., immediately adjacent to the existing school buildings, as a viable space for expansion. Parker materially misrepresents the feasibility of building on this site by stating in an "FAQ" document published on Alder Knudsen's website that the lot is "under 7,000 square feet."¹⁸ The City Zoning and Land Use Map shows the parking lot area is almost twice as large as Parker represented. The site is 13,565 square feet, 86% the size of the parcel on which Parker proposes to build on Belden Ave.¹⁹

Neighbors with technical expertise and decades of experience have demonstrated that Parker can achieve the same programmable space by building on that parking lot.²⁰ Parker and Alder Knudsen are aware of this better alternative option that can accommodate expansion within the existing planned development, as well as greatly improve traffic, parking and safety concerns. Regrettably, Alder Knudsen pushed ahead with his endorsement of the Application without regard for or meaningful dialogue about the better alternative proposal.

¹⁶ The Plan of Operation and Community Benefits is attached to this letter as Exhibit H.

¹⁷ 43rd Ward Newsletter, May 22, 2026 (<https://app.indigov.com/pub/outreach/10b93eb3-1ca1-439d-872a-ce1ffdc216e>).

¹⁸ The FAQ document is attached to this letter as Exhibit I.

¹⁹ Screenshots from the City of Chicago Zoning and Land Use Map area measurements of the Belden property (15,780 square feet) and alternative parking lot location (13,565 square feet) are attached to this letter as Exhibit J.

²⁰ A Better Proposal for development on Parker's existing six-acre campus is attached to this letter as Exhibit K.

Community, Environmental and City Impact

Parker recognizes that the demolition and construction of the proposed new building will result in “disruption in the neighborhood” including sound from mechanicals, likely need for asbestos and other hazardous material remediation and adverse impacts on available sunlight for families residing West of the proposed structure. Parker is silent as to mitigation steps. Additionally, it is not clear that the building can be demolished without negatively impacting other buildings in its proximity.

Parker has utterly disregarded the enormous adverse environmental and economic impact of destroying this historically significant residential structure, which has been and remains an integral part of the neighborhood. The building’s destruction would move approximately 4.5 million pounds of embodied carbon to landfill. All of Chicago would needlessly suffer a meaningful reduction in the real estate tax base, reducing a \$234,000 real estate tax contribution in 2022 to \$0. The present value of that tax stream exceeds \$10 million.²¹

Strong Community Opposition

In a recent update on the proposal, Parker proclaims “broad community support” for its proposal and a “shared belief in Parker’s mission.”²² The Plan of Operation and Community Benefits authored by Alder Knudsen represents that there was a “robust and constructive community engagement process which involved significant compromises by Parker.”²³ While this empty rhetoric may sound good, it is at best disingenuous if not plainly misleading, particularly given the abrupt termination of public input in early May after the March 31 community meeting. The significant disabling defects described above were completely ignored as was the groundswell of community objections. Again, over 2,100 community members, including over 1,400 43rd Ward citizens, signed a petition opposing Parker’s proposal, and hundreds have written letters opposing the proposal to Alder Knudsen.

Parker is a powerful institution, with \$56 million in revenue and net assets of \$156 million at its year end 2025.²⁴ Parker pays no taxes, despite consuming enormous amounts of valuable City services, a consumption that will increase as it moves to demolish homes and expand the use of its playing field. While the East Lincoln Park Neighbors cannot match Parker’s wealth or influence, Parker and Alder Knudsen cannot ignore or brush aside the very significant defects in the Application. Nor can they overcome those defects by making token contributions to two public schools, limited access to Parker facilities or introducing very limited affordable housing units that do not remotely compensate for 15 families being displaced or the tax base being

²¹ A professional analysis of the loss to the property tax base by Prof. David Merriman is attached to this letter as Exhibit L.

²² An email from Francis W. Parker School dated May 28, 2026 is attached to this letter as Exhibit M.

²³ The Plan of Operation and Community Benefits is attached to this letter as Exhibit H.

²⁴ Parker’s June 30, 2024 IRS Form 990

(<https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/362171732/202600159349300210/full>).

reduced. The claimed benefits of the Parker proposal are vastly outweighed by all of the negative consequences described above.

CONCLUSION

The bottom line is that Parker has failed to demonstrate that the Application is in the public interest and in compliance with all applicable statutory objectives and the rules and regulations implementing them. For all the reasons set forth above, Parker's Application should be denied.

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