

Comments on Proposed Amendment to Chapter VII of the Chicago Park District Code

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Greetings,

This email is offered as participation by my wife and I in the 45-day period for public comment regarding the proposed Code Amendment.

I was curious to see how the Douglass Park community viewed festival events in their neighborhood park. In years past, I watched how Riot Fest, in spite of thousands of community supporters, had been ousted by a small group of residents, bolstered by professional activists and organizers. It was unpleasant to watch the majority of voices ignored and Democracy abandoned, and I was curious to see how the Douglass Park issue would unfold.

So, I attended the August 24th "Community Engagement Forum" in Douglass Park.

I took detailed notes on what all 38 speakers had to say. Or tried to say.

I did not sign up to speak as I wanted to hear from the community out of respect for what seemed like the organizer's intention of the meeting. Unfortunately, others did not exhibit this restraint and respect for the process, as I recognized speakers at the Douglass Park Forum that participated as Riot Fest protesters many years ago at Humboldt Park meetings. A few of them were the main hecklers in Douglass Park and it ended up being more of a silence and smear campaign than a genuine Forum for gathering information and listening.

Unfortunately, the speakers that spoke in favor of festivals were repeatedly; no, incessantly and overpoweringly interrupted by hecklers. The hecklers yelled, whistled, mocked, and effectively employed numerous other methods of disruption. In addition, an organized group waving pre-arranged colors of paper on command, thereby producing a wave of more than distracting crinkling/rustling noise. All of these interruptions were intense and disrespectful and were only met with light resistance by Forum organizers. I suspect it was difficult for some speakers to focus on their couple of minutes to speak; likewise, it was difficult for me to focus on the point of the meeting due to these disruptions. All voices deserved to be heard, and they were not. In fact, they could not be heard.

If the "Community Engagement Forum" was intended to serve as a safe space for diverse voices to speak their opinion, the Park District failed to provide that safe space. The removal of serial disrupters would have served the purpose of holding a constructive meeting quite well, I believe.

My takeaway is that the genuinely local people are mainly concerned about lost use of the park, especially for their kids during the summer months. That is valid concern that deserves attention. Another concern is that the community wants some of the money raised by the owners of the events to be invested in the community. Maybe this could be accomplished in part by charging attendees a Park District "Community Fee" as part of the ticket sales process.

Living in Humboldt Park for over 18 years, where there are events in the Parks throughout the summer, is that events that might be gather less than 10,000 attendees can and do affect the Park, Park programs, and the surrounding community just as much, if not more than events that are greater than 10,000. In many ways, smaller events or events that historically have not charged admission are more disruptive to the community as there is less oversight and regulation.

Some impactful events in Humboldt Park have not consistently sold tickets, thereby making it difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain an accurate attendee count and to thereby hold that festival similarly accountable to the neighborhood 10,000 +/- threshold based on attendee count alone.

When Riot Fest operated in 3 different locations during their 3 years operating in Humboldt Park, even though the music was loud and there were lots of people parking their cars in the neighborhoods, and traffic was impacted, there was no uptick in violence. The Riot Fest attendees bought parking on privately owned vacant lots, certain community groups were allowed to rent the boathouse and fieldhouse parking lots as fundraisers, and people came, saw, and left. To my knowledge there were no stabbings or shootings or fights at Riot Fest, or in the surrounding community before or after the event. Conversely, there was a large fight during Puerto Rican Fest inside the Festival grounds which was witnessed and reported in the media 2022.

Comparatively, the tens of thousands of people that are drawn to Humboldt Park during the Puerto Rican Festival often do not attend the official festival, but instead gather in the other areas in the park, and in the surrounding community on their residential streets and mixed-use commercial streets. They often are consuming alcohol and leave significant amounts of waste in the community. And they "cruise" which means drive their cars repeatedly for hours and hours through the neighborhoods. Riot Fest attendees were not seen to participate in the "cruise" activity. During the cruising, flags are flown, car horns are constantly blaring, music is played at deafening levels, traffic is in gridlock status for a half-day or more, and far too often the neighborhoods are affected by violence. Sometimes, this violence hits close to home. For instance, in the 3200 block of W. Division, Yasmin Perez and Giovanni Arzuaga were gunned down by revelers on Saturday night of the 2021 Puerto Rican Festival. This is a block from my home, and we heard the shots, as did many of our neighbors. Young children were screamed at

to "get down" and some were pushed to the ground by their parents. I dropped to the grass and had to check if my wife or neighbors had been shot. That was traumatic for all and those of us who have attended the Festival in the past simply don't want to put ourselves in harms way.

So, I hope you can keep in mind that the size of the event is not the only matter at hand here. There are life-and-death matters to consider, in addition to traffic, disruption and money. There is violence that is prevalent as a direct result of some festivals. In 2022, there were dozens of police stationed near our house as a result of the 2021 shootings and as a result of community leaders such as myself contacting elected officials and imploring the police department to deploy violent crime deterring strategies. No such pleas were necessary as a result of Riot Fest, whose attendees in spite of their green hair, mohawks, and high-heeled patent leather boots, simply got in their car and quietly drove off, not even leaving behind trash.

Reducing the issue at hand to the size of an event misses the mark if you seek to know the concerns of residents. Events that have a peaceful track record, as well as those that attract violent revelers that have repeatedly led to a loss of life would be best weighed on that merit or detriment.

So, please when you are making decisions about festivals in the parks, consider the residents who actually live nearby. Why not send a survey letter to all homes within a certain distance of the affected Park. Truly engage the community. Advertising a Community Engagement Forum and then allowing hecklers to disrupt it is not an adequate attempt to engage the community. The hecklers were not peaceful protesters and I did not feel safe at the Forum. You are leaving a lot of voices unheard, and in fact oversaw a public meeting where intimidating and bullying behavior was allowed to exist basically unchecked.

I think that it is worth considering that one or more of the festivals that occur during the Summer months and that are the most disruptive to Park programming be moved to another park or location. That way the community has less disruption.

I find the timing of Riot Fest to be minimally invasive of the Park District programs because the kids have returned to school. I think a proper analysis of what is disrupted, to what degree is the disruption, and an objective and data-driven study of the impact to the community is the best approach to this. Since the Park belongs to us all, I think residents following the lead of the Park District which can move programming to other areas of an affected Park might not be an unreasonable sacrifice. Compromise and change is part of life and if festivals are safe, and otherwise comply with Park District standards, and engage the community and invest in the communities in which they operate and in the people they affect, they should be allowed to continue.

If the Community Engagement Forum is any indicator about how an amendment to the Park

