

The Works

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Prescient or Just Paranoid?

Rogers Park residents turned out in force to foil a city plan that officials say doesn't exist.

By Ben Joravsky

On October 20 more than 400 people packed the Loyola Park field house to rail against a Park District proposal to build a marina on the lake just east of Devon Avenue. One by one they rose to make the usual arguments—the money would be better spent on existing local parks, the project would mean lots of construction noise and congestion, no community need would be served, because few Rogers Park residents own boats.

Hardly anyone mentioned the underlying source of much of the anger: the fear that the marina was the first part of a

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secret plan city officials have to extend Lake Shore Drive and the lakefront park from Hollywood Avenue to Evanston. “No one really trusts them,” says Don Gordon, executive director of the Rogers Park Conservancy, an advocacy group. “We're watching them very carefully.”

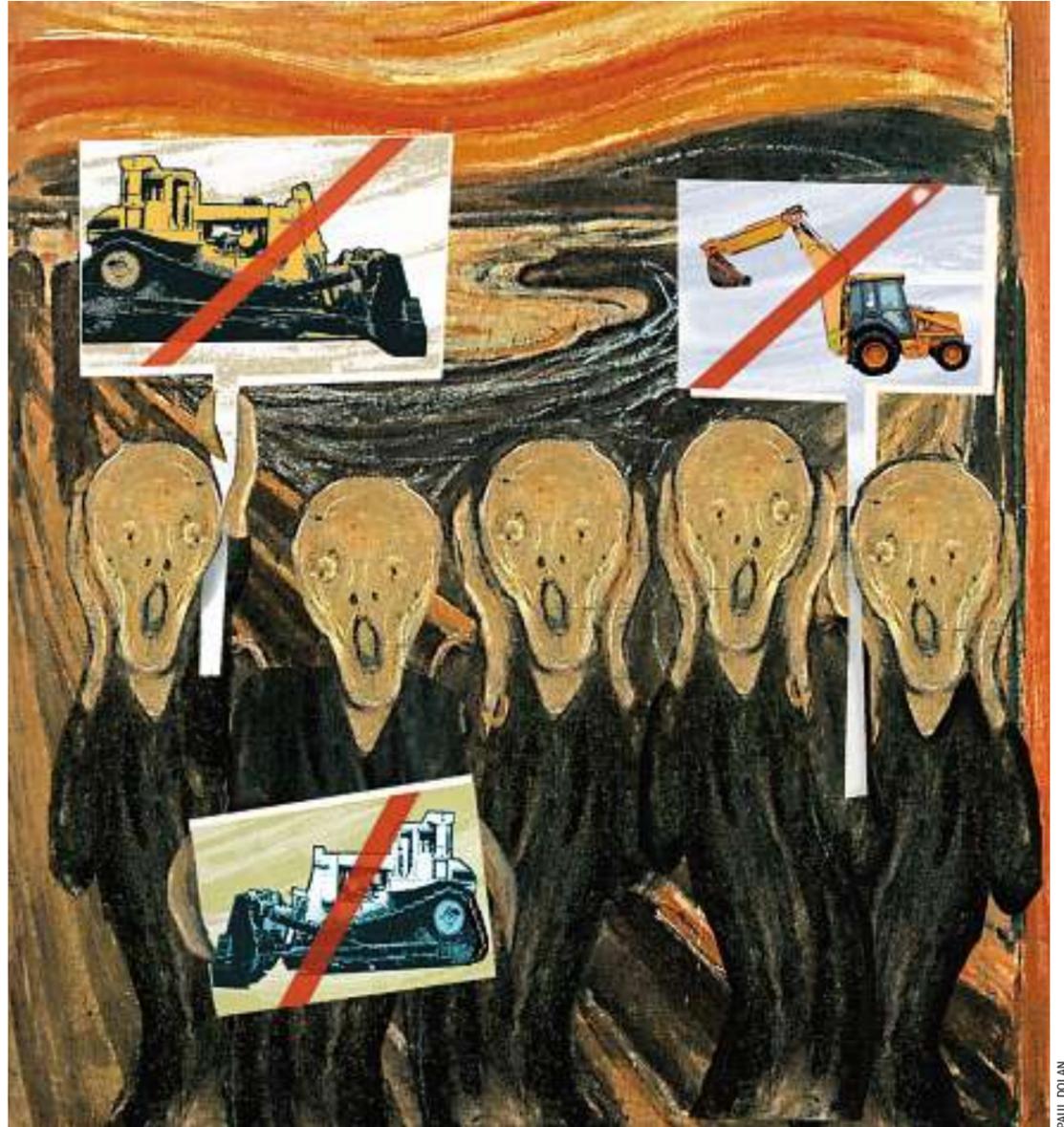
City and Park District officials don't like to talk publicly about the issue, explaining that anything they say might be taken out of context and used to stir up the locals. But private-

ly they say the fears about a secret plan are absurd and, well, paranoid. They say the city has no plan to extend Lake Shore Drive, and the local alderman, the 49th Ward's Joe Moore, says he's never seen any such plan. Some Park District officials say one benefit of a marina is that it would add a lot of park space to the lakefront, though they quickly add that the proposed one had absolutely nothing to do with any plan to extend the Drive.

The Park District's director of lakefront construction, Rob Rejman, told the audience inside the field house that the marina was one of several proposed because of increased demand for boat slips. He figures the city could easily rent another 2,000 slips and, once the money to build the new marinas was paid back, they would bring in hundreds of thousands of dollars a year that could be used for other park programs.

Brad Winick, a planner hired by the Park District to study the issue, told the audience that the demand for slips is growing for several reasons. “Demographic groups that don't traditionally buy boats are buying them,” he said. “The population is growing along the lakefront, and there's a tremendous resurgence downtown—as well as a number of boaters who store their boats in Indiana.”

Last spring the Park District set aside about \$350,000 for a study on the city's marinas. It chose Winick's company, JJR LLC, to do the study, and in August he came back with a proposal to expand existing harbors



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or build new ones at 87th Street, between 31st and 35th streets, north and south of Navy Pier, and between Devon and Granville, just east of the Loyola University campus. The northernmost site, tentatively called Edgewater Harbor, would

require a landfill at Devon to shelter the marina and its 350 to 400 slips.

Rogers Park residents didn't learn about the proposal until September 27, when a few of them attended a public hearing in South Shore regarding the

south-side marinas. “When we heard about it the alarms went off,” says Gordon. “We know that everyone's salivating over our lakefront. We thought, Oh, no, here they go again.” Rogers Park and Evanston residents spent two years fighting a pro-

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posal to build a 400-slip marina east of Calvary Cemetery, just north of the city line. Last October Evanston city officials voted to kill it.

The fight over that marina angered Rogers Park activists who like their lakefront just the way it is and don't want anything to change, even if a change would mean adding more park space to a city that doesn't have nearly enough. In 2004 they launched the Save Our Lakefront campaign, which focused on their biggest fear—a Lake Shore Drive extension. Its members, including Gordon, admit the city has never publicly proposed extending the Drive, though they say there was talk of that in the 70s. They also say that in 2004 U.S. representative Jan Schakowsky proposed a \$1 million study to look into extending the lakefront park system to Evanston, though she never mentioned the Drive. "You hear so many rumors about extending the Drive," says Gordon. "We don't know what's going on behind the scenes. They don't tell us. We wanted to put a halt to it before it even gets suggested."

Last year the activists gathered enough signatures to put a nonbinding referendum on the November 2 ballot asking voters in ten lakefront precincts, "Should local, state and federal governments allow extension of Lake Shore Drive or establishment of any other roadways, marinas, housing or commercial structures as part of any lakefront expansion from Hollywood Avenue to Evanston?" Roughly 88 percent of the voters said no. "You can't get much clearer than that," says Gordon.

That's why the activists were so surprised when the Park District proposed building Edgewater Harbor. As they see it, Park District officials either didn't know about the Calvary fight or the referendum or they didn't care. "When we heard about the marina at Loyola, we thought, 'OK, let's get the message out,'" says Gordon. The crowd that assembled at the field house last week occasionally interrupted Winick's opening presentation with derisive comments. The first speaker on behalf of the activists was the area's state representative, Harry Osterman, who drew a standing ovation when he passionately denounced the harbor as a waste of money. "I could probably not pick a worse place to put a harbor," he said. "It would take money that could go to facilities like this. A marina is absolutely not what we want. I ask the park district to change the location."

After a few more people spoke, Rejman took the microphone and announced that the Park District was killing the marina. "We cannot build all of these

harbors," he told the audience. "We proposed more options than we needed on purpose. This particular proposal as part of the planning process is off."

That caught people off guard. "Say that again," someone called out.

He repeated his statement, adding that the Park District had scheduled the public hearings to see which sites people thought were best. And since there was so much opposition to the one at Devon, it was dead.

Some people cheered. Some people left. Some stayed behind and kept blasting the idea of a marina just in case Rejman and Winick hadn't gotten the point. I talked to at least a dozen people, all of whom still believed that the

city had a secret plan to extend the Drive. They said the city had a history of sneaking projects past people and pointed to Meigs Field. At the very least, they said, it's good to be vigilant.

Gordon says he and his group plan to do exactly that. During the meeting Rejman invited them to work with Park District officials to design a single plan for the lakefront, and Gordon agreed to do so. "The planning phase is key," he says. "If we get into a planning process with the Park District, if we get them to agree on a vision for the lakefront, then it will be much more difficult for them to turn around and extend the Drive." □

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