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Neighbors Rally to Renovate Filbert Playlot

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By [Tatum Bartlett](#)



The back of Filbert Playlot Park abuts an alley, where dumpsters attract rats. Photo courtesy Friends of Filbert Playlot Park.

For families who live near Northcenter's Filbert Playlot Park (1822 W. Larchmont Avenue), the park is the only playground within a seven-block radius. In addition, three area schools and daycare facilities rely on the park for daily use. The City of Chicago acquired the property on which the playground now sits in 1959. Later that year it was transferred to the Chicago Park District, and in 1973 it was officially designated Filbert Park.

Today the pocket playlot, wedged up against the Irving Park Brown Line, stands as worn and tired as the El tracks that hover above. Weeds have grown so large that many resemble trees, the drinking fountain is rendered unusable due to unsanitary conditions, potholes scatter the concrete, graffiti covers benches and railings, and decay and mold have consumed much of the splinter-ridden wooden play equipment. Additionally, the playground is without a security gate (posing a safety hazard for quick-footed toddlers), while the appearance of a guest rat or two (the park lies adjacent to an alley lined with several dumpsters) is not uncommon. The neglected playground has indeed seen better days: That's why area families are often compelled to drive or walk a distance to other neighborhood parks.

Emily Klingensmith, a local parent, lives in one of the newer condo buildings near the park. One morning last year, Klingensmith and several new mothers in her building decided to meet up for a playdate. "We were all shocked to discover the condition of the park," says Klingensmith. "We immediately agreed that we all had to do something to try and turn it around."

A week later the group of mothers reached out to Ald. Eugene Schuler (47th), and they were put in contact with Filbert Playlot Park's Park District Supervisor, Katie Fearon-Peon. Fearon-Peon explained to the group the procedures and protocol of such a civic undertaking. With information in hand, the moms officially banded together under the name [Friends of Filbert Playlot Park Advisory Council](#) (Klingensmith serves as president). The Advisory Council has since partnered with Friends of the Parks (acting as fiscal agent), which has allowed the group to create a 501(c)(3) account for tax-deductible community donations. To finance renovation efforts, the group is also seeking sizable contributions from Ald. Schuler and the Chicago Park District. The project is working off of a \$300,000 budget (much less than the majority of larger Chicago parks seeking renovation), with money to be allocated equally from these three aforementioned pools.



The benches at the park are covered in graffiti. Photo courtesy Friends of Filbert Playlot Park.

The Friends of Filbert Playlot Park Advisory Council got into gear almost immediately after this initial meeting with Fearon-Peon, holding a community-wide meeting at the playground on Saturday, July 10. “The core group of the Advisory Council divvied up flyers and area streets and pounded the pavement,” Klingensmith says. Approximately 30 residents and businesses owners turned up in support of the group’s efforts.

“A nice by-product of this grassroots exercise is that it brought a whole group of us in the neighborhood together who may not have had the chance to meet under other circumstances,” she says.

Additionally, the Chicago Park District held an Area 5 Budget Forum on Wednesday, July 21 (Filbert Playlot Park is part of Area 5). The Advisory Council, armed with an impressive [21-page renovation proposal](#) and visuals, pitched their cause to the panel of Chicago decision-makers as they prepare to set the budget for the coming fiscal year. Filbert Playlot Park must be deemed worthy of 2011 budget allocations (on the docket) if the playground is to be renovated. This was only the first step, as a final budget hearing for the North Region will be held on [Thursday, Sept. 9](#). The group is rallying all area families and businesses to attend this meeting, as a community’s show of support at this budget hearing is vital to the group’s success.

Advisory Council Board members also met with Ald. Schulner and his staff on August 4. The alderman has publicly declared that he is on board with the group’s efforts and fully supports the park’s renovation. Moreover, Schulner sent a letter to the Park District Superintendent, Tim Mitchell, pledging his support for the cause, while his staff is currently working with local business owners and state politicians to gain their support and contributions for the project. The Advisory Council has also received grant applications from the Northcenter Chamber of Commerce. “To come up with our portion of \$100,000 of community dollars in the coming year is an optimistic yet aggressive goal,” says Klingensmith, “but we are working with a group of highly motivated and capable people.”

The community has indeed embraced the Friends of Filbert Playlot Park Advisory Council’s altruistic plea. Local business owner Barb Skupien of [Embellish Boutique](#) (4161 N. Lincoln Ave.) held an anniversary party on August 7, where 10 percent of total sales was donated to the playlot project, and as [previously reported](#), the Larchmont/Byron/Wolcott/Ravenswood/Berenice (LBWRB) Block Party, which took place this past weekend, donated all proceeds from the neighborhood event to the group.



Map of Filbert Playlot Park.

“It is really wonderful to see such support and camaraderie—families and business owners partnering together to better our community,” Klingensmith says.

A target completion date of summer 2011 has been set by the group, and according to local resident Jeff Piejak, with Klingensmith overseeing things, this should be easily attainable. “If I were a betting man,” says Piejak, “I would place all my wagers on Emily meeting that goal.”

Visit our events calendar for information on the Sept. 9 Chicago Park District final budget hearing. On the Friends of Filbert Playlot Park’s website, you can add your name to their [petition of supporters](#), find information regarding [future fundraising efforts](#), or make an online [\(tax-deductible\) contribution](#).

Tags: [Emily Klingensmith](#), [Filbert Playlot](#), [Friends of Filbert Playlot Park](#)



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