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February 7, 2009

President Angela Dye, FASLA  
American Society of Landscape Architects  
636 Eye Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20001-3736

Re: Nomination of Chicago Park District and City of Chicago  
(a joint nomination) for the 2009 ASLA Medal of Excellence

Dear President Dye:

The Illinois Chapter of ASLA would like to recognize the unique and productive relationship between the Chicago Park District and the City of Chicago by jointly nominating the agencies for a 2009 Landscape Architecture Medal of Excellence. Since the election of Mayor Richard M. Daley in 1989, the Park District and the City have produced many landscape architectural, horticultural, urban planning, and environmental projects that serve as models at the national level. By combining their separate strengths and resources, the two agencies have achieved projects that may not have otherwise occurred. This relationship allows the Chicago to continue fulfilling its official motto: "Urbs in Horto," or "City in a Garden."

Chicago has had more than one agency to create and manage parks since 1869 when three separate park commissions were chartered by the State Legislature. By the 1930s, this had expanded to 22 separate park commissions that operated simultaneously while Chicago's city government also provided some landscape-related services. The Chicago Park District was formed in 1934, through the consolidation of the independent park districts. Since that time, the Park District and the City of Chicago have cooperated on parks and other environmental initiatives. This relationship has especially flourished in the past twenty years since Chicago's "green mayor," began providing leadership.

Most park districts throughout the nation are set up as city departments that must compete with all of the other municipal interests for funding and resources. Park programs and facilities are often most vulnerable to cut-backs because they are perceived as less critical than basic infrastructure and health and safety services. Illinois is among the few states that provide legislation allowing park districts to form as separate municipal bodies. This allows the Chicago Park District to have its own tax base. The agency's operating budget is currently more than \$400 million. The City levies its own taxes, and has other tools to support environmental and open space issues, including zoning incentives for creating parks, Tax Increment Financing, and Open Space Impact Fees. Both agencies have professional staffs that include landscape architects, planners, architects, horticulturalists, naturalists, historic preservationists, and environmental engineers who all work closely together.

The following list describes some of the exemplary projects and initiatives that have been made possible by the relationship between the Chicago Park District and the City of Chicago:

#### CitySpace and other Open Space Planning Initiatives

In 1993, the City of Chicago and Chicago Park District began working together to address the city's dire need for additional open space. A CitySpace Steering Committee formed with ten task forces that included participation from the Cook County Forest Preserve and numerous other public agencies and community groups.

Published in 1998, the CitySpace Plan established ambitious new goals for increasing and protecting open space in Chicago. Because of the city's density, there were no large greenfields available for conversion into new parkland. Instead, the plan focused on identifying less obvious locations, such as land surround public schools, inland waterways, under-utilized land and vacant lots.



Since the plan was adopted there have been many successes. The City's revised code included a new zoning category for parks and open space. A new Chicago River Corridor Development Plan and Design Guidelines has helped foster new fishing stations, canoe launches, and nature trails. A non-profit program entitled NeighborSpace acquires new open spaces and encourages community groups to participate in improving and maintaining these areas. An award-winning Lake Calumet Plan was created to preserve this ecologically significant wetland area that has been long been impacted by industrial development. Hundreds of acres of this region's marsh and prairie are being acquired by the City and the Chicago Park District to be preserved as nature areas. Other related planning efforts include the Logan Square Open Space Plan and the East Garfield Park Open Space Plan.

Another outgrowth is the Campus Park Program, which has transformed expansive areas of hardscape around public schools into green spaces with playgrounds, gardens, grassy areas, and trees. Especially targeting neighborhoods that are in dire need of open space, the project has not only created landscape amenities for school students, but has also provided these beautiful green spaces to benefit entire communities. To date over 100 campus parks have been created, providing more than 200 additional acres in green space for the underserved neighborhoods. An outgrowth is the School Garden Initiative, which have become living laboratories in the Campus Parks. These gardens are planted and tended by teachers and students with support from numerous other agencies. This effort has expanded to include schools that were not earmarked for Campus Parks.

In addition to planning efforts, the Chicago Park District has also been aggressive in its efforts to acquire space for create new parks and natural areas. Since the publication of the CitySpace Plan, 39 new parks have been created; and along with the expansion of existing parks, a total of 340 acres have been added to the system. One of the most unique new sites is Stearns Quarry Park, a nineteenth limestone quarry that had become a municipal landfill in the 1970s. The City of Chicago closed the landfill and helped foster its conversion into a park. The Chicago Park District worked with consultants to transform this brownfield into a vibrant new urban park. It features a sledding hill, running track, and prairie meadow, as well as a fishing pond and terraced wetlands that are edged with the original limestone quarry wall.

#### Millennium Park

In the late 1990s, the City of Chicago and Chicago Park District began working together to create one of the nation's most innovative parks located in an underutilized area of Grant Park. Although this historic park is considered the city's "front yard," a large area along the northwest edge included a vast exposed railyard and a surface parking lot, detracting from the use and appearance of the park. Mayor Richard M. Daley envisioned the transformation of this neglected space into an award-winning center for art, music, architecture, and landscape design. Today, Millennium Park includes the Jay Pritzker Pavilion designed by renowned architect Frank Gehry, which provides outdoor seating to an audience over 10,000. The Lurie Garden is a impressive landscape of native plants, a water feature, and shoulder hedge designed by Kathryn Gustafson and Piet Oudolf. The site has two permanent iconic interactive public art installations—the Crown Fountain and Cloudgate (nicknamed the Bean). There are many other attractions and visitor services such as McDonald's Cycle Center, BP Bridge, McCormick Tribune Plaza and Ice Rink, and the Harris Theater, an indoor venue for dance, music, and theatrical productions. The Grant Park Music Festival performs free concerts throughout the summer and many other concerts, festivals, and family entertainment are offered throughout the year. Since it opening in 2004,

Millennium Park has spurred redevelopment downtown as well as providing an internationally-significant tourism destination.

#### Framework Plans for Regional Parks

In 1990, the Chicago Park District's newly formed Department of Research and Planning (now the Department of Planning and Development) began developing the first comprehensive plans



for existing regional parks. Many of these parks had begun falling into decline in the 1960s, during an era in which urban parks throughout the nation suffered from vandalism, neglect, and a lack of community involvement. To remedy these conditions, the Chicago Park District organized a broad-based community effort to launch its first major framework plan for Lincoln Park—the city’s largest and most complex park. This multi-year process analyzed the existing conditions of the park’s systems, resources, and facilities. These included studies of the park’s: transportation and circulation systems; accessibility issues; historic resources; conditions of buildings and other structures; beaches, harbors, and lagoons; trees and vegetation; recreation facilities and programming; and the needs and satisfaction levels of park users.

Published in 1993, the Lincoln Park Framework Plan set forth a visionary direction for the future. This led to numerous park enhancements and important capital improvements for Lincoln Park. The document also established a new model by which the Chicago Park District continues to develop plans through partnerships with community members, elected officials, and sister agencies at the City of Chicago. In the fifteen years since the completion of the Lincoln Park Framework Plan, the process has been successfully resulted in framework plans for many of Chicago’s other regional parks including: Jackson, Washington, Garfield, Grant and Burnham parks and the South Shore Cultural Center. These framework plans have become useful tools to getting more community involvement in the parks and insuring consensus in decision-making processes.

#### Harbor Plans and Shoreline Projects

The Chicago Park District is the steward to 26 miles of lakefront property including 31 beaches, 9 harbors, and over 5000 boat slips. Much of the lakefront parkland is composed of landfill that was created between the 1870s and 1950s. To protect these landfill extension areas, revetments were constructed out of wooden pilings capped in limestone blocks. By the early 1990s, many of the revetments had deteriorated and were in dire need of replacement. The City of Chicago and Chicago Park District began working with the Army Corps of Engineers reconstructed eight miles of the shoreline. To date more than half of this \$300 million scope of work has been completed, and construction continues.

Due to the intense demand on the city’s harbor system, the Chicago Park District published the Chicago Lakefront Harbor Framework Plan in 2007. This was the result of an intensive study of the existing facilities and includes recommendations for new harbors. In addition market analyses to insure basic financial viability for the new harbors, the Framework Plan established design criteria that addressing landscape enhancements, increased public access, new boater amenities, accessibility for persons of all levels of ability, increased safety, minimization of traffic and parking, creation of aquatic habitat, preservation of water quality, and use of sustainable building practices. This document was developed with strong community participation. Over the next 20 years as the plan is realized, several new Chicago harbors will be developed with an additional 2500 boat slips.

#### Historic Landscape Preservation

Since the early 1990s, the Chicago Park District and the City of Chicago have made great strides in preserving the city’s collection of significant historic landscapes. The two agencies have worked together to designate a number of park properties (landscapes, artworks, and buildings) as Chicago Landmarks and the Chicago Park District has successfully nominated nearly 3 dozen parks to the National Register of Historic Places and two sites as National Historic Landmarks. In 2005, the Chicago Park District and City of Chicago worked with the National Park Service to host the Preserve and Play Conference which focused on the preservation of historic recreational and entertainment sites throughout the country. The Chicago Park District and City of Chicago have produced several projects to educate the public about the city’s important historic landscape legacy through tours, podcasts, publications, and a new Explore Chicago web site. In addition, the Chicago Park District has had some important successes in its efforts to restore historic landscapes including the Alfred Caldwell Lily Pool; Jens Jensen’s Columbus Park and the



Humboldt Park Prairie River; Olmsted's Wooded Island in Jackson Park; and several neighborhood parks designed by the Olmsted Brothers. Some of this work was supported by major Save America's Treasures Grants.

#### Volunteer Stewardship Programs

Over the last several years, the Chicago Park District and City of Chicago have developed a number of successful volunteer programs to promote a better understanding and care of the landscape. The Volunteer Stewardship Program provides community members hands-on opportunities in ecological restoration, management, monitoring, and education in Park District nature area including prairies, shrub lands, savannas, woodlands, beach dunes, wetlands, lagoons, wildflower gardens, and river edges. Last year alone, 1500 Volunteer Stewards contributed over 5000 hours to protect, maintain, and enhance the nature areas. The Park District's Community Gardening Program offers additional hands-on opportunities in over 40 parks. Another volunteer effort is the Docent Program at the North Pond, Alfred Caldwell Lily Pool, Lincoln Park Conservatory, and Indian Boundary Park. After volunteers attend a six week training program, they provide free weekend tours interpreting the site's significant cultural and natural resources. A specialized program addressing bicycle safety is Mayor Daley's Bicycling Ambassadors. This program involves teenagers who spread a bicycle safety message to thousands of children and adults throughout the city.

#### Greening and Sustainability

The City of Chicago and Chicago Park District have become national leaders in the urban greening and sustainability movement. The City of Chicago's initiatives are being directed by the departments of: Environment; Water Management; Transportation; Construction and Permits; Streets and Sanitation; Zoning and Land-Use Planning; and Mayor's Office. These departments work closely with the Chicago Park District on efforts to make Chicago the most environmentally-friendly city in the nation.

An important result of this partnership is the Green Urban Design initiative which has established a master plan to inform public and private landowners of the best environmental practices. A demonstration project to help home owners, building managers, and developers is the Center for Green Technology. The city created this facility by transforming a brownfield into a LEED Platinum-certified development that includes a rooftop garden, cisterns, rain garden and other living exhibits that provide examples that can be adopted in every home or real estate development. The City of Chicago has also created rooftop gardens at City Hall (which includes bee-keeping) and the Chicago Cultural Center.

A program called Greencorps provides horticultural guidance and landscape materials free of charge to groups planting gardens in public spaces. Greencorps has also expanded to provide job training to ex-offenders in the landscape industry. This work force is helping the City and Park District by removing invasive species in vacant lots and parks.

The Chicago Park District supports the City's environmental efforts in several ways. The Park District provides recycling centers in our parks, as well as a Christmas tree mulching program. The Park District also is also working with the Bureau of Forestry to monitor invasive pests in Chicago's Urban forest.

The Chicago Park District has developed its own set of sustainable guidelines which are measurable environmental goals. To meet these goals, the Park District has begun: using new lawn mowers that use alternative energy to reduce emissions; practicing grass cycling to serve as fertilizer, reduce landfill waste, and decrease labor costs; decreasing energy consumption by re-lamping electrical fixtures with low-wattage fixtures and turning off exterior lighting when parks are closed; and practicing other energy conservation methods throughout the facilities. The Park District has also been employing best practices in storm water management. The Park District is also committed to upgrading its environmental standards in the design of new field houses. So



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far, newly-constructed field houses in Taylor-Lauridsen and Jesse Owens Parks have become LEED Silver certified buildings.

In addition to facilities management, the Chicago Park District is actively addressing environmental issues by providing approximately 20 nature areas and wildlife gardens as well as educational programming throughout the park system. One of the largest resources is the North Park Village Nature Center. With a 46-acre preserve and an educational center, the facility offers a variety of programs and activities to all age levels throughout the year, as well as valuable habitat for wildlife. Because of Chicago's location on the Mississippi Migratory Bird Flyway, the Park District has made great efforts to enhance the habitat along the lakefront by creating areas that provide rest, shelter, and food for 250 species of birds as well other wildlife that live outdoors in the city. These natural areas are not only crucial for wildlife but also important landscape for people to enjoy.

With Mayor Daley's leadership, The Chicago Park District and the City of Chicago have leveraged their green agendas to jointly accomplish more initiatives related to parks over the past 20 years than any other city in the United States. Landscape Architects, as well as the citizens of Chicago, have shared the benefits of those urban green initiatives. It is for these above reasons that the Illinois Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects is honored to nominate the Chicago Park District and the City of Chicago for the 2009 Medal of Excellence.

Sincerely,

Terry Warriner Ryan, FASLA  
Trustee, Illinois Chapter ASLA

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