

Expansion of Lake Park Facing Fight

Fearing federal funding, activists seek referendum

By Hal Dardick - Chicago Tribune

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Concerned about a proposed \$1 million federal allocation to study extending Chicago's lakefront park system north to Evanston, activists from East Rogers Park said Thursday they have filed the paperwork to trigger a referendum on the issue.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), whose 9th Congressional District includes the area into which lakefront parks would be extended, requested the federal funding earlier this year on behalf of the city, said Nadeam Elshami, her spokesman.

The House approved the funding as part of a massive transportation bill now being considered by a congressional conference committee.

The funding effort, contained in about 800 pages of a \$275 billion bill, has gone unheralded by Mayor Richard Daley, who first talked about the idea in June 2002. Then-Chicago Park District General Supt. David Doig said his agency was studying it, touching off speculation.

"It's not a dead issue, but it hasn't moved any further," Park District spokeswoman Michele Jones said Thursday. Several City Hall spokesmen also said they were unaware of any further planning on Daley's vision to extend the continuous lakefront park system 2 1/2 miles north from its terminus at Hollywood Avenue.

But the allocation was noticed by activists in East Rogers Park, where perhaps the greatest community asset is easy access to the lakefront. Current access does not require crossing Lake Shore Drive, tromping through an underpass or skirting a harbor to reach Lake Michigan.

Fearful that would change and the lake's ecological balance could be damaged if Daley's vision were realized, a group of local activists hopes to send a message to the city that only new parks, beaches or bicycle paths should be considered in such plans.

Rogers Park Community Action Network and its allies, including local Green Party members, on Monday filed petitions for an advisory referendum on the subject. Advisory referendums are

non-binding but are designed to demonstrate public opinion.

If the petitions go unchallenged and the referendum makes the November ballot in the 10 lakefront precincts of the 49th Ward, voters would get to say whether they favor an extended Lake Shore Drive, other roads, marinas, housing or commercial structures on any new landfill.

"We want to make sure the things we feel would be really detrimental get knocked out of consideration before there's any concrete proposal," said Francis Tobin, a board member of the Action Network. "Any future discussion on the proposal will be framed by the reality that the citizens said no."

Anne Sullivan, an Action Network member who collected about a quarter of the 400 or so signatures on the petition, said her East Rogers Park neighborhood would be harmed by an extended Lake Shore Drive.

"We don't want to put the lakefront any farther away from us than it is," Sullivan said. "That's the great thing about Rogers Park. You can walk up any side street and get to the beach."

Donald Gordon, chairman of the 49th Ward Parks and Beaches Advisory Committee, said the lakefront in the Edgewater neighborhood, which starts at Foster Avenue and runs to Devon Avenue, is distinctly different from that in Rogers Park, which runs from Devon Avenue to Evanston.

Edgewater, from Foster to Hollywood Avenues, is part of Chicago's storied public lakefront. But from Hollywood Avenue north to Devon Avenue, high-rises--some of which have private beaches--line about a mile of lakefront, largely blocking public access.

In Rogers Park, by contrast, almost all of the 1 1/2-mile stretch of lakefront is public. The Rogers Park Community Council in the early 1950s blocked high-rise development between Sheridan Road and the lakefront while also getting the city to buy most of the lakefront land for public use, Gordon said.

In 1992, Daley and Doig talked about additional parkland and not roads, marinas, housing or business on an extended lakefront park system. "Currently, we are not looking at extending Lake Shore Drive," Chicago Department of Transportation spokeswoman Maria Castaneda said Thursday.

But recent developments, including a discussion of a marina on the Chicago border in Evanston that the Action Network opposes and an architectural exhibit featuring lakefront plans with significant landfill development, have left Rogers Park residents concerned, Tobin said.