News Recap

CPD OL

By Crystal Fencke

During 2008, one Bronzeville park celebrated a new addition and another saw trouble even before it opened.

In October, Mayor Daley and Chicago Park District management celebrated Washington Park’s new signature children’s playlot. It opened later than expected—in October rather than the July date the Washington Park Advisory Council had anticipated. Chicago weather, including rain and humidity, was a contributing factor, said Michael Kelly, CPD chief operating officer.

The playlot, located just south of the swimming pool, cost $700,000 to build, with mostly private funding. Much of the money came from proceeds from Lollapalooza, the weekend music festival that takes place in Grant Park in August, which The Parkways Foundation organizes every year.

Washington Park Advisory Council president, Cecilia Butler, was very proud of the results of months of working with the Chicago Park District. “What this park shows is how government can really work. This is the playground out of the four in Washington Park that has been here the longest. It’s at least 90 years old,” she said.

Many of the playlot’s features were a joint effort between the CPD and the community, with the input of children who use the park, said Beth Meier Tomlins, project manager for the Chicago Park District. Icons imprinted into the sidewalks represent play and pride in the neighborhood, including one highlighting long-time activist and artist Dr. Margaret Burroughs of the DuSable Museum of African American History, 740 E. 56th Place. And a picture of philosopher Sun Ra holding an outdoor forum incorporates ideas of the park’s 160-year history.

The park’s history as a sheep farm and as the location of the original Washington Park race track is represented in whimsical toys in the shapes of sheep and horses.

On another note, a yet-to-be opened green space has neighbors and community groups worried. The park under construction at the corner of Lake Park Avenue and 41st Street doesn’t even have a name yet. But people have reported problems already-established parks see all too often: trash, loitering, graffiti and drug-dealing.

“There is evidence of drug-dealing,” said Shirley Newsome, North Kenwood Oakland Community Council chair. “People have seen known gang members in the park.”

The problems stem in part from unsupervised teens, who began frequenting the park after construction fencing surrounding it was removed after the July 4 weekend, neighbors said.

Developer Draper and Kramer is building the park in conjunction with the first phase of homes at Lake Park Crescent, one of the mixed-income developments replacing the former Chicago Housing Authority’s Lakefront Homes. A tot lot within the park is finished, but the rest of it won’t likely be done until this coming spring, according to Ald. Toni Preckwinkle (4th).

Community organizer, Newsome, is especially concerned because oversight has slipped, she has said. Police are monitoring the park, and neighbors, such as local resident, Marian Jones, are monitoring the problems. Meanwhile, Preckwinkle has faith in the success of the park in the New Year. “Over time, we get a handle on things, and they improve,” she said.