

2019 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

Washington Park National Bank

QUICK STATS

- **Location:** 6300 S. Cottage Grove Ave, Chicago, Cook County
- **Built:** 1924
- **Architect:** Albert Schwartz
- **Current owner:** Cook County Land Bank Authority
- **Historic significance:** This nearly 100-year-old neoclassical building was once the heart of a thriving retail area in Chicago's Woodlawn neighborhood and remains an important anchor to the community.
- **Why it is endangered:** The owners, Cook County Land Bank Authority, recently accepted a developer's proposal to demolish the neglected property and replace it with a new building.
- **Take Action:** Contact newly elected 20th Ward Alderwoman Jeanette Taylor to voice your support for preservation of this building!



Credit: Eric Allix Rogers

BACKGROUND

Once at the center of a thriving commercial community on the South Side, Woodlawn's Washington Park National Bank now sits empty. The five-story, limestone neoclassical building at the corner of Cottage Grove and 63rd street was built in 1924 by architect Albert Schwartz. The structure included retail shops on the 63rd Street façade and the Washington Park National Bank on the Cottage Grove side. At the time of its construction, it was meant to serve a growing middle-class community at a thriving center of Chicago's South Side. In the 1940s, the racial makeup of the area shifted toward the African American community, and the neighborhood continued its prominence as an entertainment and retail hub.

Since the 1960s, however, the area has suffered decline, and the striking Washington Park National Bank has fallen into disrepair. In 2016, Preservation Chicago highlighted the historic

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property on [its Chicago 7 list](#). Until recently, it was owned by the Metropolitan Apostolic Church. However, the building was taken over by the Cook County Land Bank Authority (CCLBA) in 2018 due to years of unpaid taxes on the property. CCLBA was formed by county ordinance in 2013 to address the large inventory of vacant residential, industrial and commercial property in Cook County.

CURRENT THREAT

CCLBA has fast-tracked a redevelopment process to help revitalize the once-bustling intersection at Cottage Grove at 63rd Street. Unfortunately, out of the three final proposals submitted to the CCLBA as part of a Request for Proposal process for the site, the CCLBA accepted the only one that completely razes the historic bank.



Credit: Eric Allix Rogers

The bank itself is currently in dilapidated condition. Nonetheless, an [April 2018 structural assessment for the CCLBA](#) concluded the building remains structurally sound. The firm that performed the structural assessment stated, "We believe that the existing framing system of the building is structurally sound, intact, and still in good condition. We believe that the building is salvageable and can be repaired to restore its full structural integrity."

Since acquiring the building, the CCLBA led a community-directed redevelopment process

for the project, hosting three meetings open to Woodlawn residents in January and February 2018 and conducting a neighborhood-wide survey later that year. Its [reports indicated strong community support for adaptive reuse](#) of the bank, stating, "Many participants expressed a desire to maintain the building's historic appearance, and to see the building reflect a mix of uses and activities." ([See page 13 of document.](#)) The same reports included multiple proposals for adaptive reuse, providing ideas to transform the community mainstay into a mixed-use property for commercial, retail and nonprofit use. The budget shown for rehabilitation was competitive with that for new construction: if the building successfully receives a National Register listing ([it was determined eligible by the State Historic Preservation Office in March 2018](#)), federal historic tax credits could be utilized. Other prominent buildings in the area, such as the former Cinderella



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Ballroom (now [Grand Ballroom](#)) and former Strand Hotel ([now Strand Apartments](#)) have recently been successfully rehabilitated and reused, the Strand most notably with historic tax credits.

In October, the CCLBA put out a request for proposals from developers interested in the building. In the request, the CCLBA claimed to consider preservation of the building as a “very important” part of the evaluation process. However, despite receiving offers that would rehabilitate the current structure, the CCLBA voted for the only one out of the three finalists that proposed demolition. The developers have proposed a three- to five-story, mixed-use structure that [Curbed Chicago](#) describes as “a plain-looking building, devoid of the architectural embellishments of its predecessor.”

The Woodlawn community is expressing its dissatisfaction with this decision. “I’m upset that our history is being erased,” [said Gloria Williams](#), a longtime Woodlawn resident and librarian at the Chicago Public Library branch nearby. The recently elected alderman in the district, Jeanette Taylor, has also stated her opposition to demolition. “It’s unfair that communities on the South Side do not get to preserve historic buildings like they do on the North Side,” Taylor told the [Chicago Sun-Times](#). LI and many local organizations hope that with a new alderman and regulatory review by the State Historic Preservation Office, a better outcome may be possible.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Woodlawn residents and other interested parties are urged to reach out to [newly elected alderman Jeanette Taylor](#) regarding their desire to see a redevelopment that incorporates the historic bank.

FURTHER READING

- [Historic Washington Park National Bank building facing demolition in Woodlawn](#)
Curbed Chicago, March 19, 2019
- [Washington Park National Bank Building Likely To Be Demolished, Replaced With New Building](#)
Block Club Chicago, March 15, 2019
- [Cook County Land Bank Seeks To Redevelop The Old Washington Park Bank Building](#)
Chicago Citizen, September 16, 2018



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- [Metropolitan Planning Council, "Woodlawn Corridor Development Initiative- Final Report," July 2018 \(PDF\)](#)