



People Saving Places For People

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March 6, 2021

Alderman Tom Tunney, Chairman
Committee on Zoning, Landmarks and Building Standards
City of Chicago
121 N. LaSalle St.
Chicago, IL
60602

Dear Chairman Tunney and Members of the Committee:

We recently learned of a proposed zoning amendment that would restrict or prohibit establishing cultural exhibits and house museums in “R” zoning districts and requiring special use permits in others. While the amendment would grandfather existing museums and cultural organizations, this added zoning restriction could be problematic in allowing future changes or expansion. Landmarks Illinois strongly opposes this proposed zoning amendment. It will make the future more uncertain for these existing nonprofits, already a vulnerable class of small businesses affected by the pandemic, and will disrupt efforts already underway by several organizations to open cultural institutions in important historic buildings. These include the Muddy Waters House in North Kenwood and the Emmett Till Home in Woodlawn.

Landmarks Illinois works with many nonprofit organizations successfully operating house museums and cultural exhibits in residential neighborhoods throughout the city. These include the National Public Housing Museum, Jane Addams Hull House Museum, the South Side Community Art Center, the Roger Brown Study Collection, the Richard H. Driehaus Museum, the Charnley-Persky House, Glessner House, the Clarke House, and Robie House and to name a few. Several other organizations are in the planning phase to establish house museums/cultural exhibits, including the aforementioned MOJO Museum in the former home of Muddy Waters and a museum to Emmett Till led by Blacks in Green.

These institutions already compatibly exist in “R” districts throughout the city and operate under city-mandated rules regarding size, parking and tour bus requirements, hours of operation and visitor capacity. These cultural and historic sites contribute to the historic character of their neighborhoods and provide educational opportunities and unique visitor experiences for area residents and visitors. Many neighbors take great pride that these institutions are a part of their neighborhood and support them as volunteers and participants in programmed activities.

House museums and cultural exhibits have been permitted in all “R” districts for decades and offer visitors to Chicago the opportunity to learn about our diverse neighborhoods and their history. These visitors contribute to the local economy, including in neighborhoods outside of downtown. Often organizations operating in “R” districts have contributed to stabilizing and improving their blocks and neighborhoods.

Many are involved in local community building efforts and offer space to other groups for meetings and outdoor gatherings. They also maintain and restore their historic buildings, which can serve as community anchors.

Many of Chicago's most notable, and soon-to-be recognized, landmarks would not have been saved but for the hard work of cultural nonprofits. For more than 50 years, these dedicated organizations have taken ownership of places in dire circumstances, fundraised for their repair and reuse, opened them to the public for educational purposes and worked to share a more complete story of Chicago's history. Residents of, and visitors to, our city benefit from their programming and their investment in community.

We urge you to vote against any change in the zoning code that will disallow and discourage the operation of house museums and cultural exhibitions in Chicago. You'll be foreclosing on not only the expansion of existing institutions, but on yet-to-be-formed organizations that could tell more inclusive, equitable and honest stories about this city and its people.

Sincerely,



Bonnie McDonald
President and CEO