IN 1982, MAYOR JANE BYRNE JOINED 1,000 community members in the North Park community area of Chicago to discuss a development proposal for the North Park Village site that was gaining traction at City Hall. When the former Municipal Tuberculosis Sanitarium closed, what lay inside its gates was revealed to the community—160-acres of beautiful natural space within the city. The development would erase it all. As Mayor Jane Byrne left the meeting, an innovative and unique plan was set in place: to protect a large portion of the land under a conservation easement.

Parks and preserves had been acquired and protected for years, but the use of a conservation easement to protect publicly owned land was something new. And not everybody was on board. Development interests remained strong and committing future administrations to protect this place was concerning to some administrators. As time went on, North Park Village became an example of the dynamic forces necessary to ensure land protection; a long, arduous, and completely worthwhile endeavor.

Throughout North Park Village’s evolution, Openlands was there. In September of this year, the Chicago City Council voted to permanently protect North Park Village, successfully culminating years of community advocacy.

I. HISTORY.

North Park Village is a sprawling 160-acre campus on Chicago’s northwest side. It is the site of the former Municipal Tuberculosis Sanitarium which operated for nearly 60 years and at its peak served upwards of 1,000 patients. The expansive grounds, fresh air, and natural setting were meant as a treatment for tuberculosis.

New medicines and medical advances changed the way tuberculosis was treated and the Sanitarium closed in 1974 leaving the expansive grounds and stately buildings with an uncertain future. People from the community that grew up around the facility report that they had no idea what lay behind the fence and dense perimeter growth. But as the public gained access, it quickly became clear that this was a very special place and worthy of conservation. The doors opened to an oasis of natural lands, parks, and a peaceful rock garden wrapped around historic buildings—over 140 acres in the midst of the density of Chicago.

Not everyone shared the conservation vision. Throughout the late 1970’s and 1980’s, numerous development plans were proposed that would have razed the buildings and cleared the grounds.

From high-rise apartment towers to suburban-like malls, there was no shortage of ideas for the City to cash in on the property. Determining the outcome of North Park Village spanned the terms of four mayors: Richard J. Daley, Jane Byrne, Harold Washington, and Eugene Sawyer. In 1982, one development plan made its way to the Chicago Plan Commission but the community’s insistence that the buildings and grounds be protected was unwavering. Mayor Byrne attended a community meeting of over 1,000 residents demanding that the City abandon its development agenda and take steps to protect North Park Village. But how?

Throughout the effort to preserve the site, Openlands worked with community residents and the Advisory Council. It was Tom Hahn, Former Openlands Associate Director, who proposed the use of a conservation easement. This is a tool that Openlands had previously used to permanently protect private lands, but this was the first time it would be applied over a publicly owned property. The proposal was ingenious. The ownership of the land would remain with the City to operate and maintain as it saw fit within guidelines prescribed by the easement, and Openlands would ensure the open space would be protected.
A conservation easement is a voluntary, legal agreement between a landowner and either a land trust or government agency that limits the uses of the land to protect its conservation values. It is a way to preserve natural and scenic open space for future generations.

II. THE RESOURCE.

The easement is divided into seven zones, or management areas. In the largest zone, called the Nature Preserve, the Chicago Park District manages a system of trails that wind through 45 acres of healthy woodland, savanna, prairie, and wetlands. Openlands TrekKeepers have worked alongside volunteers to plant trees in the natural areas, and the Park District has secured grants to protect and restore areas to breathtaking quality. The Park District offers educational programs and community meeting space in Chicago’s only nature center. The historic structure, which is protected under the easement, provides visitors with a place to interact with and learn about wildlife and natural resources in an urban setting.

Peterson Park occupies the northeast 23-acre corner of the complex, with playgrounds, soccer and baseball fields, and tennis courts. The Chicago Park District offers cultural and recreational programming out of a fieldhouse that was once the site for the building for the Sanitarium. The park is named after Pah Samuel Peterson, a pioneer lumberman and early inhabitant of the Swedish community known as Peterson Woods, in what is now the North Park neighborhood. After Peterson’s death in 1903, his family donated the 160 acres of land to the City of Chicago for what became the Municipal Tuberculosis Sanitarium.

Other zones include a 12-acre nature study area aptly named “Walking Stick Woods,” where trails and nodes provide areas for nature play, a community garden, an impressive rock garden, and general open spaces for public use. The variety of public open spaces make this an anchor for the community and Chicagoans at large. North Park Village sits less than a mile from the North Branch of the Chicago River where along its course, parks and forest preserves provide bicycling and hiking trails that lead as far north as the Chicago Botanic Garden and east to the confluence with the North Shore Channel.

III. NOT DONE YET.

With the huge victory to protect this resource until 2064 in hand, it would have been easy for local advocates to leave the future fate of the property to generations to come. But the community never gave up in its drive to permanently protect the open space in North Park Village.

In 2017, during its routine monitoring, Openlands discovered the City had permitted a driveway to be extended for emergency service access through a grassy area that was protected under the easement. Openlands contacted the City and began discussions as to how this would be resolved.

One of the working principles in conservation easements is that if the issue is going to be amended (which would be required if the driveway were to remain), then the conservation values lost by the driveway must be negligible, and conservation value for the land must be strengthened to uphold the integrity of the easement. Basically, you need to lose little and gain much with an amendment.

Openlands proposed that the only way to amend the easement to substantially increase the protected conservation values and allow the extended driveway to remain was to make the easement permanent. With half of the easement already tolled, Openlands and many on the North Park Village Advisory Council agreed this was an essential step to ensure these critical protections would not be lost. With persistence and in time, the City agreed. In September 2020, with the support of the community, Alderman Samantha Nagram, and Mayor Lori Lightfoot’s administration, the City Council approved amending the conservation easement to make the land permanently protected.

IV. OPENLANDS COMPREHENSIVE CONSERVATION.

From the closure of the Sanitarium and the beginning of community activism to protect this property in 1974, to the granting of a term easement in 1989, it has taken 45 years to permanently protect North Park Village. But the community never wavered in its drive to permanently protect its conservation values. It is a way to preserve resources in an urban setting.

This spring Openlands will dedicate our 7,000th tree planted to Carrie, my daughter is starting to get in that habit, as well. Northern Minnesota. My son and I share an affinity for camping and now if I’m lucky, and that would probably be my favorite recreation activity. I also am a believer in this dense urban environment, the third largest in the country, that we have the opportunity as a board to work with communities and others to protect our quality of life. And one thing that I’ve been so grateful about is the passion and dedication that our staff and volunteers have had to this issue. Thank you.
Openlands Virtual Journey from the Amazon to Chicago Celebrates Large Landscape Preservation Globally and Locally

While the experience of the Openlands Annual Luncheon changed this year, the spirit and community of the event was stronger than ever. “A Virtual Journey from the Amazon to Chicago” underscored the importance of land conservation at this critical time, and engaged over 1,800 people in the multimedia journey from October 13–15, raising more than $375,000 for Openlands programs and work.

The conservation leadership award was presented to Dr. Debra Moskovits, whose work has yielded lasting results for conservation and the well-being of people in the Amazon and Chicago. Over 20 million acres teeming with biodiversity and cultural diversity in the Amazon have been protected because of her commitment to conservation. She joined the Field Museum in 1985, where she found ways for the Museum to put its science to work for conservation. She launched what is now the Keller Science Action Center, and today conservation is integral to the Museum’s mission. Dr. Moskovits’s contributions to Chicago are just as significant, having founded the Chicago Wilderness in 1995. Dr. Moskovits’s legacy is a testament to her understanding of the deep interconnectedness of people and nature no matter where a person lives.

The Journey’s Keynote, Dr. Avecita Chicchón, who has collaborated closely with Dr. Moskovits throughout her career and now leads the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation’s Andes-Amazon Initiative, spoke to the interconnectedness between the Amazon and Chicago in regards to climate change: “What happens in this great tropical forest has an impact on the global climate as well… Nearly fifty percent of the Amazon is under some sort of protection now. But we need to protect the Amazon in a way where we must avoid a tipping point, and we must have at least seventy percent of the forest protected. We still have a lot of work to do.” She was joined by Dr. John Fitzpatrick of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Openlands Board Member Wendy Paulson for a podcast discussion about our region’s connections to the Amazon and their hope for conservation in the future.

On the final day of the Journey, Openlands President and CEO Jerry Adelmann summed it up best, “The land and water of our region — this tapestry of green and blue at all these different scales — it connects us to the Amazon, it connects us to the globe. We are all citizens of the world and the challenges we face are global, but they play out here at the local level. The lessons learned and the challenges we face are so common and we need to learn from each other about how best to address them.”

Openlands extends its deepest gratitude to all who supported and participated in this year’s Luncheon and especially event co-chairs Connie Keller and Michael Keiser.

Thanks to our Premier Sponsor:

Picture (top left to bottom right): Dinesh Goburdhun, Jeff Sunderburg, Dr. Debra Moskovits, Danielle Russell, Ed Collins, Arnold Randall, Dr. Avecita Chicchón, Michael Taylor, Jerry Adelmann, Delores Lucas, Dan Kane, all part of our Journey from the Amazon to Chicago virtual experience.

Become an Openlander. Donate Today!

Landscape preservation takes imagination, persistence, and YOU.

Support Openlands today and join in conserving another 55,000 acres for our region’s future. Visit openlands.org/donate to learn more.