

Threat growing around garden

U. of C. plans to raze plot, use it as staging area for construction in spite of supporters' objections

By Dawn Reiss

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What's taken root in the community garden at 61st Street and Dorchester Avenue is far more important than the crops harvested each year from the 143 plots, supporters say.

It has served as a bridge between the University of Chicago and the nearby Woodlawn neighborhood, they say, and now that's in jeopardy with the school's decision to raze the garden next month for construction of a 78,000-square-foot Chicago Theological Seminary.

"Five, six years ago, no one would come down here. It was a pretty desolate area," said Avi Schwab, who works at the university in the IT department. He and his wife,

Laura Staley, have a plot. "But the garden has grown from just a few plots to what it is today and gives people a reason from the university to connect with people who live in Woodlawn."

Longtime gardener Jamie Kalven will miss the space. "The garden just can't be relocated," he said. "It's not like you can just pick up and move wood-chipped paths and stone borders. We understand that is the university's land and we appreciate that we've been able to use it. But we think it is in the university's best interest to preserve this garden since students love it and gravitate toward it."

The U. of C. announced this spring that it would raze the garden

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University of Chicago freshmen tour the community garden at 61st Street and Dorchester Avenue near Woodlawn. The university wants to raze the site. CARLOS JAVIER ORTIZ/PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE

Garden in way of plans at U. of C.

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because the site was needed for a construction staging area. But there's been no organized discussion, said students and other supporters, who are advocating that the closing be postponed until there can be a public forum.

U. of C. spokesman Steven Kloehn said the university has made an effort on numerous occasions to discuss the issue with the gardeners and find an alternative location to create "a smooth transition."

Any talks have been with individual gardeners, several said, not all of them together.

The garden anchors what many call the "Sustainability Quad," a one-block area next to Carnegie Elementary School. It includes a weekly farmers market, the Experimental Station — which provides services including bike repair and organic discounted food in bulk.

It also sits adjacent to the planned seminary building, which is on the southeast corner of 60th Street and Dorchester. Gardeners said they don't understand why the garden



Jamie Kalven, a longtime gardener, give students a tour of the garden at 61st Street and Dorchester Avenue, near the University of Chicago and the Woodlawn neighborhood. The university has let gardeners use the plot for years, but now wants to raze it. CARLOS JAVIER ORTIZ/PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE

must go if construction won't be on that site.

"Based on the expertise of the people who do this for a living, it's been determined we need that piece of land for a staging area to make sure it is a safe construction site," Kloehn said.

Supporters also see some irony in displacing the garden to build a LEED-certified, or environmentally friendly, building. LEED encourages projects to "not only preserve natural areas like gardens, but preserve and enhance them by making them a part of the building environment," said Ashley Katz, communications manager at the

U.S. Green Building Council.

The garden sits on 61st Street, which long has served as the unspoken parallel separating the University of Chicago from the Woodlawn neighborhood. Bishop Arthur Brazier, who co-founded The Woodlawn Organization in 1961 with community organizer Saul Alinsky, brokered a "gentleman's agreement" with the university that allowed the South Campus expansion from 60th to 61st but no farther.

It was the result of the volatile neighborhood transition of the early 1950s to 1960s, when Woodlawn changed from 60 percent white

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to 95 percent black, the organization said.

"There was a great fear (among) homeowners (in) Woodlawn that (there) would be another urban renewal program ... where many were kicked out of their communi-

ties and had to sell their homes in mass exodus," Brazier said.

Woodlawn became an unstable community beset by gangs and crime, he said. But in recent years the neighborhood has fought back and has seen some renewal spurred

by mixed-income development.

Many believe the garden has helped foster that renaissance.

"It's a place that brings people together because of all different backgrounds," junior Justin Tate said. "You have a space out there that bridges the gap between practice and ideas. It's one thing to talk about, it's another to do it as a community."

Sophomore Erin Britton said she hopes the university changes its mind about the garden. "This is one of the reasons I love this university. It was a pleasant surprise."