



Chicago Park District

Legislation Text

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REQUEST TO INITIATE THE PROCESS TO RENAME STEPHEN DOUGLAS PARK IN HONOR OF FREDRICK DOUGLASS

To the Honorable Board of Commissioners of the Chicago Park District

I. Recommendation

It is recommended that an order be entered authorizing the General Superintendent or his designee to initiate a 45-day notice period to solicit public input to rename Stephen Douglas Park in honor of Frederick Douglass

Proposed Park or feature: Stephen Douglas Park

Location: 1401 S, Sacramento Drive

Community Area: Douglas Community

Wards: 12 and 24

Proposed Name: Frederick Douglass Park

II. Explanation

The Chicago Park District naming and renaming procedures allow for the naming of features in parks, including playgrounds and buildings. There is no Chicago Park District precedent for renaming a historic park. The renaming of parks is addressed in the Chicago Park District Code - Chapter 7, E.3. The proposal to rename Stephen Douglas Park to Frederick Douglass Park has strong community support.

The history of the naming of Stephen Douglas Park is as follows. In 1869, the Illinois state legislature established the West Park Commission, which was responsible for three large parks and interlinking boulevards. Later that year, the commissioners named the southernmost park in honor of Stephen Douglas (1813-1861). Best remembered for his pre-Civil War presidential defeat by Abraham Lincoln despite his superb oratorical skills, Douglas was a United State Senator who was largely instrumental in bringing the railroad to Illinois and Chicago. Douglas was a proponent of popular sovereignty (let the people decide), with respect to determining whether new states entering the Union would be free or slave. Douglas' wife inherited a slave plantation from her father, from which Douglas profited. In April of 1861, when the South fired on Fort Sumter, Stephen Douglas backed President Lincoln in support of the Union cause, stating "there can be no neutrals in this war, only patriots and traitors" and "every man must be for the United States or against

it.” Douglas died shortly thereafter.

In 1934, Stephen Douglas Park became part of the Chicago Park District, when the city’s twenty-two independent park commissions merged into a single citywide agency.

Proposed Name Change - Frederick Douglass

In 1818, Frederick Douglass was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, of mixed race, into slavery on the eastern shore of Maryland. Douglass taught himself to read and write. He contemplated escape on several occasions. Douglass met a free black woman named Anna Murray. She provided funds to Frederick, which he used to disguise himself as a sailor and escaped slavery. He married Anna Murray shortly thereafter, and in an effort to hide his identity, he dropped his middle name and changed his last name to Douglass. Frederick and Anna settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Douglass began reading *The Liberator*, an abolitionist publication, and began attending abolitionist meetings, where he met the editor of *The Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison. Thereafter, the Anti-Slavery Society hired Douglass as a paid lecturer. This was his beginning as an orator; he would become one of the most famous orators of his time. Douglass travelled across the Midwest and Northern states making speeches. He focused on the abolishment of slavery, the promoting of the moral and intellectual improvement of colored people, and women’s rights.

In 1845 his autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, was published, revealing his identity as a run-away slave. This forced him to flee overseas to avoid being captured and returned to slavery. The book was an international best-seller.

His freedom was purchased two years later by fellow abolitionists from England. and he returned to the U.S. a free man. Upon his return, he moved his family to Rochester, New York, and produced an influential African American antislavery publication, *The North Star*. In 1851, Douglass partnered with an abolitionist, Gerrit Smith, to revamp the paper. It now represented Smith’s National Liberty Party. Smith provided Douglass with financial subsidies and a wider audience. Douglass changed the name of his paper to *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*. In 1855, Douglass published his second autobiography My Bondage and My Freedom, another best-seller, even more popular than the first.

Initially, Douglass criticized Lincoln for moving too slowly with the abolishment of slavery. In 1863, Douglass’ attitude toward Lincoln dramatically changed. Douglass knew that the Emancipation Proclamation was a revolutionary document. In 1865, Douglass attended Lincoln’s second Inaugural Speech, and often quoted from the speech. Upon hearing of Lincoln’s death, Douglass was said to feel the death as both a personal and national calamity.

In 1870, Douglass moved to Washington D. C. For the rest of his life, he was a Republican party insider and elder statesman. Douglass was elected president of the troubled Freeman’s Savings Bank in 1874 to help shore up confidence among its depositors. It proved a futile effort and he recommended to Congress that the bank be closed in June of that same year. This closing landed a devastating blow to the African American community.

In 1877, President Hayes appointed Frederick Douglass, marshal of the District of Columbia. This federal appointment required

Senate approval, the first time a black man received such a position. Douglass served in that role until 1881. Douglass next served as the Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia, from 1881 to 1886. Also in 1881, Douglass published a third autobiography, [Life and Times of Frederick Douglass](#). In 1889, Douglass became the first African American to hold high office in the U.S. government when he served as Minister Resident and Consul General to Haiti, from 1889 to 1891.

Fredrick Douglass was the most prominent African American at Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. Having previously served as the United States minister to Haiti, Douglass attended as the fair as an official representative of Haiti. There, he joined forces with Ida B. Wells to produce pamphlet, *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*; twenty thousand copies of it were distributed. Frederick Douglass also spoke at the fair.

Frederick Douglass died on February 20, 1895. He remained a central figure for the fight for equality for African Americans and women for his entire life. Frederick Douglass is honored with the following named after him: neighborhoods, parks and sites, streets and bridges, schools, and statues in numerous states. There is a statue of Frederick Douglass located at the Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois.

III. Park Naming Procedures

Chapter VII, Section E.2 of the Code of the Chicago Park District, (the Naming Ordinance), which governs the naming and renaming of parks and park features, states that if a proposed name honors a person, the (i) person shall have been deceased for a least one (1) year prior to consideration; and (ii) the person shall have demonstrated a continued commitment and made an extraordinary contribution to civic betterment, locally, nationally or internationally.

Chapter VII, Section E.3 of the Code of the Chicago Park District, (the criteria for renaming of parks and park features), which governs the renaming of parks and park features, states that in considering a proposed change of name for a previously named park or park feature, the General Superintendent or his/her designee shall consider the criteria listed in Section E.2. In addition, for parks and features within parks that are either named for a specific person or that have a known history attached to their name, the General Superintendent or his/her designee may consider alternative means of recognition to the proposed name change and there shall be a presumption in favor of retaining the existing name. Exceptions to the above criteria shall be made only upon a finding of extraordinary circumstance by the General Superintendent.

Pursuant to the Naming Ordinance, this request to rename and name parks have been forwarded to the Secretary of the Chicago Park District, who shall (i) file a copy of this request with the Board of Commissioners (or appropriate Committee); and (ii) initiate a notice period of at least 45 days to provide notice and solicit public input. Such notice shall be posted at the respective subject park field house (or for any park without a field house, at the nearest field house) and it shall be sent to advisory councils located within a one (1) mile radius of the subject park. At the conclusion of the notice period, the General Superintendent or his designee may in his discretion recommend to the Board that it approve the requested renames and names.