

Obama presidential center in Chicago could cost \$1.5 billion

George Marlowe
19 May 2017

Earlier this month former US president Barack Obama spoke in Chicago about his plans to build his presidential center on the city's impoverished South Side. Astonishingly, when the center is completed by 2021, the accumulated cost of building Obama's monument to his political legacy could exceed \$1 billion dollars.

The early-phase spending, which includes the costs of building a library and a museum, is expected to reach \$675 million. According to *NBC Chicago*, Obama's library architects indicate the total project could require up to \$1.5 billion, more than three times the amount raised by George W. Bush for his presidential center. Bill Clinton by contrast was only able to raise a meager \$164 million.

In total, the 13 presidential centers aimed at sanitizing the imperialist legacy of the American presidency cost the public more than \$64 million each year. In 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt built a presidential library for \$400,000. Following Roosevelt, Harry Truman built one that cost \$1.75 million. The last 60 years have seen the cost of building shrines to each presidency skyrocket, even taking inflation into account. Lyndon B. Johnson's center cost 10 times as much as Truman's, and Ronald Reagan's cost three times as much as Johnson's.

The estimated cost of Obama's monument to himself has now reached stratospheric levels and he has already begun fundraising in Wall Street and the private corporate sector. The museum is also expected to display Michelle Obama's expensive and lavish dresses. The mainstream media, true to its sycophantic, money-worshipping self, has largely fawned over these plans.

There have been occasional hints of discomfort in the media. For example, *Wired* magazine noted, "The

monolithic monument, which could stand as tall as 180 feet once built, features staggered, light-hued stone cladding and brings to mind an ancient ziggurat, which some might consider a testament to Obama's well-documented ego."

An editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* expressed a little embarrassment about the billion-dollar price tag. The writer notes that despite being a "supporter of Obama, I think it's time to put an end to this modern-day version of the Egyptian pyramids."

Over 250,000 square feet of Jackson Park will now be overhauled to construct Obama's personal pyramid, hosted by the University of Chicago. Jackson Park is located in the low-income Woodlawn neighborhood. The neighborhood is just south of more affluent Hyde Park. Nearly 30 percent of the population in Woodlawn lives in official poverty with a per capita income of less than \$18,928.

Highlighting the aristocratic principle at work here, the Barack Obama Foundation board in charge of the new center is led by a roster of corporate executive and venture capitalists. The board includes figures such as Silicon Valley venture capitalist John Doerr, who has an estimated net worth of \$4.1 billion. Another figure is J. Kevin Poorman, President and CEO of Penny Pritzker's PSP Capital Partners, LLC. Pritzker was Obama's Commerce Secretary and her net worth, according to Forbes, is more than \$2.5 billion.

Jackson Park was built in 1893 for the Chicago's World Fair and designed by famed American landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) and Calvert Vaux (1824-1895). Olmsted was known for his egalitarian and democratic sensibility and was responsible for the design of beautiful public park systems across the United States and Canada in the last half of the 19th century. Among Olmsted's many other

projects (some of them carried out with Vaux) include Central Park and Prospect Park in New York, the Emerald Necklace in Boston, Mount Royal Park in Montreal, the Niagara Reservation in Niagara, New York (the country's oldest state park), Belle Isle in Detroit, Golden Gate Park in San Francisco and the master plans for the University of California, Berkeley and Stanford University in Palo Alto, California.

Obama, speaking recently in Chicago alongside his former chief of staff, the city's mayor, Rahm Emanuel, bragged about his intentions in regard to his presidential center. "What we want this to be," he said, "is the world premiere institution for training young people and leadership to make a difference in their communities, in their countries and in the world."

Obama also made the fraudulent assertion that his presidential center would be an economic boon to Chicago's South Side. He claimed it would bring in thousands of jobs, with at least 300 permanent positions. His foundation also claims that it will bring in over \$3.1 billion to the Cook County area, through tourism and construction.

Whatever jobs are eventually created, and one has every right to be skeptical, they will do nothing to alleviate the wide-scale social misery that prevails in Chicago, presided over by the Democratic Party since time immemorial.

The gains will overwhelmingly go to business, not to the working class and youth Obama feigns sympathy for. Concerns have also been raised in the Woodlawn area community groups that the construction of the Obama museum and library will largely benefit the wealthy.

The Obama center will only accelerate the process of gentrification on the city's South Side, making housing in the area even less affordable for working class families. More than half of the population of Cook County, Illinois now pay more than they can afford in rent.

The South Shore neighborhood, adjacent to the Woodlawn neighborhood, has been dubbed the "eviction capital" of Chicago. One property management firm alone has been responsible for nearly a third of the evictions in the area, as it eyes a boost in real estate prices. High eviction rates are frequently bound up with the predatory practice of buying up distressed housing stock, clearing out existing

residents, renovating the buildings and charging higher rents to more affluent tenants.

There has also been a steady depopulation of the city's working class neighborhoods, as they have been neglected and left to rot. Working class youth face the bleakest of prospects and high unemployment levels. Violence and social breakdown have become regular features of life in such areas.

Like many other cities and towns in the United States, Chicago is a city of vast economic contrasts, between fabulous wealth and immense poverty.

Democrats such as Emanuel and Obama have played their role in this process, while utilizing the police to repress the impoverished population. Citing his role as a "community organizer" on the South Side, Obama absurdly claimed that his presidential center would help inspire youth through his example.

The Obamas are already rich and hope to become far richer. The pair are conservatively expected to make \$240 million from speeches, book deals and pensions as they cash in from their time in the White House. Together, their combined net worth puts them well into the top 1 percent of American society.

Perhaps sensing the vast social gulf, the Obamas also recently announced that they would be donating \$2 million to help youth in the area as part of a "summer jobs" program. This cynical public relations charity stunt—and tax deduction—is a drop in the bucket, and will hardly offset the immense social decay suffered by Chicago's working population.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact