

# **The McMobil Site: 13 stories? We Can Do Better**

The University of Chicago and its partner Mesa Development LLC want to build a huge 13-story high-rise at the so-called “McMobil” site on 53rd Street across from Nichols Park. Their building would have 267 apartments and a big-box retail outlet aimed at bringing in shoppers with cars from around the city. It would be grossly out of scale with its surroundings and too far from public transportation. It would add congestion to 53rd Street and degrade the quality of life in the area around it.

And if this building goes up, imagine what they’ll try to do next on 53rd Street.

All that now stands in the way of the university’s plan is Ald. Will Burns (4th), who has the authority to approve or deny the rezoning required for construction to start. We urge him to deny it.

**The building would dwarf its surroundings, choke the street with traffic, and degrade the quality of life for everyone in the area around it**

This plan for the McMobil site should be shelved and a new one developed that’s appropriate in size and puts the needs and wishes of its neighbors front and center. We’re having a meeting on Monday, March 18, to discuss this with you, your neighbors, and, we hope, with Ald. Burns. Please come, learn more, and join the discussion.

Hyde Park is a livable residential neighborhood; let’s keep it that way. Let’s make it a better neighborhood for *everyone*.

**Join us:  
Monday, March 18  
Augustana Lutheran Church  
5500 South Woodlawn Ave.  
7:00 – 9:00 PM**

**53rd CARRD**  
**Citizens for Appropriate Retail and Residential Development**  
An ad hoc citizens group dedicated to preserving the livability of our neighborhood  
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## The shadow across 53rd Street

Developers of the Mobil gas station and former McDonalds sites on 53rd Street across from Nichols Park presented to Hyde Parkers on Jan. 28 a vision for the combined parcel that clearly meets one goal of planners for the new 53rd Street — residential density. Unfortunately, it achieves that goal at the cost of almost every other important planning principle that has been articulated by community members. Above all, it ignores the most important lessons we have learned about transit-oriented development.

The location of the rental apartment high-rise proposed for the site ignores the strategies of transit-oriented development which Hyde Parkers clearly articulated in the series of meetings put together a few years ago to solicit ideas for developing the street and referred to as the “53rd Street Visioning” workshops. Ironically, those meetings were also intended as a way to educate the neighborhood about the latest ideas in urban planning. It seems that local business and political leaders should have been listening instead of talking.

The building, proposed by Mesa Development LLC, is 13 stories in height, has some setbacks above the fourth story of the building and provides green space beyond the basic zoning requirements — located above the fourth floor. It provides parking for 218 cars and has 267 units. Half of those parking spaces will be dedicated to shoppers at the retail stores on the first floor. Both the nearest business organization — The Kimbark Plaza board of directors — and the Hyde Park Chamber of Commerce enthusiastically endorse the plan. In order to be built, the project requires the site be spot-zoned by Ald. Will Burns (4th).

A high-rise several blocks from our major mass transportation hubs — the Metra station and Lake Park Avenue — will create traffic snarls and choke the street with commuters coming to and from their high-rise building overlooking the park. These same residents may stroll down 53rd Street on the weekends, but they are also likely to do what most auto-commuters do with lots of their disposable income — spend it to and from work and at faraway shopping centers they will get to with the cars they need to comfortably live on a block without a single public transportation option.

One essential strategy in development of walkable commercial areas is to attract new residents who are predisposed to walk in the first place. When one develops a building near alternate transportation options, that’s just who will consider living there. Conversely, developing a dense building that is too far from available mass transit will attract people who are not interested in that amenity — people who drive everywhere, in other words.

The hybrid resident imagined by the developers and local leadership who uses a fraction of a car and prefers to walk six blocks to take the Metra to work in all weather simply doesn’t exist. It is likely that the tenants who do want to live at McMobil will fight for the parking spaces they can get in the building and seek out places to park elsewhere. Parking problems in the area will worsen, and calls for permit parking will once again surface.

Renderings of the building presented Jan. 28 display a placid, verdant façade. It appears to be the very picture of green development until one realizes that the lovely front lawn pictured is Nichols Park. Undoubtedly, this is an attractive amenity to the developers. Unfortunately, the consequence of the lovely view for the lucky tenants is also a long shadow cast across 53rd Street and covering Nichols Park’s northern end in darkness.

We are also concerned about the proverbial shadow that this high-rise may cast over future development of 53rd Street. If a 13-story building makes sense to planners at the McMobil site, there is really no other stretch of the street where a high-rise would not be welcome to them. If one high-rise across from Nichols Park seems inoffensive, imagine a corridor of high-rises stretching down 53rd Street. What would prevent it? What planning principle would prevent a miniature Sheridan Road- where blocks of high-rises tower over the road — once the first tall building goes up?

As previously mentioned, the developers need a zoning change in order to construct this building. That means it is ultimately up to Burns whether this building goes up as-is or is redrawn to more accurately reflect the priorities of Hyde Park — and transit-oriented development generally. We believe it would be a mistake for Burns to rubber-stamp this project.

Until now, much of the development that has occurred under Burns’ watch has been inherited from former-Ald. and current Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle and therefore has not been a political liability for him. This high-rise, which is on the exact spot where Preckwinkle nixed two earlier high-rise plans as a result of pressure from her constituents, is all his. It is a real test of whether Burns, who was a legislator in Springfield before becoming alderman, is able to stand toe-to-toe with Chicago developers and represent the folks who gave him his job.