

Plans for community center chugging along

Garfield-Clarendon Model Railroad Club hopes for return



Members of the Garfield-Clarendon Model Railroad Club, located in Clarendon Park Community Center in Chicago, adjusting work of the trains on Feb. 8. The club is hoping for additional space as the center is renovated. (Victor Hilitski/For the Chicago Tribune)



The Clarendon Park Community Center and Field House in Chicago. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune 2015)

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By Morgan Greene

The future of an Uptown community center is settled, even if what's in store for the railroad club whose sprawling track and clanging trains call the historical building its home is less certain.

The Clarendon Park Community Center, for years caught in a back-and-forth between community members who wanted to see the ailing Chicago Park District building renovated and others who hoped for brand-new construction, will remain on the North Side just off the lake.

Last month, the Park District board voted to enter into a \$1.12 million contract with Booth Hansen architects for the rehab. The overall project, funded in part from nearly \$7 million in TIF funds, **is expected to include two phases**. Construction is anticipated to start by mid- to late 2021, according to the Park District, and it will remain partially open during construction.

“I think the real benefit is that the Park District is saving a historically significant building,” said Scott Baumgartner, a member of the Garfield-Clarendon Model Railroad Club. “There’s still some remnants remaining of the original structure, and to be able to preserve that for generations down the road, I think, is very important.”

And the other thing is that had the building been demolished, the train club would no longer exist, quite frankly. We would have had to close down.”

So, being able to one day open again to wide-eyed kids and railroad enthusiasts alike will be a plus, Baumgartner said.

The possibility of what a teardown would mean for the railroad club’s miniature world (created on a 1/87 scale) worried community members. Last year, more than 2,000 people signed an online petition to save the center, named as one of Chicago’s most endangered buildings by Preservation Chicago in 2015.

In a survey about program preferences, community members placed the “train display” second in importance, only after the gym. Concerns of community members also included building operation during construction, and what that would mean for programming like the youth arts and hip-hop organization Kuumba Lynx, and gardening programs outside the center.

If the railroad club had to relocate, members estimated it could take years to get the display, anchored at the center since 1963, up and running again. The club estimates the current railroad, with 1,500 linear feet of hand-laid track, to be one of the largest model railroads in the country.

Club members were also unsure about what would happen to their youth education program that melds the railroad with STEM education.

“It’s kind of like, could you deconstruct the Eiffel Tower and move it somewhere?” Katharine Boyda, president of the Clarendon Park Advisory Council, said last year as debate over the future of the center grew. “Well, maybe. But what would that take?”

In recent months, the trains have been quiet. No one has checked in on the pocket-size car that crashed into a fire hydrant. The tiny people waiting for a train to arrive will have to keep waiting, as the miniature Appalachian-inspired countryside remains dark.

The club has had some Zoom meetings and developed a pandemic protocol that would allow members to enter the room — with a reservation system to stagger visits, required masks and a process to wipe everything down. But the Park District has not signed off on letting members back in the building and says it will do so when health officials determine it to be safe.

“First and foremost, it’s going to be strange,” Baumgartner said, about a hopeful return to Clarendon one day. “The really sad part about it is, we’ve agreed that we’re not going to be able to allow visitors to come in.”

As renovation plans move forward, the club is hoping for additional workshop or storage space, Baumgartner said. But members haven’t had luck getting any requests approved.

“Ultimately, we’d like to have some space available to us so we can set up a workshop,” Baumgartner said.

Heather Gleason, the Park District’s director of planning and construction, outlined the long journey to reach this point at the last Park District meeting.

“Improving Clarendon Park Community Center has long been the desire of the community,” Gleason said.

“The planning process resulted in a vision for that project that will fix fundamental problems — like the leaky gym roof and lack of accessibility, and create a more functional floor plan, as well as update the interior of the historic building,” Gleason said.

The renovation was celebrated at the meeting by both the board and Ald. James Cappleman, 46th.

“It’s a dream come true,” Cappleman said at the virtual meeting, noting the center is situated in a North Side census tract with a high rate of poverty. He called the rehab “remarkable.”

“Because this community center serves as a beacon for all the residents,” Cappleman said. “Going to the ribbon-cutting for this will be the highlight of my entire time as alderman.”

Parks Superintendent Michael Kelly said the project stretches back decades.

“This project, for me and many folks on our team, goes back so far for me — I was working with Alderman (Helen) Shiller on this project. For those of you who remember Alderman Shiller, she was once a very, very big personality, a stalwart of the ward,” Kelly said.

“Personally, I had always wanted this to be a teardown and a new field house,” Kelly said, but the funds couldn’t be raised. “So while I’m disappointed that we’re not building a new building from the ground up, I am excited that we’re finally retrofitting this building, tightening it up and making it suitable for the 21st century.

“So I want to congratulate the community on that.”

A 1914 Tribune article announcing plans for Clarendon Beach declared it “will be the most complete social center in the world.”

“It will be much more than a bathing beach,” said the chairman of the bathing beach committee of the special park commission. “It will be a community center for all the year.”

This summer, Clarendon became a spot to which people flocked to gather outside near the lakefront, said Melanie Eckner, of the Clarendon Park Advisory Council. That was a fitting role for the hub, once marketed as a bastion of health and happiness.

Eckner said the renovation shows that decision-makers can listen to the community.

“I think what’s really important for the Clarendon Park Advisory Council is that it remains a community center for all people,” Eckner said. “That it continues to be there for the people who live immediately around it and reflects the diversity of the community.”