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POLI 204: US City & Metro Politics

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Chicago in the COVID Era: Mayor Lightfoot and Two Controversial Developments

Introduction

For large cities across the country, 2020 was incredibly taxing. A struggling economy crippled city finances, leaving many cities to find unique ways to bolster their budgets. Issues of racial injustice permeated through segregated cities in the wake of George Floyd's murder, causing tense division between city leaders and their constituents and forcing mayors into the spotlight. And a global pandemic forced Americans inside and decentralized work, posing significant questions as to the future of city life and placing expensive, taxpayer-funded megadevelopments in limbo. The great city of Chicago, Illinois was no exception to these issues, and the processes that transpired in Chicago in 2020 serve as a microcosm of events that occurred in cities around the country.

This paper examines how the Coronavirus pandemic in tandem with racial injustice has impacted the Windy City through its government structures, finances, and new developments, and how the city's mayor, Lori Lightfoot, has taken on a bigger role. In particular, I examine Lightfoot's short tenure as mayor and reflect on her actions in general and in response to COVID-19. In addition, I discuss how the pandemic has created uncertainties surrounding Tax Increment Financing (TIF) funds and two controversial TIF megaprojects—Lincoln Yards and The 78. Ultimately, I hope to highlight important criticisms of city management that many residents expressed during an unprecedented time of chaos in Chicago, and I reflect on how we might look back on this period of time years into the future.

Structures of power

Before discussing the Coronavirus pandemic, Lightfoot's response, and how the pandemic has impacted finance and development, it is important to understand the different power structures within Chicago's city government and which actors have control over particular facets of city life. Chicago's city government consists of Mayor Lightfoot in the executive branch, and the City Council, which is the legislative branch. Within the City Council there are 50 alder,¹ each representing their own jurisdiction within the city, called a ward. It is unusual for cities to have such a large number of city council members; the only large city with more is New York City with 51, and most other large cities have no more than 20. Because there are so many alder, the individual power of each alder is much smaller compared to other cities, and it is more necessary for alder to build coalitions and caucuses.

The city charter technically establishes Chicago's city government as a strong council, weak mayor system wherein the City Council can override Lightfoot's vetoes. However, the city government generally does not operate this way because the mayor has plenty of powers and privileges. For instance, the mayor can issue executive orders and appoint alder to certain committees. Because the mayor can appoint alder to head committees, many corrupt mayors of Chicago's political machine past have used this as a means to induce alder to support their agenda or as a vehicle for patronage. However, Lightfoot has vehemently opposed this style of politics. Lightfoot can also appoint city employees to various city boards and commissions and can hire and fire the heads of city departments like the Chicago Police Department and Chicago Public Schools.

¹ The City Council has debated changing the title from "alderman" to "alder" to be more gender-neutral; this paper will henceforth refer to aldermen as "alder"

Within Council meetings, both the mayor and City Council have certain agenda-setting powers at their disposal. The mayor, who presides over City Council meetings, can submit proposals and recommendations to the City Council, and she is also in charge of Chicago's annual budget, which gives her some power over tax revenues. This allows Lightfoot certain control over special taxing districts, including TIFs. In meetings, alder introduce legislative proposals and resolutions typically surrounding issues like the Municipal Code, traffic regulations, zoning, and licensing requirements. Alder have an odd power called aldermanic prerogative that essentially gives them the final say over zoning and housing developments in their wards. Alder representing wealthier wards typically use their aldermanic prerogative to block the development of affordable housing, but progressive alder can also use aldermanic prerogative as a bargaining chip to raise the percentage of a new development allotted for affordable housing in their ward. The City Council votes on these matters, but the mayor can break ties in votes. Using the full extent of their power, the alder can also block the mayor's appointments and budgets with a majority.

Criticisms of the Lightfoot administration

Lightfoot, the first openly gay person and first Black woman to become Chicago mayor, campaigned as a political outsider eager to root out the city's storied corruption on the way to a landslide 2019 runoff victory. That mayoral election was Chicago's first since 1915 in which no candidate was either incumbent or a favorite of Chicago's political machines. Aside from corruption, among the many important issues Lightfoot highlighted in her campaign were police reform and affordable housing. In her time as mayor, she has positioned herself as a pragmatic, righteous leader who does not cooperate with those who oppose her agenda. However, many of

Lightfoot's constituents and colleagues have been at odds with her over her handling of campaign promises, especially in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic and protests against police brutality in 2020.

To root out corruption, Lightfoot has tried to eliminate the aforementioned aldermanic prerogative, citing its use by alder for corrupt purposes. Her first action as mayor was an executive order that curtailed aldermanic prerogative over licensing and permits, but this order did not confront zoning issues as a result of backlash within the City Council. Though Lightfoot has continued to target the prerogative over zoning, prominent alder like Ald. Scott Waguespack, chair of the Finance Committee, have made this pushback clear:

“You don't need to take a broad sword and chop it out. [...] [Lightfoot] has a lot of other battles that we're working on ... that need to be focused on [...] Yes, she would [lose a City Council vote to eliminate zoning prerogatives].”²

Despite Lightfoot having drawn up her political persona around eradicating Chicago of its political corruption, she has her own group of detractors concerned with mayoral power. Toward the beginning of the pandemic in April 2020, the City Council only narrowly voted to give Lightfoot emergency powers to more swiftly act on and respond to the spread of the virus. This vote came after the Council voted against approving those powers earlier that same week, casting the action as a power grab.^{3 4} In addition to this, some of her City Council colleagues, like Ald. Howard Brookins, Jr., have pointed out that her constituents might view her fight

² Spielman, F. (2020). Lightfoot's most powerful City Council ally urges her to abandon threat to abolish aldermanic prerogative over zoning. Retrieved 9 April 2021, from <https://chicago.suntimes.com/city-hall/2020/1/24/21080478/aldermanic-prerogative-zoning-lori-lightfoot-lose-fight-scott-waguespack>

³ Byrne, J., & Pratt, G. (2020). Mayor Lori Lightfoot's opponents block COVID-19 measure giving her extraordinary spending powers for Chicago's pandemic response. Retrieved 7 April 2021, from <https://www.chicagotribune.com/coronavirus/ct-coronavirus-chicago-lori-lightfoot-emergency-powers-stalled-2020-422-t6bwxrxbafrwb4nww4dhj2ham-story.html>

⁴ Cherone, H. (2020). City Council narrowly approves measure giving Lightfoot emergency powers. Retrieved 7 April 2021, from <https://news.wttw.com/2020/04/24/city-council-narrowly-approves-measure-giving-lightfoot-emergency-powers>

against aldermanic prerogative as means to seize more power.⁵ Chicago political commentator Ben Joravsky also considers the dismantling of aldermanic prerogative to be instrumental in granting the mayor more power, for better or worse.⁶

Lightfoot also campaigned on increasing affordable housing. In March 2021, she proposed a rewrite of Chicago's affordable housing ordinance that would increase affordable housing in new developments. However, Lightfoot's action on affordable housing has only come nearly two years into her term, and progressive alder like the newly-elected Ald. Byron Sigcho-Lopez feel as though her plan does not go far enough:

“We are not creating nearly enough family-size units. [...] Unfortunately, we continue to see one-bedrooms and studios that are not enough to address the issue of affordability we have citywide. The changes have to be in line with what's needed to create stable communities — not what is convenient for developers to meet their profit margins.”⁷

Additionally, Lightfoot campaigned on police reform, but many have criticized her for not fulfilling promises or pushing hard enough. Prior to becoming mayor, Lightfoot chaired Chicago's Police Accountability Task Force in the wake of the fatal police slaying of Laquan McDonald. Under Lightfoot, the Police Accountability Task Force found racism and systemic failures in Chicago's policing, and Lightfoot spotlighted this during her campaign. However, some alder have criticized Lightfoot's handling of police issues, citing her decision to spend federal COVID relief money on policing.⁸ Others, like University of Chicago Law professor

⁵ Byrne, J. (2020). Mayor Lori Lightfoot withdraws plan for City Hall to take over business sign permit approvals. Retrieved 10 April 2021, from <https://www.chicagotribune.com/politics/ct-lori-lightfoot-sign-permits-aldermanic-prerogative-20200211-hb4myfcbunhzhinlsqwu4mqvvy-story.html>

⁶ Joravsky, B. (2019). The aldermanic prerogative myth. Retrieved 10 April 2021, from <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/the-aldermanic-prerogative-myth/Content?oid=69817877>

⁷ Spielman, F. (2021). Lightfoot proposes massive rewrite of affordable housing ordinance. Retrieved 1 April 2021, from <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2021/3/24/22348549/affordable-housing-chicago-city-council-ordinance-introduced-percent-units-set-aside-fees-lightfoot>

⁸ Morell, C. (2021). Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot ran as an outsider. Two years in, her approach hasn't changed. Retrieved 31 March 2021, from

Craig Futterman, have argued that Lightfoot has refused to work collaboratively with the people most impacted by police violence:

“[This is the] same person who I sat by her side in making a series of recommendations about what needs to be done and the importance of working collaboratively with people who have been most impacted [by police violence]. [...] Now as mayor [she] has shown no interest with collaborating with those same group of folks.”⁹

Others have criticized Lightfoot’s handling of the Coronavirus pandemic as a whole. Throughout 2020, Lightfoot has issued several executive orders relating to COVID, bypassing the City Council. When Lightfoot ordered the city’s lakefront bike paths to be closed at the height of the pandemic, many immunocompromised essential workers and individuals seeking to exercise in COVID-safe ways criticized her administration. Many at-risk individuals relied on these bike trails to get to work in lieu of crowded transit or increasingly congested sidewalks. However, when confronted, Lightfoot did not budge, refusing to re-open the trails or even mark off any of the city’s mostly-empty streets for the use of cyclists. Her response pointed to the city’s other bike trails, although many of those were also closed:

“The lakefront’s not reopening anytime soon. As people are aware, there’s lots of bike lanes and bike trails throughout the city. When we closed off the lakefront, we coordinated with a lot of advocacy groups to encourage people to use one of these alternative means of transportation, and that’s what folks should do.”¹⁰

Furthermore, many Chicagoans have criticized Lightfoot for her response to racial injustice and protesting in the city. To many, in the midst of outrage in response to police

<https://www.wbez.org/stories/chicago-mayor-lori-lightfoot-ran-as-an-outsider-two-years-in-her-approach-hasnt-changed/c5c382e9-1118-4eeb-8801-aec648ad8f9a>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Greenfield, J. (2020). Lightfoot: Nope, I’m not reopening the Lakefront Trail for bike commuting anytime soon. Retrieved 31 March 2021, from <https://chi.streetsblog.org/2020/04/11/lightfoot-nope-im-not-reopening-the-lakefront-trail-for-bike-commuting-anytime-soon/>

violence, Lightfoot espoused similar talking points to her political machine predecessors, focusing on law and order and demonizing criminals and those who looted and vandalized property. Many criticized her strict use of law enforcement as opposed to specially trained professionals like emergency responders and saw her as too pro-business.¹¹ Moreover, Lightfoot ordered many of Chicago's bridges to be raised and transit to stop running at night to prevent protesters from spilling into affluent areas of the city. This action stranded some commuters, like hotel worker Kyle Lucas, who said of Lightfoot and the city's handling of protests:

“It's definitely eroded my trust in the city, in the reliability of the transportation system, it's eroded my views on the mayor and her commitment to enacting real change [...] I think a lot of people saw the bridges being raised as if to protect the rich and the wealthy and the property downtown in light of people marching and protesting because of massive inequities and injustices in our city, particularly toward Black people. I think it was a very visual reminder for a lot of people of that disparity and I absolutely believe it escalated tensions and made people more angry.”¹²

Tax Increment Financing and COVID

In addition to creating a struggle for mayors (and Lightfoot in particular), the COVID-19 pandemic has caused issues for city financing and land development. With the pandemic hampering city finances, Chicago and other cities across the country have resorted to extraneous methods to help remedy budget shortfalls and avoid spending cuts and layoffs. One vital method Chicago has gone about doing this is utilizing surplus Tax Increment Financing (TIF) funds. A TIF district is a type of special tax district cities use as a tool to induce economic development in certain neighborhoods where development would not occur if not for the financial assistance of

¹¹ Dumke, M. (2020). In Lori Lightfoot's Chicago, bridges have become barricades. Retrieved 31 March 2021, from <https://www.propublica.org/article/draft-bridges>

¹² Dukmasova, M. (2020). Chicago's mayor turns city's infrastructure into weapons against protesters. Retrieved 7 April 2021, from <https://theappeal.org/chicago-mayor-bridges-protest/>

the city. In 2019, 36% of Chicago's property tax revenue, or about \$926 million, was wrapped up in TIF districts.¹³ These districts, of which there are about 136, cover roughly one-third of the land area of the city.¹⁴

TIFs are slightly different in every jurisdiction, but they generally serve the same purpose—to (re)develop blighted areas of the city that need economic revitalization. In Illinois, for the city to create a TIF district, they must qualify an area as “blighted” and in need of development. An area must meet at least five state standards out of 13 to meet the qualification for blight. Then, the city establishes a TIF district around this area, and assessed property values in this district are frozen. As the development progresses, property values in the district rise beyond the frozen assessed value, and property taxes increase. Each extra dollar in property taxes gets funneled into a TIF fund. The money in this TIF fund goes towards the development, as well as roads, sewers, and new public infrastructure that accompanies the development. TIF funds exist for up to 23 years, and extra or leftover money in TIF funds can be “ported” to the TIF funds of other development projects in the city.

Though TIF funds are supposed to be inaccessible to the city during development, the city can make use of some TIF money. As Chicago's mayor, Lightfoot has control over the city's annual budget, which means she has the ability to manage revenue surpluses in TIF districts. In her power over the annual city budget, Lightfoot can declare a certain amount of TIF money to be in surplus, returning that money to the city. Most of this surplus TIF money goes toward Chicago Public Schools, and much of the rest of it goes to other tax districts like the Chicago Park District. In 2020, the Coronavirus pandemic put a massive \$700 million dent in Chicago's

¹³ Cherone, H. (2020). Share of city property tax revenues claimed by TIF funds grew 5% in 2 years: Report. Retrieved 16 April 2021, from

<https://news.wttw.com/2020/08/11/share-city-property-tax-revenues-claimed-tif-funds-grew-5-2-years-report>

¹⁴ Jacobs, J. (2020). How Chicago's controversial TIF program took over a third of the city. Retrieved 16 April 2021, from

<https://news.medill.northwestern.edu/chicago/how-chicagos-controversial-tif-program-took-over-a-third-of-the-city/>

spending plan, and Lightfoot declared \$300 million of Chicago's TIF funds as surplus to help repair this dent. This \$300 million would help fund Chicago Public Schools and offset the need for service cuts and layoffs.¹⁵ Despite this decision, some Chicagoans thought Lightfoot did not go far enough. Jesse Sharkey, the president of the Chicago Teachers' Union, argued in a statement that Lightfoot should allocate the entirety of Chicago's \$926 million in TIF revenues:

“to critical needs — including housing supports for families teetering on the brink of homelessness and broadband devices for every public school child.”¹⁶

Although the intention of TIF is to help revitalize “blighted” areas, the policy is not always used in this way. TIFs are intended to apply a “but-for” test in which the state assesses whether the development would not occur “but for” the TIF subsidies. This is meant to ensure that the area receiving the development actually needs the extra funding to secure development. In affluent neighborhoods, development should occur without the necessity of extra funding. However, the “but-for” test is imperfect, and as a result, Chicago frequently breaks this stipulation and creates TIF districts in wealthy areas of the city. For example, in 2006, the city approved the LaSalle/Central TIF district right in the city's central business district, which includes the Willis Tower.¹⁷ TIF critics rebuke city officials for approving TIFs to subsidize megadevelopments in affluent or gentrifying areas rather than secure much-needed development in underserved areas. Consequently, those in opposition to TIFs argue that they exacerbate

¹⁵ Dardick, H. (2020). Record \$926 million flows into controversial Chicago TIF districts, more than a third of city property taxes. Retrieved 16 April 2021, from <https://www.chicagotribune.com/politics/ct-cook-county-chicago-tif-district-report-20200806-7wh5hc7mxzctfackoi4nkefjsq-story.html>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ LaSalle/Central TIF. Retrieved 21 April 2021, from https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/dcd/supp_info/tif/lasalle_central_tif.html

inequality rather than spur redevelopment.¹⁸ As Rev. Ira Alcee of Greater St. John Bible Church in the West Side neighborhood of North Austin argues:

“[TIF] was designed to help poor people [...] It was designed to lift up distressed communities, creating more capital investment. But instead they have took tens of millions of dollars that belong to us and invested in the more affluent communities. It’s time that Chicago stop the reverse Robin Hood practices of the TIF system.”¹⁹

Introducing Lincoln Yards and The 78

Arguments surrounding TIFs have been at the center of two large community developments over the past few years in Chicago. Recently, developers have sought TIF funds to redevelop two large vacant lots into expensive megaprojects with high rises—Lincoln Yards and The 78. [Lincoln Yards](#) is a \$6 billion, 14.5 million square-foot project that lies on a formerly industrial lot straddling the north branch of the Chicago River between Bucktown and Lincoln Park, two affluent neighborhoods. When completed, Lincoln Yards will bring 23,000 full-time jobs, 6,000 housing units, and a plethora of green space.²⁰ The second project, [The 78](#), lies on the south branch of the Chicago River between the South Loop and Chinatown neighborhoods. The 78 would bring 13 million square feet of buildings with 24,000 jobs and 10,000 residential units to the site adjacent to downtown.²¹ On the surface, these developments appear to be easy to support and greatly beneficial to the city. However, as the votes to approve the TIFs were taking place, several grassroots organizations, including the Chicago Teachers Union, occupied LaSalle

¹⁸ Cherone, H. (2020). Share of city property tax revenues claimed by TIF funds grew 5% in 2 years: Report. Retrieved 16 April 2021, from

<https://news.wttw.com/2020/08/11/share-city-property-tax-revenues-claimed-tif-funds-grew-5-2-years-report>

¹⁹ Roeder, D., & Malagón, E. (2020). As pandemic blitzes city finances, an unexpected cash windfall for Chicago government. Retrieved 16 April 2021, from

<https://chicago.suntimes.com/2020/8/7/21357322/chicago-tifs-tax-increment-financing-districts-pandemic-surpluses-lightfoot-city-hall>

²⁰ Kozlarz, J. (2019). TIFs for Lincoln Yards, The 78 approved by City Council. Retrieved 16 April 2021, from <https://chicago.curbed.com/2019/4/10/18304637/lincoln-yards-the-78-tif-finance-committee-city-council>

²¹ Ibid.

Street outside City Hall to protest the use of TIFs for megadevelopments. Alongside them were six newly-elected democratic socialist City Council members, including Ald.-elect Byron Sigcho-Lopez (25th), in whose ward The 78 was slated to be developed.²²

There were several reasons as to why these groups opposed these new TIF developments. First, the City Council was rushing to approve Lincoln Yards and The 78 in the waning days of then-mayor Rahm Emanuel's administration. Less than six weeks after Emanuel's departure, new property assessments were completed, and based on these new assessments, Lincoln Yards no longer passed the "but-for" test and thus did not meet the requirements to qualify as a "blighted" area. However, the City Council had already approved the \$2.4 billion in TIF funds for both projects, so nothing could be done. Incoming mayor Lightfoot, having campaigned on housing affordability issues, opposed the TIFs. However, the exiting Emanuel knew he had the votes, so Lightfoot acceded to the TIFs on the condition that Sterling Bay and Related Midwest, the developers for Lincoln Yards and The 78 respectively, would pledge for minority- and women-owned firms to do a majority of the construction work.^{23 24}

For many underserved Chicago residents, the fact that the Lincoln Yards site is not "blighted" is already obvious, and the city allowing development to move forward is unjust. Many residents have long understood that development should occur in attractive areas of the city without the need for extra funding from the city. As Anthony Stewart, co-founder of the community organization Black Workers Matter in the West Side neighborhood of Austin, argues:

²² Ibid.

²³ Dardick, H. (2019). The race to beat the clock on Lincoln Yards: How a delay could have stopped the megadevelopment from getting \$1.3 billion in taxpayer money. Retrieved 20 April 2021, from <https://www.chicagotribune.com/investigations/ct-lincoln-yards-tif-blight-question-20190826-3tjv44ljqradbfe22yynyzcjie-story.html>

²⁴ Kozlarz, J. (2020). Lightfoot vows to reform Chicago's controversial TIF system. Retrieved 16 April 2021, from <https://chicago.curbed.com/2020/2/5/21124209/chicago-development-tif-district-lightfoot-reform>

“Does anyone think the booming North Side is going to stop booming without city TIF money? [...] Instead of seeing investments in neighborhoods like mine, we see our property taxes diverted by mayor after mayor to the politically connected developers for projects in some of the richest neighborhoods.”²⁵

Additionally, many have lambasted the developments for their low allotments of affordable housing. In fact, The 78 only has 500 units slated for affordable housing out of 10,000 total, and the developer is paying a \$91.3 million dollar fee to the city’s Affordable Housing Opportunity Fund to avoid building at least 500 more units to meet the city’s quota of 10% affordable housing in new developments.²⁶ Lincoln Yards, when completed, will have 600 units of affordable housing, comprising a mere 10% of all units, which is the bare minimum required by Chicago inclusionary zoning laws.

Moreover, some residents are concerned that these projects will increase property taxes, rents, and cost of living in their environs, leading to gentrification and the displacement of nearby residents. This is especially a concern with The 78, which abuts Chicago’s Chinatown neighborhood and lies near the Pilsen neighborhood, which are home to many lower-income Chinese and Latinx residents, respectively. As nearby resident Miguel Del Toral asks:

“Why do they say they are fighting to benefit our communities when by building these projects, they make our surrounding environments far more expensive, and they create environments which working-class people cannot afford to live in?”²⁷

Furthermore, many have criticized these TIF developments because they direct tax revenue away from schools, parks, and public service jobs like the fire department. For Lincoln Yards and The 78, that amounts to \$1.3 billion and \$1.1 billion, respectively. Ben Joravsky has

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Lutton, L. (2019). Chicago activists look for new ways to oppose megadevelopments. Retrieved 16 April 2021, from <https://www.npr.org/local/309/2019/04/19/715269443/chicago-activists-look-for-new-ways-to-oppose-megadevelopments>

²⁷ Ibid.

criticized the TIFs for allocating tens of millions in property tax dollars toward the marketing and legal fees for these developments.²⁸ Others have argued that rather than put property taxes towards TIF developments, the city should allocate this funding to the revitalization of Chicago neighborhoods that need it the most. As Rev. Marshall Hatch of West Garfield Park says:

“We have the fewest building permits, we have no cranes, we have the highest unemployment, we have the most displacement of poor people, we have the highest violence [...] This is not rocket science. Investing in communities is a way of valuing everybody's life.”²⁹

How has COVID impacted these developments?

Despite all of this backlash, development of Lincoln Yards and The 78 has continued to move forward. However, the Coronavirus pandemic has been a cause of concern for the developers of these megaprojects. The pandemic and its coincident tanking economy gave way to cutbacks on office space needs and fewer financing resources, putting a pause on development.³⁰ Moreover, as the disease swept through American cities and caused work to go remote, cities (and real estate developers) became increasingly concerned about mass urban flight. Coupled with the increasing costs of living, the prospect of moving out of the city became attractive. The Coronavirus pandemic has seen 82% of urban centers experience more outmigration compared to before the pandemic.³¹

²⁸ Joravsky, B. (2019). How Rahm plans to spend the \$1.3 billion in TIF tax dollars he's giving to Lincoln Yards. Retrieved 16 April 2021, from

<https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/tif-lincoln-yards-rahm-emanuel/Content?oid=67155096>

²⁹ Lutton, L. (2019). Chicago activists look for new ways to oppose megadevelopments. Retrieved 16 April 2021, from

<https://www.npr.org/local/309/2019/04/19/715269443/chicago-activists-look-for-new-ways-to-oppose-megadevelopments>

³⁰ Ori, R. (2020). Coronavirus chaos — wrecked economy, less office space demand, scarce financing — challenges Chicago's megadevelopments. Retrieved 5 May 2021, from

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/ryan-ori/ct-biz-coronavirus-impact-chicago-megadevelopments-ryan-ori-20200515-5msrdsnfxbgmdfbxfruhbekrvu-story.html>

³¹ Patino, M., Kessler, A., & Holder, S. (2021). More Americans are leaving cities, but don't call it an urban exodus. Retrieved 5 May 2021, from <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2021-citylab-how-americans-moved/>

Additionally, in cities across the country, retail rents plummeted as several businesses went under and left. Suddenly, securing long term demand from residents and businesses to move into these developments when completed became somewhat of a gamble. For instance, by late 2020, The 78 still had yet to secure an anchor business to occupy one million square feet of its offices.³² Despite all the uncertainty surrounding the future of these developments, experts argued that they were more likely to see delays rather than failure.³³ The megaproject developers, Sterling Bay (Lincoln Yards) and Related Midwest (The 78), were generally not worried. As Sterling Bay CEO Andy Gloor has said:

“It’s not easy, but we’re not daunted by it [...] While we did not anticipate a pandemic, we did project a very long development cycle. We figured it’s a seven- to 10-year project, and during that duration there will be head winds — maybe not recessions, but downturns.”³⁴

Conclusion

In the tumultuous year of 2020, the concurrent issues of COVID and racial injustice caused chaos and uncertainty in several aspects of Chicago city life. This chaos has led to bitter disagreements and tense debates among Chicagoans and between residents, stakeholders, and individuals in positions of power. Mayor Lori Lightfoot made many important decisions regarding Chicago’s response to the pandemic and protests, both in terms of city management and security, and her decisions did not please all of her constituents. Additionally, the pandemic and its consequent economic downturn placed doubts on the future security of the controversial TIF megaprojects Lincoln Yards and The 78. As the beginning of the pandemic threw Chicago

³² Smith, R. (2020). Will COVID kill the megadevelopment?. Retrieved 5 May 2021, from <https://www.chicagomag.com/chicago-magazine/october-2020/covid-megadevelopment-lincoln-yards/>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ori, R. (2020). Coronavirus chaos — wrecked economy, less office space demand, scarce financing — challenges Chicago’s megadevelopments. Retrieved 5 May 2021, from <https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/ryan-ori/ct-biz-coronavirus-impact-chicago-megadevelopments-ryan-ori-20200515-5msrdsnfxbgmdfbxfruhbekrvu-story.html>

into an awkward purgatory wherein urbanites were uncertain as to the city's future, developers of Lincoln Yards and The 78 worried whether their large investments would make strong returns. However, hindsight is 2020, and it is now clear that these concerns were minor as the world is looking to open back up.

Reflecting on how COVID-era changes in power structures have impacted city governance, it will be interesting to see if history will be kind to Mayor Lightfoot. There appears to be a familiar frustration among Chicago residents, but it is certain that Lightfoot has presided over the city during an incredibly challenging period. Furthermore, although experts and the megaproject developers themselves are confident that the Coronavirus pandemic will not ruin their development plans, only time will tell if the pandemic has made any lasting, marked impacts on Lincoln Yards or The 78.

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