

Chicago Tribune

Editorial:

Make this South Works project more than another bold vision



By **Editorial Board**

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Dreams of a South Works rebirth have jilted the South Side too many times. Since U.S. Steel shut down its Far South Side mill in 1992, there've been developer dalliances that yielded nothing more than blueprints in a drawer. Chicago-based McCaffery Interests and U.S. Steel once floated a \$4 billion plan to build 13,000 homes and a 1,500-slip marina. That went nowhere. Ten years ago, Solo Cup talked of building a factory at the lakefront site — again, zilch.

Now, European developers Barcelona Housing Systems from Spain and a unit of Dublin-based WELink Group have inked a deal to buy the 440-acre site so they can build 20,000 homes, plus space for retail, restaurants, parks and offices. A patch of dormant land from the South Side's industrial yesteryear turns into a vibrant, mixed-use community. Could it happen?

There are myriad reasons why this site should flourish rather than languish. South Works is prime lakefront land, with a wondrous view of the Chicago skyline. It's not far from Jackson Park, where the Obama Presidential Center and a Tiger Woods-designed, PGA-caliber golf course are touted as transformative projects for surrounding South Side neighborhoods. And the South Works site is massive — you could fit Grant Park and Northerly Island into its expanse and still have room — an ample canvas to do something big and bold.

With that kind of scale, the project could be a B12 shot for the South Side's moribund economy. So, a plea to Mayor [Rahm Emanuel's City Hall](#): Roll up your sleeves and make this happen.

The mayor issued a news release trumpeting the developers' deal to buy the site, calling the agreement "a major milestone." Barcelona Housing and its WElink partner, Emerald Living, have five months to close the deal. The mayor's office has not disclosed the sale price, and has not said what it offered the developers to entice them to climb on board. We hope, however, that Emanuel will assure Barcelona and Emerald that the city will provide the infrastructure the South Works project needs to thrive.

"We'll need schools, a library, a hospital, a fire station — the public amenities that come with that kind of big influx (of people)," Ald. Susan Sadlowski Garza, 10th, whose ward encompasses the site, tells us. And if the city needs to establish a tax increment financing district there to set aside money for those amenities, she's fine with that. A TIF district to facilitate development of the site has been on the table before; the city offered one when Solo Cup thought about putting a factory there.



The ore walls near the lakefront at the U.S. South Works property near 87th Street and Lake Michigan. The city of Chicago has announced a Purchase and Sale Agreement (PSA) of the old U.S. Steel South Works property on the city's far South East Side. Emerald Living, a green-tech development company announced the PSA today Tuesday August 1, 2017. (Phil Velasquez, Chicago Tribune)

Emanuel has other major redevelopment projects on his plate. There's the much-hyped North Branch Industrial Corridor makeover in Lincoln Park, where a mix of technology office space, apartment towers, hotels, and retail is envisioned. And in the South Loop, developer Related Midwest plans to morph a 62-acre former rail yard along the Chicago River into as much as 10 million square feet of residential, office, hotel and retail space.

Those are worthy projects, but the difference is that the neighborhoods surrounding those tracts are already thriving. South Works represents a chance to revitalize Far South Side communities that have, for so many years, been beaten down by disinvestment, violence and an exodus of jobs and people.

Garza says South Siders have grown weary of splashy, bold plans at South Works that withered before a brick was ever laid. "We've been down this road before," Garza tells us. "People are tired of having the carrot dangled in front of their face, and then having the rug pulled from under them." As Emanuel works with BHS and Emerald on this project, he needs to remember that. It's about time South Works ends its history of failures and becomes a dream realized.

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