



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

# Press Release

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## Oaks of North Lawndale aids the MWRD in restoring the canopy



*(L-R): MWRD Commissioner Martin J. Durkan, 24th Ward Ald. Michael Scott, Paul Coffey, Vice Provost and Dean of Community Engagement at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Elissa Tenny, President of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Kevin Sutton, Executive Director of the Foundation for Homan Square, and Harrison District Police Cmdr. Kevin Johnson kicked off the Oaks of North Lawndale project.*

A partnership between the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD), the 24th Ward and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) has led to an ambitious project that will change the landscape of the North Lawndale community in hopes of a greener and drier future.

MWRD Commissioner Martin J. Durkan, Ald. Michael Scott (24th) and officials with the SAIC, Foundation for Homan Square and North Lawndale Community Coordinating Council kicked off the Oaks of North Lawndale project earlier this fall. The MWRD will be donating 5,000 oak tree saplings from the Restore the Canopy program to help North Lawndale develop a peaceful, tree-lined community that is working to address stormwater management and deliver the many benefits that trees provide.

"We are extremely proud to lend our support to the Oaks of North Lawndale project, and look forward to the many benefits it will provide," said Commissioner Durkan. "For anyone who has expe-



*Commissioner Durkan stands next to 500 of the 5,000 saplings the MWRD will donate to the project.*

rienced a flooded basement or flooded street, it is clear why the MWRD values trees and these important partnerships. In many communities across Cook County, like North Lawndale, we have lost too much of this crucial urban canopy that provides more than shade. We are always looking for ways to capture stormwater, and the Oaks of North Lawndale will help us achieve our goals."

Inspired by artist Joseph Beuys' "7,000 Oaks" project in Kassel, Germany in 1982, the Oaks of North Lawndale aims to reforest the 3.2 square miles of the North Lawndale neighborhood. The SAIC intends to plant a total of 7,000 trees in a multi-phased approach over the next five years. The trees will sprout out of the Homan Square Campus and spread north to Garfield Park, south to Douglas Park, and east and west to the boundaries of North Lawndale, creating a "city in a garden," as envisioned by Daniel Burnham. Aside from 60 trees planted at Douglas Park, most will be planted on city parkways.

"The Oaks of North Lawndale is a propositional legacy project for the City of Chicago. The School of the Art Institute of Chicago is developing this project with and for the community and non-profits in North Lawndale," said Paul Coffey, Vice Provost *(continued)*



## Oaks of North Lawndale aids the MWRD in restoring the canopy *(continued)*



*(L-R): MWRD Commissioner Martin J. Durkan, artist Pedro Reyes, Paul Coffey, Vice Provost and Dean of Community Engagement at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), Taykhoom Biviji, research associate at SAIC, and Andrea Frank, assistant to the Vice Provost and Dean of Community Engagement at the SAIC, celebrate the kickoff of the Oaks of North Lawndale program.*

and Dean of Community Engagement at SAIC. “We hope to be getting city support to reforest North Lawndale and bring the benefits of an arboretum to this area of the city.”

SAIC officials are partnering with other local organizations, like Homan Grown and the Gardeners, to nurture the MWRD saplings until they grow to about 1.5 inches in diameter and 5 feet in height, at which time they plan to plant the trees in the community. The SAIC is also collaborating with the North Lawndale Employment Network to employ recently paroled citizens through a job training program that prepares them to enter landscaping careers.

In managing Cook County’s stormwater, the MWRD is challenged by changing weather patterns and increases in impermeable pavement that cannot contain stormwater like trees can. Due to a reported 13 million trees in the region being lost from emerald ash borer devastation, the MWRD began Restore the Canopy, purchasing tree saplings from the Illinois state tree nursery and transporting them to Cook County as a way to empower area residents to restore the region’s depleted tree canopy. The MWRD launched the Restore the Canopy program in the spring of 2016, and quickly came to the aid of many communities, schools and organizations across Cook County, distributing more than 43,000 trees to date.

“We are happy to partner with the School of the Art Institute,



*Firearms collected were broken down and melted and converted to shovel heads to be used to plant trees.*

the 24th Ward and the North Lawndale community on the ambitious Oaks of North Lawndale project,” said MWRD President Mariyana Spyropoulos. “Trees are a form of green infrastructure that keep water out of our basements, sewers and streets. It’s partnerships like this that help our Restore the Canopy program reach its greatest impact.”

As a symbolic start to the project, the SAIC brought artist Pedro Reyes to SAIC’s Homan Square campus to restage his work “Palas por Pistolas” (Guns into Shovels), melting down confiscated firearms to form the material for shovel heads. The molten metal was then smithed into shovel heads and once cooled, attached to wooden handles milled from local ash trees felled as a result of the emerald ash borer beetle. Initially conceptualized as a response to gun violence in Mexico, Reyes first organized “Palas por Pistolas” a decade ago for residents of the city of Culiacán to turn in their weapons and convert them to shovels for planting trees. He has spread his message across the world to address gun violence and the environment.

“We are starting to see the catastrophic effects of climate change, so another crucial undertaking is to constantly plant trees; our survival depends on this,” Reyes said. “This is the transformative essence of this project: to turn an instrument of death and turn it into an instrument of life.”

To learn more about the project, contact [oaksofnorthlawndale@saic.edu](mailto:oaksofnorthlawndale@saic.edu). To learn more about Restore the Canopy, visit [www.mwrdd.org](http://www.mwrdd.org).

### Recovering Resources, Transforming Water

*Established in 1889, the MWRD ([www.mwrdd.org](http://www.mwrdd.org)) is an award winning, special purpose government agency responsible for used water treatment and stormwater management in Cook County, Illinois.*