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## She's the architect of Lightfoot's plan to reshape Chicago neighborhoods

City housing commissioner Marisa Novara leads the most aggressive effort yet to create more affordable housing, while battling segregation and gentrification.

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John R. Boehm

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In fast-gentrifying Pilsen, tension raged for several years over a seven-acre parcel of land that has sat fallow since at least 2004. [Beginning in 2015](#), the site at 18th and Peoria streets was the subject of protests, a lawsuit and other volleys in a battle over how much affordable housing should be included in developments there.

Then, Chicago housing commissioner Marisa Novara announced last December that the city would buy the land for \$12 million. When the acquisition is completed early this year, Novara’s department will seek proposals to build up to 280 affordable housing units there.

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“I believe fundamentally this is the role of government,” Novara says. “It’s to be a proactive partner with communities. There’s no reason we should be sitting back and watching when we see we’ve already got a lot of displacement (in Pilsen), loss of the Latino community and loss of affordable housing.”

That City Hall-as-activist philosophy has fueled Novara’s 90-person housing department since mid-2019, when incoming Mayor Lori Lightfoot named her to run the agency. Under Novara, the agency has worked to slow or manage gentrification not only in Pilsen, but also in [Woodlawn around the Obama Presidential Center](#) and in [neighborhoods on the western end of the 606 recreational trail](#).

Those efforts are only [part of an ambitious agenda](#) driven mostly by Novara’s belief that “we must use inclusionary housing tools to reduce segregation, not maintain it.”

As Lightfoot’s point person on housing, she’s spearheading the [most aggressive effort ever by a Chicago mayor](#) to ease a growing affordable housing crisis, while also tackling longstanding economic and racial segregation in the city. At the same time, the program reflects centralized policymaking driven by the mayor, in which citywide housing goals can override local neighborhood priorities.

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That approach is seen in a [revamped Affordable Requirements Ordinance](#) that dictates the amount and type of affordable housing that developers who receive city support through zoning changes or funding must create. The revamp was designed expressly to reduce Chicago's entrenched segregation.

Another example is a [2020 ordinance that allows new ADUs](#), or accessory dwelling units, such as coach houses and granny flats, in residential areas for the first time since the 1950s. It's in the pilot stage now, but in the long run is an attempt to change the overall housing mix of all neighborhoods by adding smaller, more affordable units on blocks that are dominated by single-family homes.

The Pilsen project was part of Novara's biggest initiative yet, the parceling out of low-income tax credits and city funds that could unlock a billion dollars in affordable housing development around the city. Apart from the dollar amount, the biggest in the city's history, there's an equity objective.

In 2021, a deep dive by her department into the racial and geographical makeup of the city's past affordable housing efforts found that developments using tax credits were largely concentrated in low-income areas on the South and West sides. So they tailored the latest round of tax credits to change that pattern.

"While we're very excited about the sheer volume of what we're able to do, it's also about getting to our mission, which is the equitable distribution of affordable housing across all 77 community areas," Novara said in a December Zoom call with press to [announce 24 projects](#) that, if all are built, will provide 2,400 new affordable housing units.

If all of Novara's initiatives bear fruit, Chicago "will look more equitable," said Guacolda Reyes, chief real estate development officer at the Resurrection Project, a group that has been building or rehabbing affordable housing in Pilsen since 1991. "There will be a little less racial segregation, and more neighborhoods that embrace diversity of incomes."

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Not everyone is a fan of Novara's zeal for new affordable housing developments. She draws fire for a proposal she supports that will include dozens of affordable units in a new 300-apartment project near O'Hare International Airport.

"I wish she'd do her homework," says Ald. Nicholas Sposato of the 38th Ward. "I can look out my office window right now at the affordable housing that we already have" in Dunning, around Harlem Avenue and Irving Park Road. "We have

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The project “is going to make a lot of competition for the seniors who own those three-flats and are trying to live off” the rental income, Sposato warns.

He and fellow Northwest Side Ald. Anthony Napolitano, 41st, opposed the plan, advanced by Glenstar Properties in Napolitano’s ward and [approved last fall by the City Council](#) in a rare departure from the tradition of aldermanic prerogative—which gives council members effective veto power over proposed developments in their wards.

Napolitano was quoted several times in the press saying he doesn’t oppose affordable housing, but wanted a commercial property on the site, along the north side of the Kennedy Expressway at Cumberland Road. Napolitano did not respond to Crain’s request for comment.

Liz Butler, a land use and zoning attorney at the Chicago firm Elrod Friedman, says Novara’s support put the project over the top after Glenstar “voluntarily doubled the affordable housing” to 20% of the 297 units.

Butler describes Novara’s style as “leading with empathy.”

Novara grew up in Kalamazoo, Mich., and now lives in Little Italy with her husband and two children. She says her interest in affordable housing began in the late 1990s, when she was working toward a master’s degree in social work at the [University of Chicago](#).

Working with a North Lawndale organization that helped women on welfare find jobs, she discovered that “having stable housing was usually an obstacle for these women.”

She recalls helping a Black mother named Rita find a new apartment after one of her children was diagnosed with lead poisoning. “She had a letter from a doctor that said, ‘You have to move or (the Department of Children & Family Services) will take your children;’ ” Novara says.

After she helped Rita—whose last name Novara doesn’t remember—apply for an affordable housing program on the West Side, the property manager, according to Novara, said, “Thanks. That will be a 15- to 20-year wait.”

“I remember we got back in my car and sat there in silence,” Novara says. It dawned on her, she says, that “housing you can afford is a justice issue, and there is an injustice being done.”

Novara later worked for an affordable housing developer and then for the Metropolitan Planning Council. Beginning in 2015, Novara led the MPC’s effort to measure what segregation costs Chicago. [The study](#) included an estimate of the cost in lives and dollars lost, and a set of recommendations.

The proposed solutions included rewriting the ARO with racial equity in mind and spreading city-sponsored affordable housing throughout Chicago.

In 2019, “candidate Lightfoot was one of the first people we briefed,” Novara says, likening the “Cost of Segregation” report to “the MPC standing on the outside, knocking on the door and saying, ‘Hey, city of Chicago, don’t you want to do this differently?’”

Her appointment as housing commissioner, she says, was “the mayor opening the door and saying, ‘Come on in and go do all this.’”

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