



Agenda Item Summary

File #: ID 24-291, **Version:** 2

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Agenda Item Title

Options for Honoring and Memorializing the Distinguished Life, Achievements, and Legacy of Former Oak Park Resident, Dr. Percy L. Julian & Presentation on Preliminary Policy Framework for Future Candidates

Overview

The purpose of this agenda item is to obtain Village Board direction on potential options for honoring and memorializing the distinguished life, achievements, and legacy of former Oak Park resident, Dr. Percy L. Julian, an internationally renowned black American research chemist and pioneer in the chemical synthesis of medicinal products from soybeans and other species of plants, as a stand-alone action, separate from a formal policy for approving future honorary designations later to be considered for approval by the Village Board. Staff will also seek feedback from the Village Board on a potential policy framework for honoring and memorializing other distinguished Oak Park residents in the future.

Recommendation

Accept Alternative 1 reflecting staff's recommendation to initiate the required next steps to advance any of the proposed options for memorializing Dr. Percy L. Julian as preferred by and including any input from the Village Board, and return to the Village Board for further direction and/or approval of any related actions.

Background

The Village has a rich legacy of innovation, activism, and excellence through connections to internationally-renowned figures in academia and sciences, arts and culture, business, media, politics, and law. Publicly memorializing the contributions of these distinguished and historic Oak Parkers is a unique opportunity to recognize and educate the world on our exceptional and shared heritage. Such memorialization may occur through the creation of signs, markers, public improvements, public art, and commemorative events. Staff have identified a range of viable options to further memorialize Dr. Percy L. Julian in the village that could be implemented in advance of any alternative or additional options the Village Board may wish to pursue. Below is a high-level overview of the options. Staff is prepared to conduct further exploration and/or proceed with next steps for implementing any of the options the Board may prefer.

1. Premier "DOOPer Star" in a Newly Initiated "Oak Park Walk of Fame". This option would create an interactive memorial and/or "Oak Park Walk of Fame" with Dr. Percy L. Julian recognized as the Premier "DOOPer star."

- a. Premier “DOOPer Star” Conceptual Elements. Using the “Hollywood Walk of Fame Star” as a baseline concept, the “DOOPer star” could be installed in the course of the existing sidewalk. Ideally, it would feature uniform, bespoke design elements, allowing for customization with brass or bronze text and medallions that educates residents and visitors on any individual’s legacy. The recommended medium for the “DOOPer star” would be a higher level of finish than standard segments of sidewalk. Example mediums could include: terrazzo tile, porcelain tile, polished natural stones such as granite, marble, or limestone, and colored concrete. Should the Village Board elect to advance this option, staff recommends the Oak Park Area Arts Council, Public Works, Community Relations, and living members of Dr. Percy L. Julian’s estate, should they choose to provide input, and other community stakeholders as appropriate be consulted regarding the adopted template.

- b. “Oak Park Walk of Fame” Location Considerations. Downtown Oak Park was an initial consideration for the establishment of the “Oak Park Walk of Fame”. If this area were the location of choice, staff would defer to input from the Board, Downtown Oak Park Business Association, and any other community and/or stakeholder input to assist with identifying the precise and most suitable location in the downtown area. The “Oak Park Walk of Fame” could begin at the southeast corner of Scoville Park (Oak Park Avenue and Lake Street) and travel north-south along the village’s namesake street. This location, another community focal point instantly recognizable to all Oak Parkers regardless of when they called the Village home, proudly broadcasts our shared heritage and provides space for communal celebration of distinguished individuals and groups in the heart of the village.

Alternatively, the “Oak Park Walk of Fame” could begin at the intersection of Oak Park Avenue and Hunter Court, expanding east-west along Hunter Court as new additions are implemented. This location presents an opportunity to include the premier “DOOPer Star” in the Oak Park Avenue streetscape project that is currently in the design and engineering phase. Additional improvements to Hunter Court would further compliment the implementation of the “Oak Park Walk of Fame” and strengthen pedestrian connections between the Avenue Garage and Oak Park Avenue, with opportunities to expand further west to downtown.

Alternatively, the “Oak Park Walk of Fame” could begin at the southeast corner of Scoville Park (Oak Park Avenue and Lake Street) and travel east-west along Lake Street with a similar effect. And, finally, incorporating the “Oak Park Walk of Fame” into the design of the Oak Park Avenue Streetscape project could be another opportunity to intentionally create and activate a destination space for the walk of fame initiative proximal to and along the Village’s namesake street. In any event, if this idea is deemed worthy of pursuit by the Board, the selected location should “activate” a presently underutilized gathering space or segment of a commercial corridor,

enhancing economic vitality through robust placemaking and place-keeping strategies.

- c. **Implementation Schedule.** The implementation timeline would depend Village Board direction. If directed to move this initiative forward as part of this Agenda item, staff could begin the process for identifying the appropriate location and achieving design of the template. Conceivably, these actions could be completed in the current fiscal year and not later than winter of 2025. Construction could occur during the next construction season as early as the Spring/Summer of 2025.
 - d. **Future Honorary “DOOPer Star” Designations.** Future “DOOPer Stars” could be added as soon as the defined administrative policy is adopted. It is recommended that funding be provided by the applicant, with the Village Board having the authority to partially or fully fund additional “DOOPer Stars” through a majority or supermajority vote.
2. **Branded Corridor Identity, Memorializing Dr. Percy L. Julian through Streetscape Design and Other Improvements to the Public Realm.** Staff have identified various streetscape improvements that could be impactful in further memorializing Dr. Percy L. Julian along Chicago Avenue between East Avenue and Austin Boulevard. These contemplated improvements would be salient given the level of visibility and proximity to the historic home of the Julian Family. The Village Board, with input from the DEI Office and Community Relations Commission, the Oak Park Area Arts Council, Public Works, and other community stakeholders as appropriate, could approve the implementation of a streetscape project, or projects to be implemented in phases, to memorialize Dr. Percy L. Julian’s legacy. Costs for each element of the streetscape would be highly dependent on the final project scope, level of finish, phasing, and associated labor and miscellaneous costs. Any contemplated improvements along the corridor would synergistically compliment the City of Chicago’s Soul City Corridor Development Framework for Chicago Avenue in the Austin community whilst conveying the transition to Oak Park. This leveraged interplay and placemaking is likely to enhance the economic vitality of the Chicago at Austin Business District and ultimately serve as a catalyst for the revitalization of Chicago Avenue east of Austin Boulevard, further strengthening the business district’s viability and prosperity.
- a. Specific streetscaping considerations would be as follows:
 - i. **Honorary Corridor Designation Along Chicago Avenue.** One overarching aspect of the branding could include the honorary designation of Chicago Avenue, from Austin Boulevard to Harlem Avenue, as Dr. Percy L. Julian Memorial Drive
 - ii. **Crosswalk Designs & Public Art.** Implement custom crosswalk designs using geometric patterns

representative of molecules or chemistry equipment at the intersection of Chicago and East Avenues; the improvements could be the first phase of a multi-phased project extending east towards Austin Boulevard

- iii. **Gateway Signage.** Install gateway signage memorializing Dr. Percy L. Julian at the intersection of Chicago Avenue and Austin Boulevard

- iv. **Pedestrian Lighting.** Custom pedestrian lighting fixtures resembling test tubes or graduated cylinders could be procured and installed along Chicago and East Avenues in the immediate vicinity of the Julian residence

- v. **Informational Signage.** An interactive memorial made up of pedestrian-scaled signage; signage could include written text and QR codes linking to digital exhibits and audio tours detailing the life and legacy of Dr. Percy L. Julian

- vi. **Banners.** Banners depicting Dr. Percy L. Julian's image, accomplishments, and inspirational quotes could be procured and installed along Chicago Avenue

- b. **Phased Implementation.** To begin, improvements should highlight the honorary corridor designation and define the intersections of Chicago and East Avenues and Chicago Avenue and Austin Boulevard as nodes or anchors for the corridor. Future phases could be implemented between as budget permits.

3. **Dr. Percy L. Julian Historic Business District.** This option would designate an existing business district as the Dr. Percy L. Julian Business District. Dr. Julian was not only a world-renowned chemist, but also a successful entrepreneur and businessman who balanced his career ambitions with social justice and equity by providing employment opportunities to women and minority professionals in the field of chemistry, who often struggled to obtain due respect for their professional credentials. Dr. Julian's legacy clearly exemplifies a commitment to industry and service. A business district supported with civic and economic empowerment activities to ensure thriving commerce and sustained economic opportunities for others is appropriate for honoring and uplifting his legacy.

Fiscal Impact

The proposed options for honoring and memorializing Dr. Percy L. Julian in the village of Oak Park carry variable fiscal implications and may require staff reprioritizes projects in the Capital Improvements Plan. Considerations encompass immediate costs associated with design, construction, and maintenance, but thought should also be given to long-term educational and economic benefits associated with the opportunities presented.

DEI Impact

The detailed framework provided in this agenda item offers an opportunity to rectify the omission or underrepresentation of marginalized groups and advance diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives within the Village of Oak Park. By standardizing the process within the public forum, all historically significant and distinguished individuals with connections to the Village can be considered and assessed on merit. Removing implicit bias from the process will reduce barriers and provide a pathway to recognition and memorialization for all individuals or groups, regardless of personal or assigned affiliations.

Alternatives

1. Accept Staff's recommendation, identifying the Board's preferred options including any revisions the Board may desire for further memorialization of Dr. Percy L. Julian in the Village.

Advantages:

- Village immediately recognizes and memorializes Dr. Percy L. Julian and ensures his legacy is acknowledged and celebrated without delay. This action will demonstrate the Village's commitment to equitable preservation of its heritage
- Allows for customization in recognizing and memorializing Dr. Percy L. Julian, whether it be through the premier "DOOPer Star" in a proposed "Oak Park Walk of Fame," branded corridor and streetscaping improvements along Chicago Avenue, designation of a business district, or any combination of effort
- The proposed options present a unique opportunity to stimulate economic vitality; preserving and celebrating the diversity of the Village and the influence Oak Parkers have had globally may drive further tourism

Disadvantages:

- The Village would need to allocate funds for the design, construction, and maintenance of the proposed options; this may require reprioritization of the Capital Improvements Plan
2. Do not accept any of the staff's recommended options for further memorialization of Dr. Percy L. Julian in the Village, and provide staff with altogether different direction to fulfill this purpose.

Advantages:

- By opting to forego staff's recommended options, the Village Board has an opportunity to take a further customized approach to memorializing Dr. Percy L. Julian. This allows for creative thinking and the exploration of alternative options that may better align with a broader vision

Disadvantages:

- Exploring alternative directions may require additional time for research, consultation, and decision-making, prolonging the period before Dr. Percy L. Julian's legacy is officially honored and memorialized in the Village
- Rejecting staff's recommendations may result in a lack of consensus; divergent opinions on how best to memorialize Dr. Julian could lead to disagreements, conflicts, or gridlock, hindering progress and undermining community cohesion
- The Village may need to allocate additional resources to research, develop, and execute a new memorialization strategy, leading to higher expenses and budgetary constraints
- Opting for an alternative direction could result in a loss of focus and momentum in the memorialization process; without a predefined plan or framework, the Village may struggle to maintain clarity and direction, potentially leading to scattered efforts and inefficiencies

3. Maintain the status quo and do not proceed with any efforts to memorialize Dr. Percy L. Julian

Advantages:

- Some individuals, including the descendants or relatives of Dr. Julian, may prefer to maintain his legacy in a more private or personal manner, rather than through public memorials or commemorative events

Disadvantages:

- By foregoing the memorialization of Dr. Percy L. Julian, the Village may fail to adequately recognize and honor his significant contributions to society, particularly in the fields of science, entrepreneurship, and social justice
- Memorialization efforts provide valuable opportunities for education and awareness-raising about historical figures like Dr. Percy L. Julian; by foregoing his memorialization, the Village misses an opportunity to educate residents and visitors about his life, accomplishments, and contributions
- Individuals and groups who advocate for the memorialization of Dr. Percy L. Julian may feel disappointed or marginalized by the Village's decision to maintain the status quo

Previous Board Action

On February 6, 2024, the Village Board adopted a motion directing staff to identify potential options to further honor and memorialize Dr. Percy L. Julian in the village of Oak Park for its review at a future study session. Separate from the above requested action, yet as part of the same motion, the Village Board also directed staff to prepare a draft policy framework to standardize an approval process for future honorary designations in memorialization of distinguished, former Oak Park residents for its review at a future study session.

Citizen Advisory Commission Action

N/A

Anticipated Future Actions/Commitments

Dependent on Village Board direction based on the options and alternatives contemplated in this agenda item, staff anticipates the following potential future actions:

- Conduct a thorough cost-benefit analysis of proposed memorialization strategies to assess feasibility, sustainability, and budgetary implications; evaluate potential funding sources, grants, and partnerships to maximize resources and minimize financial burden on the Village, with the findings to be presented to the Board at a future date
- Explore alternative options for memorializing Dr. Julian beyond staff's recommended options to be presented to the Board at a future date
- Disengage until Board provides direction to reengage the initiative

Intergovernmental Cooperation Opportunities

N/A