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Mayor Johnson at one year in office: Former activist grapples with being the boss



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Mayor Brandon Johnson presides over a Chicago City Council meeting at City Hall on April 17, 2024. (Eileen T. Meslar/Chicago Tribune)



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Mayor Brandon Johnson paused to soak in the scene as row after row of longtime union members and leaders sprang to their feet.

As he approached his first anniversary in office, the freshman mayor whose political career [began](#) at the firebrand Chicago Teachers Union looked right at home before the adoring crowd of self-proclaimed troublemakers at the annual Labor Notes conference in April near O'Hare International Airport. During his speech to the group,

Johnson commended the City Council's controversial, razor-thin January [endorsement](#) of a cease-fire in the Israel-Hamas war.

"I'm also proud that the city of Chicago led the way the beginning this year of passing a resolution calling for a permanent cease-fire in Gaza," he said. "And I'm so grateful that I got a chance to vote to break the tie."

Outside, meanwhile, protesters were clashing with Rosemont cops. Hundreds of pro-Palestinian demonstrators banged on a police car to demand the release of one of them who had been detained.

Johnson, celebrating his newfound role as the boss of the nation's third-largest city with a roomful of union bigwigs at the annual strategy session, was not the target of the rally-turned-skirmish by rank-and-file labor groups outside the event, the Labor for Palestine National Network said.

But the chorus of protesters singing the labor anthem "Which side are you on?" while fighting with baton-wielding officers illustrated a difficult reality for him one year into his term: How does a mayor who proved his bona fides through audacious organizing against the establishment set the tone for peaceful protests amid a swelling antiwar movement [ahead of the Democratic National Convention's](#) arrival in Chicago this August?

As with other issues during Johnson's first year, the question touches on the conundrum of his jump from underdog mayoral candidate to chief executive. His campaign caught fire because he vowed to fight the status quo. But to some, his administration now represents the status quo.

Like his fifth floor predecessors, Johnson has been thrown a series of curveballs over the past 12 months, making it tougher for him to find his footing at the outset as he's up against a sharp learning curve in occupying the most powerful seat in Chicago government.

The very costly and divisive [migrant crisis](#) waiting on Johnson's desk from day one crowded out many of his early legislative victories centered on worker's rights, and saddled him with high-profile setbacks as he stumbled through how the city could house tens of thousands of asylum-seekers.

Though momentum is returning in the wake of him clinching the [passage](#) of an ambitious \$1.25 billion bond plan to fund affordable housing and development, pockets of Johnson's progressive base are restless. They object to decisions such as [keeping](#) embattled Chicago Transit Authority chief Dorval Carter as well as a [campaign about-face](#) on a [publicly financed](#) Chicago Bears stadium.



Mayor Brandon Johnson, center, is questioned by reporters on his way to a meeting with Senate President Don Harmon at the state Capitol on May 8, 2024, in Springfield. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

Jason McGrath, a Chicago-based strategist who was a pollster for the last three mayors, said Johnson should be concerned about these “calls coming from inside the house.”

“It’s a very, very hard job, and I think he’s finding now that it’s a lot easier to throw bombs from the sideline than it is to be in the ring and actually defuse them,” McGrath said. “Right now, there are too many people who are openly criticizing him who should be with them. And if that’s not a flashing red light yet, it certainly will be soon.”

Aldermen have said they felt bigfooted over decisions from placing migrant shelters in their wards to the city’s impending [cancellation of the ShotSpotter contract](#), and his political capital in Springfield is on much shakier footing than a year ago.

If the mayor was concerned about the drumbeat of negativity, however, he did not betray that in an interview with the Tribune.

Instead, Johnson accentuated his wins, touting the recent bond plan eight times during the 30-minute sit-down. He also pointed to other progressive gains, such as the city [allocating](#) \$250 million for affordable housing and homelessness services and \$100 million for violence prevention, [abolishing](#) the tipped subminimum wage, [expanding](#) mandatory paid time off and increasing the city’s [youth jobs](#) program by \$76 million.

It’s all a part of righting historic wrongs, Johnson said, a process that will take time. While he didn’t specifically ask for patience after 12 months, the mayor took pains to paint as well-established the structural oppression he says he was elected to fix.

“We’ve had 40 years of gross neglect and disinvestment within the city of Chicago, right?” Johnson said when asked about his administration’s weakest spot. “And so part of my responsibility, of course, is to address the age-old systems of failure and to build a better, stronger, safer Chicago, and that is something that I’m committed to doing.”

The migrant crisis

As a candidate, Johnson invoked vivid imagery of unleashing rivers of investment to flow through Chicago’s left-behind communities, writing off the premise of budgeting being a zero-sum game as a “false choice.”

“The table is big enough,” Johnson said during a March mayoral debate. “Now listen, whether you like salt or sugar on grits, it’ll be on my table. And for our brown families, whether you like red sauce or green sauce, it’ll be on my table.”

The mayor’s messaging since assuming office has often signaled a grimmer reality — much of that outside his control.

More than 41,000 asylum-seekers have made their way to Chicago since August 2022, when Republican Texas Gov. Greg Abbott [sent the first](#) of what would become hundreds of migrant buses in a bid to overwhelm the liberal city and erode its pro-immigration values.

It soon dawned on the fledgling administration that the city’s migrant shelter apparatus, though rapidly growing, could not keep pace. As the population of migrants [sleeping outside Chicago police stations](#) peaked at 3,900 — with up to 850 others camped out at O’Hare — that fall, pictures of the threadbare tent cities shocked the nation. The Johnson administration was ultimately able to [move them inside](#) the shelter system right before the harsh winter arrived.



Migrants eat dinner outside a shelter on the Lower West Side on March 4, 2024 in Chicago. Several religious groups organized the event to feed migrants and hold a brief religious service on the sidewalk outside the shelter. (Armando L. Sanchez/Chicago Tribune)

On the City Council floor, Black aldermen who feared their communities were once again being shortchanged in favor of newcomers expressed outrage during [rancorous debates](#) over each migrant spending item.

The growing resentment in the body helped drain the good feelings out of what should have been Johnson's early honeymoon period when new mayors are often able to accomplish important agenda planks without expending much political effort.

"That was partially what the right-wing governors intended for it to do: To cause chaos, to split diverse populations," Ameshia Cross, a Democratic political strategist, said. "It was maniacal, but it was also something that has tended to work. ... Pitting them against each other is not hard when you don't have enough resources to go around."

The cascading tensions laid bare how the mayor who vowed to bring prosperity and equity to those in need found himself dealt an extraordinarily bad hand. But how his team navigated the next several months nonetheless drew reproach from multiple corners of the city.

The gripes have spanned turf wars over where in the city the migrants should stay to discomfort from the left over implementing shelter evictions in the face of fiscal headwinds.

In his Tribune interview, the mayor struck an unapologetic stance when pressed on how he responded.

Asked how he would have differently to the situation upon taking office, knowing what he knows now, Johnson said "I wish that Congress would actually do its part and pass substantive immigration reform."



Mayor Brandon Johnson and Gov. J.B. Pritzker, left, before a news conference unveiling a new exhibit for the Archaeopteryx fossil at the Field Museum on May 6, 2024. (Eileen T. Meslar/Chicago Tribune)

On whether his philosophy of Chicago having “enough” for everyone was wishful thinking, Johnson responded that his \$1.25 billion bond package — which schedules the city to pay off \$2.4 billion in accumulated debt through 2061 — is “20 times the amount of dollars that we have made for the migrant mission.” (Chicago’s migrant response has cost \$372 million, according to the city.)

“You actually can do both-and,” Johnson said. “I’m optimistic in this moment because everything that I said that we need to do as a city together, we are doing that.”

To be sure, other local officials agree that the federal government left Chicago high and dry by allowing mass waves of asylum-seekers into the country with no support for the cities that would absorb them. But as time went on, an ongoing sense of disorganization and lack of coherent answers over the most pressing issue in City Hall began to erode goodwill.

One recent sign of progress is that the city’s shelter census has dropped from a peak of 15,700 at the end of last year to 7,800 last week. That comes as the tempo of buses from southern states remains subdued — and after 650 shelter residents so far have been evicted under a Johnson policy dictating they can stay [for no more than 60 days](#) unless they have children or meet other exemptions.

Johnson’s closest allies on the left have pressured him about that very decision.

After a November Johnson news conference announcing the 60-day policy (on the same week he passed his 2024 city budget, thereby undermining the good news for him of that major City Council victory), progressive Ald. Daniel La Spata texted the mayor: “Hey sir, This quote, ‘sacrifice the needs of Chicagoans in support of those who wish to become Chicagoans,’ I don’t agree with it.”

Johnson promptly responded that he was available to talk, according to a Freedom of Information Act request of the mayor’s texts. The eviction policy was ultimately delayed until March.

The mayor’s [botched plan last fall](#) to erect a temporary winterized base camp for 2,000 migrants atop former a industrial site in Brighton Park was one of his most embarrassing defeats, as Gov. J.B. Pritzker [yanked state funding](#) for the entire proposal in late November amid concerns the city’s [environmental remediation work](#) was shoddy. It was one of several tense first-year moments between Johnson and Pritzker.



Trent Sprague/Chicago Tribune

Large tents at a proposed migrant encampment in the Brighton Park neighborhood on Dec. 5, 2023. (Trent Sprague/Chicago Tribune)

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But asked whether he believed that episode damaged trust in his administration, the mayor reiterated that the scope of what's required to care for and resettle the asylum-seekers is far too great for one municipality alone.

Then he applauded his November ordinance to crack down on what he said were "rogue" transportation companies dumping migrants in Chicago.

"Do you know that not a bus has arrived in the city of Chicago since the end of December?" Johnson said. "Not one bus. Why? Because we put forth a structure that I promised that I would do: to create a real operation that's centered around people's humanity."

While buses have technically stopped entering the city, the Tribune has reported they are instead simply [dropping off migrants outside city limits now](#), sometimes in neighboring counties. From there, the passengers often board the Metra to the landing zone set up by the administration near Union Station and await a bed in Chicago's shelter system.

That's an outcome Johnson acknowledged privately, before he sought to coordinate drop-offs with suburban leaders. In a December text to CTU President Stacy Davis Gates obtained via a public records request, the mayor shared a Fox News headline with his close ally that read: "Buses respond to Chicago's new penalties and restrictions by dropping migrants in secret locations."

"Secret," Davis Gates responded. "Wow."

Progressive leadership

Johnson's April runoff victory represented a seismic disruption to business as usual at City Hall, as he became the first progressive to win the Chicago mayor's seat in decades.

In practice, there have been signs the new administration has struggled with transitioning into the executive role, as evidenced by his top surrogates repeatedly wading into political storms, and vacancies in government positions remaining unfilled. Other figures on the left have publicly broken with him more and more.

The [stunning downfall](#) of Johnson's signature progressive plan the Bring Chicago Home referendum in the March primary election further [hinted](#) that the political winds from a year ago have shifted.

But Davis Gates, the CTU president and his longtime friend, said it would be unfair to expect Johnson to dismantle the old system of government this soon.

“This idea that in a year our government is going to transform from a neoliberal ‘close, consolidate and cut’ system, I think is an unreasonable expectation,” Davis Gates said. “We are undergoing a seismic transformation in a very small amount of time. The fact that Brandon Johnson has been able to accomplish everything that he has in the past year is nothing short of miraculous.”

Meanwhile, the Democratic Socialist aldermen Johnson tapped for powerful committee assignments upon taking office have stepped into various minefields that gave opponents openings to pounce on the narrative that the mayor’s inner circle is too extreme and lacks decorum. Though Johnson isn’t necessarily concerned with being attacked for his leftist roots, the constant drama has forced him to stick his neck out for his allies in remarkable ways.

Besides the November [tie-breaker vote](#) Johnson cast to rescue his former floor leader and ex-Zoning Committee chair, Ald. Carlos Ramirez-Rosa, 35th, following [bullying allegations](#), the mayor found himself facing an [effort](#) last month to strip Ald. Byron Sigcho-Lopez, 25th, of his Housing Committee chairmanship.



Ald. Byron Sigcho-Lopez, 25th, speaks in his own defense at City Hall in Chicago on Monday, April 1, 2024, during a special meeting of the City Council called to determine if Sigcho-Lopez should be removed from his position as chairman of the Committee on Housing and Real Estate after he spoke at a rally where someone else had earlier burned an American flag. (Terrence Antonio James/Chicago Tribune)

That uproar hinged on Sigcho-Lopez’s choice to [stand](#) in front of a charred American flag at a rally outside City Hall to protest the DNC. The alderman said he didn’t see the flag.

“It’s been a little bit surprising to me because I know him to be an extraordinary organizer, but everything seems so disorganized,” Aviva Bowen, a Democratic strategist in Chicago, said about the mayor. “He also seems to have empowered — and even platformed — some of the rabble-rousing.”

Sigcho-Lopez told the Tribune he believes the censure attempt against him did not show weakness in progressive leaders but their commitment to justice: “I think he has not looked away, the way other administrations have.”

Asked whether there was room for improvement in his administration’s ability to maintain relationships, Johnson pointed to successes. “Look at what we’ve accomplished together working with City Hall,” he said, before again listing his \$1.25 billion bond deal and legislative victories from last year.

Months of vacancies languishing on several government-appointed boards have also led to grumblings of city business being stymied and that his administration struggles to nail down the bread-and-butter basics of running

City Hall. He did not [reveal](#) his pick for commissioner of the critical Department of Housing, Lissette Castañeda, until December, for example, while other key cabinet [spots](#) took until last month to be filled.

There have been material consequences to this hesitancy. A failure to fill a Zoning Board of Appeals vacancy that existed from the previous administration, for example, led to a tie vote in February that sank a proposed homeless shelter in Uptown supported by both the Johnson administration and local Ald. Angela Clay, 46th.

Johnson responded to a question about whether he has regrets about the ZBA inaction by saying, “Our appointments are working well. We have the most diverse administration in the history of Chicago,” and listing the racial makeup of his appointees.

Other vacancies for which the mayor had been publicly urged to speed up his search process include the Chicago police oversight board and the the ethics board. The latter concerns were aired by Johnson’s handpicked Ethics Committee chair Ald. Matt Martin, 47th, another progressive ally.

Johnson further rankled some in his progressive base when he adamantly backed [the Chicago Bears’ plan for a \\$5 billion stadium](#) that would be half-funded by taxpayer dollars, even though he vowed on the campaign trail not to support such a public subsidy.



Mayor Brandon Johnson in front of an artist’s rendering as the Bears announce plans to build a new lakefront domed stadium, April 24, 2024. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

And he has resisted growing calls to oust Carter, the CTA chief. Asked by the Tribune whether he has at least looked at potential replacements for him, Johnson said discussing those topics is “irresponsible.”

“Having questions about how we build a transportation system that ultimately meets the needs and demands of the people of Chicago, those questions are welcome,” Johnson said. “Determining who I get to fire and hire, I find that to be irresponsible and I won’t discuss personnel matters publicly.”

The Carter problem could certainly become a progressive voter one, as [transit issues](#) have particularly resonated among liberals along Milwaukee Avenue and the lakefront who carried Johnson to the runoff.

Fiscal approach

Rahm Emanuel measured his economic development accomplishments by cranes in the sky. Lori Lightfoot tallied dollars spent on the South and West sides.

Johnson, meanwhile, centers his economic wins around workers: new jobs or protections, higher pay or delivery of affordable housing.

For a business community already wary of Johnson's "tax-the-rich" electioneering, his early council pushes to expand paid time off, phase out the city's tipped wage credit and ask voters to raise a tax on property sales through the Bring Chicago Home referendum proved their apprehension right.

They punched back this spring by [bankrolling](#) the anti-Bring Chicago Home push, a marked example of Chicago business leaders acting in open opposition to the mayor.

Nonetheless Jack Lavin, head of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, said there are many areas in which he agrees with the administration.



Chicago mayoral candidate Brandon Johnson signs Sam Rose's poster while attending a Bring Chicago Home public hearing at the Grace Church of Logan Square on March 12, 2023, in Chicago. (Armando L. Sanchez/Chicago Tribune)

Lavin approves of Johnson initiatives to explore cutting red tape for developers, [forging ahead](#) with the O'Hare's revamp and [converting](#) LaSalle Street office space into housing with city subsidies. The same goes for the mayor's \$1.25 billion bond, which will be funded by phasing out the city's reliance on tax increment financing. The mayor's police superintendent pick, Larry Snelling, also put business stakeholders as well as conservative critics at ease.

Johnson kept to his word he would not raise property taxes — a chief business concern — in his first budget despite staring down a yawning \$538 million deficit, rising migrant response costs and ever-present pension and debt obligations. Fiscal watchdogs, however, warned Johnson's reliance on one-time measures to balance the books would be difficult to repeat as structural imbalances remain.

In addition to rising pension costs, the [CTA](#) and [Chicago Public Schools](#) are both facing fiscal cliffs and might also need revenue boosts.

How the mayor will shore up all these [looming shortfalls](#) is unknown, but as a candidate he [floated](#) reviving the corporate head tax, upping the hotel levy, implementing new charges on securities trades and creating a jet fuel tax. Johnson did not answer the Tribune's question on which of those priorities remain most viable.

"The business community can absorb some, but I think their view is, 'Are you targeting us, or is there a more comprehensive plan?'" said Greg Goldner, an Emanuel ally, CEO of Resolute Consulting and Bring Chicago Home opponent.

While the next three years are certain to be uncertain, this summer will bring one of Johnson's biggest tests yet — the arrival of the DNC.

The mass Chicago police [arrest](#) of pro-Palestinian protesters at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago this month reflected one prognosis of what could come. Speaking with the Tribune about that incident, Johnson showed that a year into his term on the fifth floor of City Hall, he can still speak like a radical organizer.

"In some instances, arrests are part of the objective. I'll say it like that," the mayor said. "I've taken arrest before. It's not unprecedented."

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