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It hasn't exactly been sweet home Chicago in Obama's first year

By Bob Spector Tribune reporter

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Once hot-selling Barack Obama souvenirs are marked down to remainder-table prices at a drugstore near the Kenwood home he owns but has barely visited since becoming president a year ago this week.

That's not a reflection of disenchantment with Obama in his old South Side stomping grounds, but rather the sobering realities of time, distance and enormously elevated responsibilities.

"He's president of the United States, not mayor of Chicago," said Peter Flemister, a retired attorney at a diner in Hyde Park the other day. "He's got a financial crisis, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, health care. I'd rather he stay in Washington and take care of them than be focusing on here."

Chicagoans may fancy themselves an unsentimental, nose-to-the-grindstone lot, but folks in Obama's adoptive hometown indulged in a wave of parochial euphoria with his election. The huge, election night rally in Grant Park was electric with possibilities, not the least of which was the notion that Chicago would be transformed into the nation's unofficial second capital and reap a big payoff in both stature and dollars.

Even the typically measured Obama appeared to get carried away when he told the Tribune that he hoped to return home every couple of months and considered the South Side his "Kennebunkport," an allusion to the Maine family compound of President George H.W. Bush.

In hindsight, there was wishful thinking all around. As the nation marks the anniversary of the first Chicago president's inauguration, consider this:

- Obama's political magic hasn't kept the state from suffering through a recession like everybody else, and the state and city governments are drowning in red ink.

- Chicago's high-profile bid for the 2016 Olympics went down in flames despite Obama's personal intervention.

- To some, the scandal-marred transfer of Obama's U.S. Senate seat to Roland Burris may be the most lopsided Chicago trade since Lou Brock for Ernie Broglio.

It's not that presidents can't have a palpable impact on their home bases.

Springfield has built a thriving tourist industry around Abraham Lincoln. Tiny Crawford, Texas, got a huge economic shot in the arm whenever President George W. Bush showed up at his Prairie Chapel Ranch for a lengthy stay with an entourage of aides, security personnel, media and onlookers.

But Chicago is a far cry from Crawford; Plains, Ga., (Jimmy Carter); or even Little Rock, Ark., (Bill Clinton). Sizing up what it means for a modern president to hail from an already bustling commercial and cultural center is a more challenging task.

"At the very least, it will become part of the keepsake box of the city, like having Oprah in town or being home to the 1893 World's Fair," said Chris Mooney, a political scientist at the University of Illinois' Springfield campus. "Every big city needs to be noticed now and then. Even if you're already the prom queen, it's nice to be complimented."

Obama took an array of influential Chicagoans with him to Washington, and U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said that has made it far easier for him to gain an ear for Illinois concerns at the highest levels of the White House. A recent example, Durbin explained, is the intense attention that federal officials have paid to the issue of keeping invasive Asian carp out of Lake Michigan.

If anything qualifies as Obama-inspired local pork, it could be the administration's decision to buy the empty Thomson prison in northwestern Illinois as a holding tank for terror suspects now detained at Guantanamo Bay. Obama was likely aware of the prison's availability because he was a member of the Illinois Senate in 2002 when state officials, in a cost-cutting move, decided not to open the just completed facility.

Beyond Thomson, however, there is little evidence that Obama so far is rewarding his home state with an extra dollop of federal spending, as Washington leaders often have done. (Lyndon Johnson, of Texas, for example, was in his first year as vice president when Houston was picked to be home to NASA.)

Illinois, to be sure, has received a healthy share of Obama's showcase federal stimulus spending pot. But the \$10.7 billion to date earmarked for Illinois is not a windfall when compared with other states. Illinois, the fifth-largest state, is in line for the fifth-largest amount of funding, according to ProPublica, an independent, nonprofit investigative journalism program that has closely monitored the stimulus program.

On a per capita basis, the funding to Illinois only ranks 32nd among the states, according to ProPublica.

The second President Bush was famous for his long, extended trips to Crawford, but Obama in his first year has been to Scandinavia (two trips to Copenhagen, one to Oslo) as often as Chicago.

Shortly after the inauguration last January, the Obama family returned to their Kenwood home for a long Valentine's weekend. The family hasn't been back since, though the president returned to Chicago in

June to speak at a medical conference and in July for a political fundraiser. On neither occasion did he stay the night.

It seems that even with a taxpayer-covered jet and security entourage at their disposal, the nation's first parents have discovered how hard it can be to juggle family getaways with the busy social and school calendars of their young children.

Last week, in the middle of a long and delicate negotiating session with congressional leaders over health care reform, Obama suddenly announced he was taking a break for a few hours. "He stood up and said, 'I'm out of here,'" Durbin recalled. " 'Malia is having a flute recital, and I'm going to be there.' "

To be sure, there is an upside in Chicago to having Obama stay away. Presidential motorcades often create monumental traffic tie-ups. The security cordon around the Obama home for that Valentine's weekend visit extended for a three-block radius.

Jack Cella, general manager of the Seminary Co-op Bookstores around the University of Chicago campus where Obama once taught law, said that for much of last year, the neighborhood was crawling with reporters from around the world, as well as tourists and curiosity seekers. That activity has slowed in the winter months, and it's not clear if it will resume with warmer weather.

Not long ago, it was common to see the Obamas wandering the neighborhood, but residents are by no means put out about them now staying away, Cella said.

"We've still got as much enthusiasm as ever," he said. "There is still real admiration and affection for the first family. It would be nice to see him, but people realize he's got an awful lot to

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