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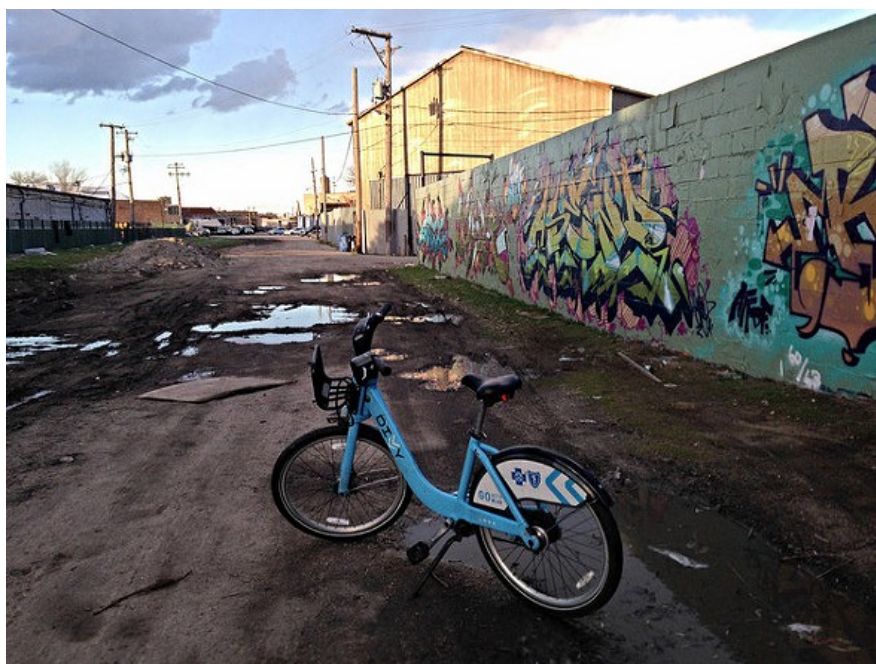
REPRINTS

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Little Village residents hope Paseo won't be a path to gentrification

Neighbors want affordable housing support to buffer rails-to-trails project.

By John Greenfield @greenfieldjohn



The Burlington Northern Santa Fe right-of-way near 30th and Kedzie.

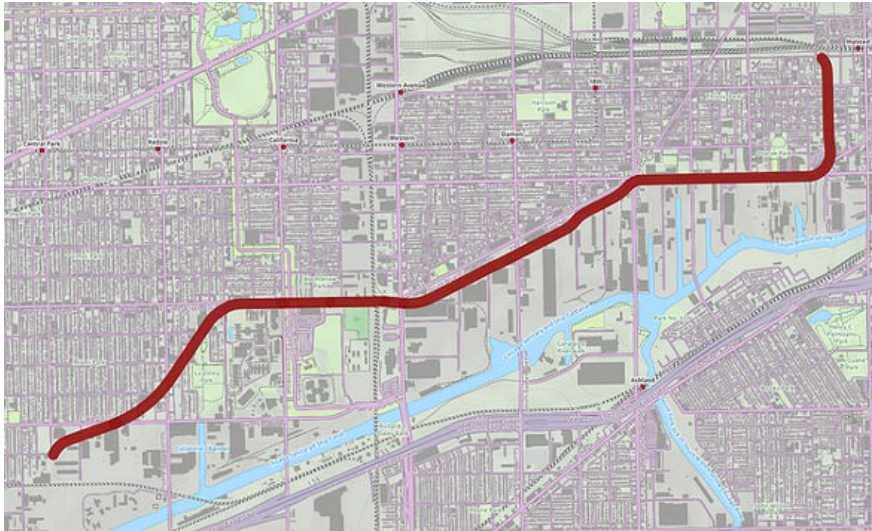
JOHN GREENFIELD

Last Wednesday, as I Divvied southwest along a disused Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad corridor in Little Village, I caught the delicious aroma of fresh corn tortillas from the nearby El Milagro plant. I rolled past the razor-wire-topped walls of the Cook County Jail, then stopped to check out La Villita Park, a green space on a former brownfield site. The corridor continued southwest past the Semillas de Justicia ("Seeds of Justice") Community Garden, various industrial businesses, and a few colorful murals, ending near the Paul Simon Job Corps Center.

This street-level right-of-way winds from 26th and Rockwell to

32nd and Central Park. Since early 2015, the city has been doing community outreach for its plan to turn this stretch of asphalt, rutted dirt and gravel pathways, and vacant lots into a paved 1.3-mile multiuse trail called the Little Village Paseo ("Promenade"), with landscaping, gathering places, and public art.

On Sunday, Mayor Emanuel upped the ante with a surprise announcement that the plan has been expanded to include another 2.7 miles of largely abandoned BNSF right-of-way. The resulting four-mile trail, now simply called the Paseo, will go all the way northeast to 16th and Sangamon in Pilsen, and feature artwork that celebrates Latino culture.



A map of the Paseo route connecting Little Village and Pilsen.

STEVEN VANCE

The first trail section, along Sangamon between 21st and 16th, will start out as a simple paved path that will be built this summer as part of a BNSF and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency lead-abatement project. There's no time frame or cost estimate yet for the rest of the trail.

While the 606—the 2.7-mile, \$95 million trail that debuted on the northwest side last June—is an elevated, car-free greenway, the south-side facility will be a cheaper, simpler at-grade trail with street crossings. But renderings suggest its aesthetics and amenities will be several notches above a garden-variety bike path.

Neighbors previously voiced apprehension that, like the 606, the Little Village Paseo would lead to higher property values, property taxes, and rents, eventually pricing out longtime locals. The mayor's announcement that the trail will now reach Pilsen brings that concern to the forefront.



A CDOT rendering of the Paseo at 26th and Sacramento, looking southeast towards the Cook County Jail.

CHICAGO DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Unlike Little Village, Pilsen has seen rapid gentrification in recent years, including a wave of upscale retail and housing, so the Paseo's potential to fuel displacement will be an especially pressing issue there. (The median home sale price in Pilsen is \$241,000, according to Zillow. Little Village is cheap by comparison, with a median home sale price of just \$129,000.)

I heard concerns over displacement last Wednesday, when the Chicago Department of Transportation unveiled the results of a feasibility study for the Little Village portion of the Paseo during a community meeting at Kanoon Elementary.

Elva Rodriguez Ochoa, a local who works at the nonprofit Openlands, said she's excited to have a place to run nearby instead of having to schlep to the lakefront. "But it's important for our community to be proactive and work with the city to find ways to keep the areas near the trail affordable," she said.



A CDOT rendering of the western trailhead of the Paseo (center) at 32nd and Central Park.

CHICAGO DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

The Little Village Environmental Justice Organization has also been involved with discussions about the trail. They spearheaded successful campaigns to shut down the nearby Fisk and Crawford coal-fired power plants and transform a pair of brownfields into the

park and community garden.

"Folks who fought for these things should be able to stay in the neighborhood and enjoy them," said organizing and strategy director Kim Wasserman-Nieto, a lifelong Little Village resident, adding that LVEJO has "made it clear to the city that unless they do this project in a holistic manner, we may find ourselves on opposite sides of the issue."

Luis Gutierrez, executive director of Latinos Progresando (no relation to the eponymous local congressman), told me the Paseo has the potential to promote healthy activity in a neighborhood with a high rate of childhood obesity, as well as provide jobs for locals who could build and create artwork for the path—if there's a focus hiring locally.

"But there needs to be a component to the Paseo plan to make sure people who live here are able to stay." Gutierrez added. He recommended implementing a property tax freeze for homeowners near the future trail, and creating a program to offer assistance to long-time renters who want to buy a home.



The Bloomingdale Trail

JOHN GREENFIELD

There doesn't seem to be clear evidence that the 606 has sped up gentrification in neighboring Humboldt Park and Logan Square. "We've been studying the issue, but there has been no analysis I've seen that persuasively quantifies the way the trail is affecting nearby property values and rents—although I expect that it is having an effect," says Geoff Smith, director of DePaul University's Institute for Housing Studies.

That hasn't stopped the perception of a real estate feeding frenzy since the greenway opened last June. In January, dozens of residents

held an antidisplacement rally after a developer announced plans for luxury town houses a block south of the trail, priced at \$929,000 each. (The median home sale price in Logan Square is \$258,400, according to Zillow, and \$197,400 in Humboldt Park.)

Beth White, Chicago director of the Trust for Public Land, which has managed the ongoing development of the 606 for the city, argued there was an extensive public input process for the greenway, and that the path has had many tangible benefits for nearby residents. She noted that there was a long series of design charrettes and community meetings in the years leading up to construction, and the trail has provided hundreds of construction and arts-related jobs for disadvantaged youth, in addition to educational and cultural programming.



Abandoned BNSF rail line near 21st and Sangamon, which will become part of the Paseo this summer.

JOHN GREENFIELD

Juan Carlos Linares, director of Humboldt Park's Latin United Community Housing Association, said that while the 606 has been a wonderful amenity, he has heard concerns about sharply rising property taxes from clients who live near the trail.

Linares praised a \$1 million city program announced last month, which offers "forgivable" loans of up to \$25,000 for home improvements to low-income property owners near the 606. If the owner still lives there after four years, the money doesn't have to be paid back.

"Great program, but perhaps we should have thought of that before the trail came up," Linares said.

He added that the Paseo is an opportunity to use lessons from the 606 by taking a broader approach to trail planning that also

addresses housing issues.

The affordability question became more complex Sunday when Emanuel announced the Paseo extension during a groundbreaking ceremony at Paseo Community Garden at 21st and Sangamon.



Emanuel announced the Paseo plan at a groundbreaking ceremony Sunday.

JOHN GREENFIELD

During the event, planning and development commissioner David Reifman told the crowd that the Paseo is part of a Pilsen–Little Village land use planning process launched in 2013. He said the goal is "to preserve the communities' cultural identity and affordability."

Reifman also mentioned that the city will host a housing fair on April 16 in Little Village, with information on affordable housing resources and home improvement opportunities.

I told 12th Ward alderman George Cardenas I'd talked with constituents concerned about property tax hikes. "Along the Paseo we may be able to introduce legislation that freezes the tax for several years," he said. "The idea is not to bring gentrification but to improve the quality of life."

Reifman was skeptical about the tax–freeze idea. "Those tend to be somewhat difficult to do," he said. "I think our goal is to continue to try to find opportunities for affordability, for programs that we do that are part of our normal investment in neighborhoods."

That answer may not be enough to reassure Little Village and Pilsen neighbors that they'll be able stay in their homes after a beautiful new trail is built nearby. ❏

John Greenfield edits the transportation news website Streetsblog Chicago.

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