

# The 606 trail, a study in contrasts, celebrates its first birthday



The 606, a 2.7-mile-long park on abandoned train tracks, opened June 6, 2015. The 14-foot-wide multiuse trail along the narrow Bloomingdale Avenue runs through four neighborhoods — Bucktown, Wicker Park, Logan Square and Humboldt Park.

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**A** year after opening, The 606 has been everything people expected, for better or worse.

The sheer volume of runners, cyclists, strollers, families and others using the 2.7-mile Bloomingdale Trail, which is under the umbrella of The 606's trail and park system, suggests it's a hit, despite a couple of hiccups.

But go off the elevated trail a bit, and opinions differ on what the trail — once a railway for freight trains — means for the 80,000 residents who live within a 10-minute walk of The 606, which slices through the city's Northwest Side. It's definitely driven new residential developments in the neighborhoods around it: Wicker Park, Bucktown, Humboldt Park and Logan Square. But some longtime residents in the

neighborhoods say diversity is on the wane while property values — and property taxes — are on the rise, stirring fears that homeowners as well as renters will be priced out those neighborhoods.

The area has been gentrifying for years, but some residents are worried the trail will only accelerate that. Jennifer Velazquez and her family use the trail and consider it a nice space, but her main concern is that it, along with other projects, may nudge them out of Logan Square given the expected property tax increase on the Kimball Avenue home her father bought down the block from the trail 10 years ago.

"We're at a point where we've lost families, but we don't want to keep losing any more. So I think if we stabilize the amount of property taxes or rent prices to keep everyone where they are right now, I think that will be a good thing to see," said Velazquez, 21, a member of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association whose parents are Mexican immigrants. "If we keep going at this rate, I feel like there's going to be no more Hispanic families in Logan Square."

At the same time, neighbors have found it to be a much-needed and attractive commuting route.

It's not uncommon to see people in their work clothes taking the trail home like Marybeth Moore, who walks a scenic route to work at Josephinum Academy near North and Western avenues. "It's a nice way to start and end my day," said Moore, 27, who lives along Humboldt Boulevard two blocks from the trail and near where new luxury homes under construction are priced close to \$1 million.

Since it opened last June 6, people have incorporated the trail into their daily lives, even when it is freezing cold and snowing sideways, said Jamie Simone, interim director of The Trust for Public Land's Chicago regional office, which managed the \$95 million project.

"Every time we're up there, it seems to be very well-used and well-loved," she said, adding: "We all thought it would be really successful based on the community's desire for an outdoor amenity, knowing how people embrace biking in the city of Chicago, knowing it crosses CTA transit lines, both buses and the Blue Line, and it crosses to the on-street bike network."

There's even been some discussion about extending the trail east, even as fundraising — with a goal of \$14 million — continues to complete the parks hugging The 606.

"If we can connect the existing 606 trail to the other side of the river, it opens up a whole new world of possibilities for bike commuters," said Ald. Brian Hopkins, 2nd. During a speech last month at the [City Club of Chicago](#) luncheon, he laid out his vision to extend the trail east from its easternmost point at Ashland Avenue to below the Kennedy Expressway and over the river via an 1899 swing bridge once used for freight train service.

## **The mix of trail users**

Sure, the trail can be busy — the officials have no official count for daily users — but fans see it as an escape from headache-inducing traffic jams. Cyclists, runners, dog walkers and others mostly coexist peacefully, except for the occasional collision, not unlike the situation on the lakefront trail. There are no stop signs or traffic lights.

"We get a good breeze when we're up here sometimes. It takes your mind off a lot. You don't have to watch out for a car," said Tommie Campbell, 41, who walks along the trail for exercise three times a week from Kedzie to Ashland avenues.

While reviews have been largely glowing, some users have complained about the lack of public toilets on or along the trail. But that isn't exactly deterring visitors.

As the weather continues to warm up, more people are ditching the gym and opting to sweat it out on the trail.

On a recent day, Jessica Medina took the Blue Line train from the Logan Square stop to the Division station and then the Ashland bus north to Walsh Park, the trail's eastern terminus. Medina, 45, recruited two friends to walk the entire trail west to the Ridgeway Avenue trailhead, where they cheered and proudly snapped a photo before taking public transportation home.

"We got to see the city more and get out of the house," said Joel Morell, 27, who ventured onto the trail for the first time in May. "It was long and tiring and the best feeling ever."

The trio plans to start making round trips on the trail by the end of the summer to lose weight and get in shape. "Everybody's nice. People are motivating, giving us high-fives," Medina said.

"It's very cool to be above the city," said Dustin Majewski, 33, who for nearly five years has rented a place on Albany Avenue that's steps away from the trail. He goes on a 20-minute run with his 9-year-old rescue pit bull "Pig" about three times a week including during the winter. He also rides the trail at times to commute by bike to work downtown, cutting through neighborhoods to head east. "I love it. I think it's brilliant. It's great, it's recycled," he said.

And it's not just people who are drawn to The 606: Lincoln Park Zoo's motion-activated critter cams installed at the east and west ends of the trail spotted squirrels, rabbits and raccoons on the trail — and even bats were detected, by an audio monitoring system, zoo officials said.

## **Neighborhood watch**

Velazquez, whose family has lived for a decade down the block from The 606, has seen Logan Square change over the past few years. Neighbors have moved out. Condos have replaced empty lots. Modest

homes have been razed to make way for new, bigger houses. The store where she bought her prom dress and another shop where she picked flowers for her mom have closed. Bars and vegan restaurants have opened around her.

She's considering working full time and attending Northeastern Illinois University part time to help contribute to the household as her family prepares for a property tax hike. Her father, a factory worker, is the sole income provider, so the family is looking at options including renting out the attic as an apartment for extra income, she said.

The city's most recent assessment used to calculate property taxes was completed prior to the opening of The 606 last year. Homeowners throughout the city will see a property tax hike on bills this summer because the city raised taxes to pay for pensions and Chicago Public Schools increased taxes to cover building projects and education costs.

Just how proximity to The 606 is affecting property values and the housing market is being studied by the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University. Such results could be used in the consideration of strategies to preserve affordability and in the planning process for future trails, said Executive Director Geoff Smith. The housing stock is diverse along The 606 with condos and dense development along with higher-income households on the east end and single-family homes and small two- to four-flats and low- to moderate-income households farther west, he said.

"The whole goal is to understand how this public investment that is an amenity ... how it affects the surrounding community," said Smith, who has lived near The 606 for the past nine years.

The Logan Square and Avondale area, which is north of the trail, has been a hot housing market in recent years and is among the communities that have seen the strongest recovery in the Chicago housing market since the crash, he said.

In April, the median sales price for a detached single-family home in Logan Square was \$645,000 and \$366,000 for an attached single-family home like a condo or townhouse, according to data provided by the Chicago Association of Realtors. Citywide, the median sales price was \$225,000 for a detached single-family home and \$321,000 for an attached single-family home.

In recent weeks and months, community groups have protested against gentrification and proposed ideas to ease the burden for longtime residents who want to stay but fear getting priced out because of higher property tax bills or higher rents.

"If we're going to keep working-class families in the community, we need to quickly develop policies, ordinances and new laws that will help balance the development in the community," said Juliet de Jesus Alejandre, an organizer for the Logan Square Neighborhood Association.

Skyrocketing property taxes have been the main complaint Ald. [Roberto Maldonado](#) said he has fielded from residents who live near the trail. Maldonado represents the 26th Ward, which includes Humboldt Park.

"That is a legitimate concern because that 606 has been marketed nationwide by the real estate industry, and everything that is around The 606 is like gold when it comes to real estate value," the alderman said.

The 606 is certainly used as a selling point in many descriptions of home listings.

Niko Apostal, principal broker of the Apostal Group, a residential brokerage firm at Coldwell Banker, adds: "One really nice thing about The 606, it opened up areas further west from Bucktown and Wicker Park."

Maldonado never doubted The 606 would fast-track gentrification. That's why, he said, he didn't provide a letter of support to use tax increment financing funds for the project or attend last year's grand opening.

"A lot of people use it from the community, but a lot of people may not be using it some years down the road because they'll be living someplace else, removed from the neighborhood, from the place they called home for many years and maybe not be so close to it to be able to enjoy it," he said.

### **More people, more problems?**

Initially, John Knoerle was concerned about everything from crime to traffic to trail users peering into his Bucktown home, which is 10 to 12 feet from the trail.

"We haven't had any rubbernecks or gawkers, and that's been pleasant. I was afraid. They can see right into it (his home), especially at night with a light on they can see right into kitchen," said Knoerle, 67, who has lived on Bloomingdale Avenue since 1999. He draws the blinds in the living room so people are not able to stare at him.

Although the trail is packed on weekends, Knoerle said there hasn't been any major traffic jams in his neighborhood. Though he does have a new transportation-related problem: cyclists speeding down his sidewalk.

Other residents complained that visitors are taking up much of the street parking and requested parking permits, according to Maldonado's office.

Like anywhere in the city, the trail isn't immune to crime: Some thieves have targeted users. Marc Buslik, former Chicago police commander of the Shakespeare District who now serves in another role in the

department, said the trail hasn't seen any crime wave to speak of. Security cameras are posted on The 606.

In March, the Chicago Police Department, which patrols The 606 on foot, bike and all-terrain vehicles, issued a community alert notifying residents of three incidents in which cyclists late at night were knocked off their bikes and robbed. During one incident, the victim struggled with the attackers over a handgun, police said.

Within days, a 17-year-old boy was arrested and charged as a minor with robbery in connection with one of the attacks, Chicago police said.

Other crimes have been reported, from pot smoking and beer drinking to battery, according to nearly a dozen police reports obtained through a [Freedom of Information Act](#) request.

Other than the rising property taxes and speeding bikes, Knoerle said his other concerns never became reality in The 606's first year.

"It was not the complete nightmare I feared it would be," he said.

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Save the date: Saturday is the big block party marking The 606's first birthday.

The free event kicks off at 10 a.m. with a festival at Humboldt Boulevard between Wabansia and Cortland avenues. There'll be plenty of food as well as live music for a variety of tastes: salsa, alternative country, Latin ska/reggae and children's acts.

Children can create crafts at the Julia de Burgos Park just north of the trail at Albany Avenue, and play games at Walsh Park at Ashland Avenue, the trail's eastern end. Performances and processions will move along the trail. An "illumination hour" will cap off the party with attendees making objects that light up and walking on the trail from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m.

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