

Editorial: The 606 trail's uneasy rapport with its neighbors



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.

By **Editorial Board**

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There's a lot to like about Chicago's snazzy 606, the 2.7-mile greenway that slices through the Northwest Side, built on what used to be an elevated freight rail line. Runners, cyclists, skateboarders and strolling families wend their way over the Bucktown, Wicker Park, Humboldt Park and Logan Square neighborhoods, passing by hydrangea and tufts of sedge, comfortably aloft over the cacophony and congestion of city streets.

Some of the trail's neighbors, however, aren't that enamored with one aspect of the 606: The price of real estate around it has shot up. Longtime residents complain that the trail's popularity and aesthetic have accelerated gentrification in their neighborhood, which is sending home prices — and property taxes — soaring.

According to a report by the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University, housing prices along the trail west of Western Avenue rose 48 percent from 2013, when construction on the trail began, to 2016. In neighborhoods just east of the trail, housing prices have gone up nearly 14 percent in that time.

Two local aldermen, **Proco "Joe" Moreno**, 1st, and **Roberto Maldonado**, 26th, have conjured up a way to power down the rate of gentrification along The 606. They're proposing an ordinance that would raise demolition fees for developers in neighborhoods along The 606, making it much more expensive to raze old housing in order to build pricier homes. The ordinance also would charge developers a "deconversion" fee when they transform multifamily housing along The 606 into single-family housing. Money raised by the ordinance would go into a fund that would help improve the existing housing stock for homeowners and tenants living there now.

"If the developers are really willing to buy existing properties and want to demolish them to build higher-end new properties, making it almost impossible for neighborhood people to afford them, they will have to pay a premium demolition fee," Maldonado told the Tribune's Corilyn Shropshire.

Maldonado and Moreno have yet to lay out how much they would charge for "deconverting" multifamily housing, or how much higher they would raise demolition fees. And they haven't detailed what specific areas along The 606 the ordinance would cover. It doesn't matter. We think this ordinance should be shelved.

Does Maldonado really think that ramping up demolition fees would deter a developer who's angling to make a killing on a teardown? If the price is right, an old two-flat's going to get demolished and replaced by something in the seven-figure range, no matter what demolition fee is charged. And what about longtime homeowners who want to cash in on their neighborhood's transformation? A house is more than a home — it's an investment, and homeowners have every right to reap the payoff from their years of improvements, upkeep and mortgage payments.

Gentrification has posed a dilemma for American cities for as long as there have been cities. Indeed, there's something unsettling about seeing a neighborhood with an enduring identity and feel gradually morph into something tonier and shinier, a transformation that changes the neighborhood's character. But cities aren't static entities, frozen in time. They evolve, principally because their neighborhoods evolve. People move in and out, businesses and shops come and go. It's a process as natural as evolution itself.

Should mayors and city councils ensure that affordable housing doesn't get lost in these neighborhood transformations? Of course. The trick is to craft the right solution. For example, we like the idea of tying affordable housing into "transit-oriented development" — projects that encourage use of mass transit by situating near train stations buildings with retail space, high-density housing and limited parking. A portion of the apartments can be set aside as affordable housing.

Managing a city's evolution is inherently a balancing act. On one side of the scale, public officials can react smartly to changes in a neighborhood's character and affordability. On the other side of the scale, they can let economic development naturally occur. That is, if gentrification around The 606 risks driving away residents, the aldermen can generate more transit-oriented development and other creative strategies.

But blocking investment that seeds a neighborhood's growth and prosperity isn't the way to make the balancing act succeed.

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