



PLAY WEEK PROPERTY LINES

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Can high-profile park projects, catalysts for development, play nice with neighboring communities?

Advocates and planners wrestle with the challenge of pairing new urban amenities with equitable development

By **Patrick Sisson** | Jul 17, 2018, 3:14pm EDT



The 606, a rails-to-trails park traversing parts of Chicago's near northwest side, has become a case study in the impact of new parks on surrounding neighborhoods. | [Flickr Creative Commons/Matthew Wilder](#)

PLAY WEEK

All things urban recreation, from reinventing the sidewalk to innovations in children's playground design.

Chicago's 606, a former industrial rail line turned linear park on the city's near northwest side, opened in 2015 and has quickly become a part of daily life.

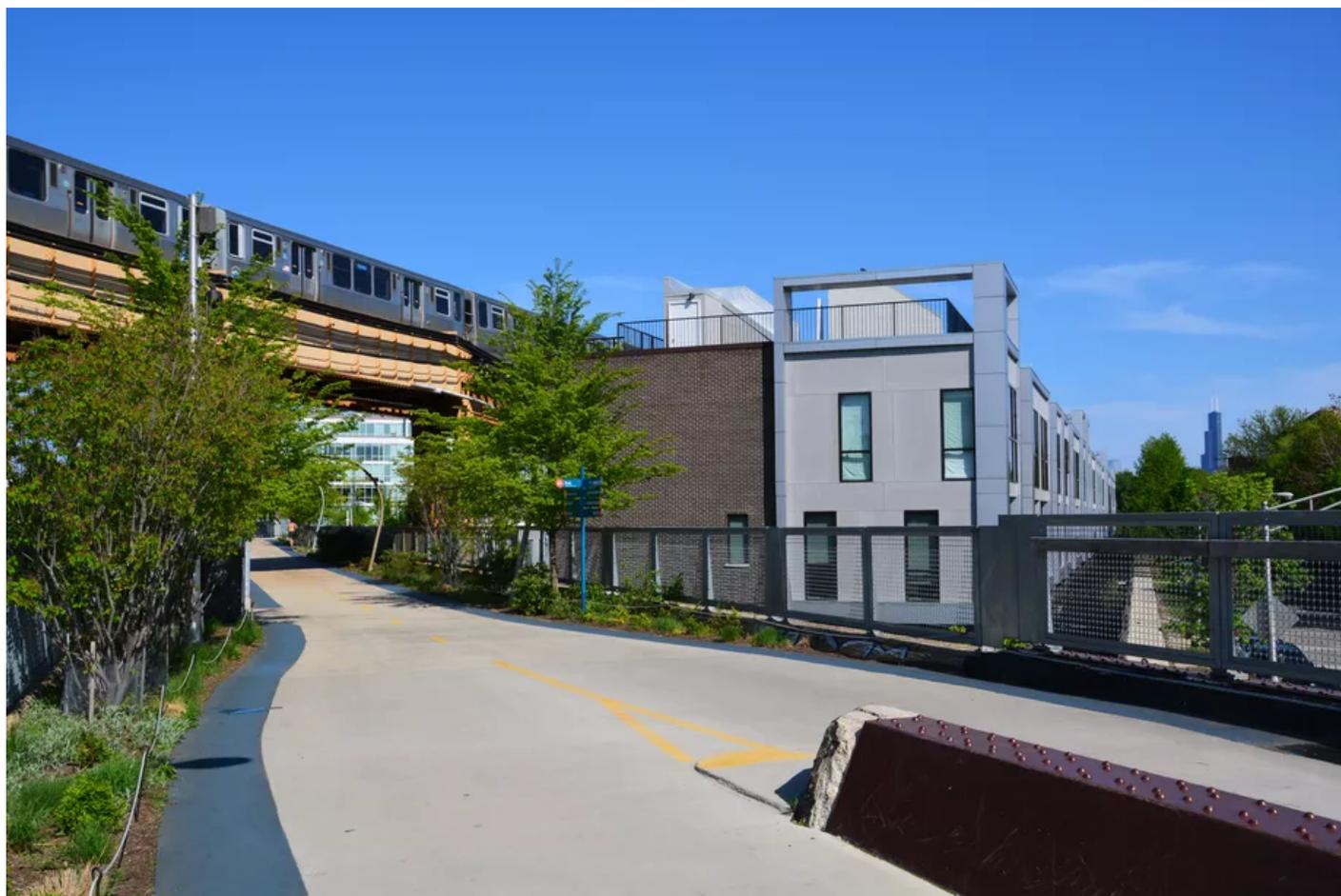
A car-free corridor filled with bike traffic, senior walking clubs, and arts and cultural events, the 2.7-mile trail even hosts the occasional [evening stargazing](#) event at a public observatory built into the parkway's western edge. Miko's, a neighborhood Italian ice

stand visible from the path, has started an annual tradition of making a limited-edition flavor from berries grown on the 606.

Like the High Line, the Manhattan rails-to-trails conversion that inspired a raft of elevated pathways and industrial-to-recreational parks, the 606 has demonstrated the transformative potential of new parks.

But, just like residents in the neighborhoods around New York's High Line, Chicagoans in the areas closest to the 606—Wicker Park, Bucktown, Humboldt Park, and Logan Square—see the trail as a case study in the consequences—and cost—of this new generation of urban amenities.

Housing prices alongside the trail's eastern half, in Bucktown and Wicker Park, which passes over a stretch of Damen Avenue lined with expensive boutiques, have long been on the rise. But like other such signature park projects across the country, such as Atlanta's Beltline or Philadelphia's Rail Park, which opened last month, the presence of a photogenic new park supercharges property values and real estate development.



“There is a lot of awareness nationwide that the 606 is a great case study for similar projects across the country. How do we make amenities for those residents [who are] already here, not just people who are being attracted to the neighborhood?” | Shutterstock

According to a November 2016 [report from the Institute of Housing Studies at Chicago’s DePaul University](#), home prices alongside the western portion of the 606, which traverses more affordable, traditionally Latino neighborhoods such as Humboldt Park, increased 48.2 percent since trail construction started in 2013.

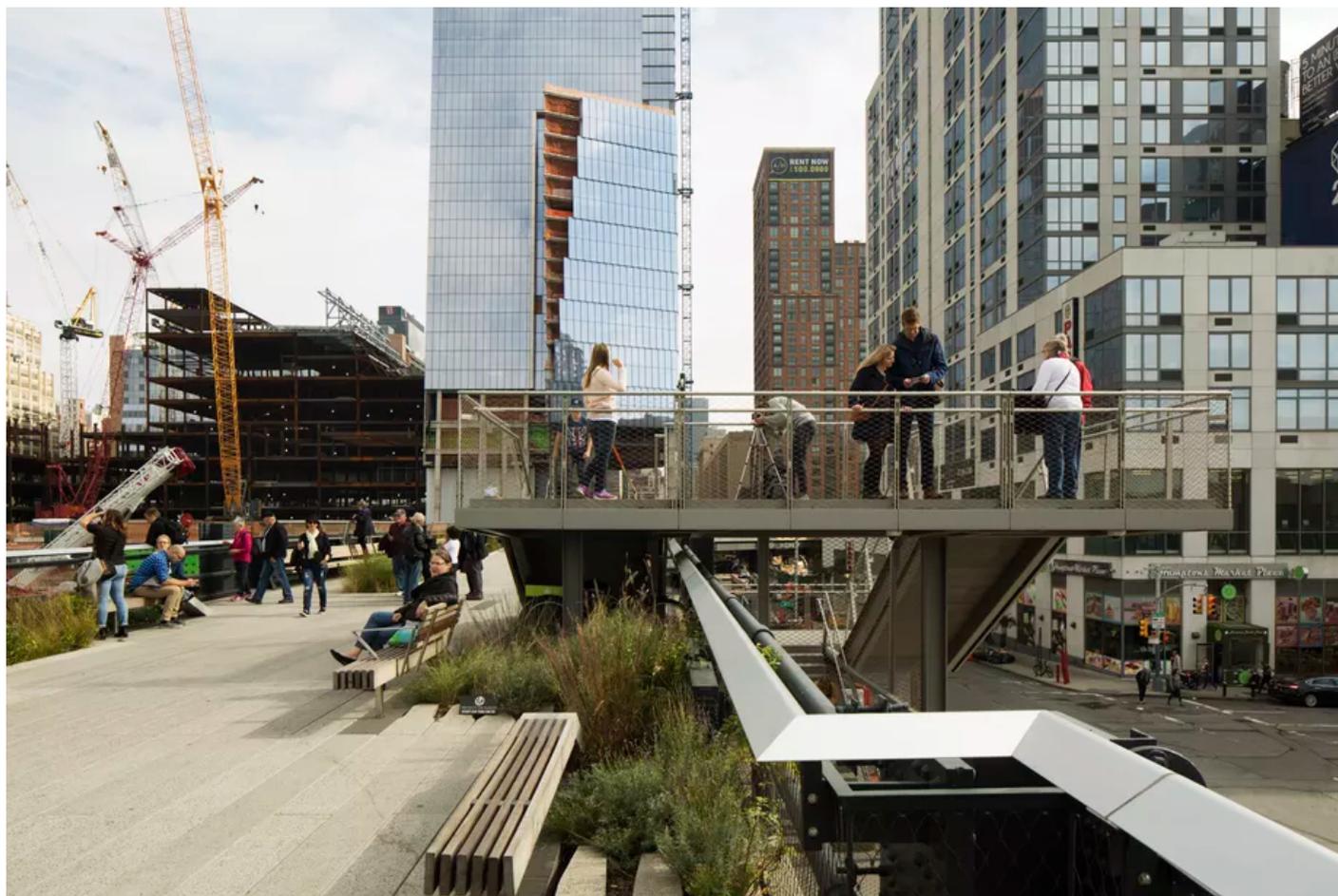
According to IHS researcher Sarah Duda, proximity to the trail lowered home prices when it was a postindustrial eye sore. But now, listings adjacent to the 606 carry, on average, a 22 percent premium, which normally means about \$100,000 more than comparable homes.

With more signature parks in the pipeline across the U.S.—including [El Paseo](#), a proposed trail in Chicago’s South Side Pilsen neighborhood—park advocates, community groups, and local leaders continue to grapple with the housing issues raised by these projects, or what’s been called “the [High Line effect](#).”

Increasingly, a consensus has formed around what could be called a “slow park” movement: pre-emptive community engagement, subsidies and investment in affordable housing, and a focus on keeping the communities benefiting from these public investments from being displaced.

“The question now is, how do we create amenities like this that are inclusive, not exclusive?” says Juan Carlos Linares, executive director of [LUCHA](#), a housing advocacy group working in many of the neighborhoods impacted by the trail.

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A view along the High Line in New York City. | UIG via Getty Images

Why turning postindustrial space into parks makes sense

It's easy to point fingers at parks. Adrian Benepe, senior vice president of the Trust for Public Land, a nationwide nonprofit that also helps oversee and manage the 606, believes there are often more powerful forces shaping real estate and housing costs. In the case of the 606 and Chicago, neighborhoods like Logan Square were already gentrifying, and many of those displaced lived near the city's Blue Line elevated rail.

Benepe, who once ran municipal parks in New York City, believes the worst lesson to take from this new generation of urban amenities and their potential impact is that they shouldn't be built, or that we should dial down plans for signature neighborhood parks to avoid potential changes to the surrounding neighborhoods. He calls it the "green enough" fallacy, a concept coined in a 2012 article.

"I've never been to a community meeting where neighbors have said, 'don't make my community park as nice as Central Park,'" says Benepe. "The people who say that tend to

be upper-middle-class activists and advocates who don't live there. The people who live there want the nicest park they can get.”

That was the case with the 606. For more than a decade, neighbors had asked city officials to transform the abandoned Bloomingdale Trail into a park, before Mayor Emanuel made it a priority shortly after being elected in 2011.

If you build a nice park, will it inevitably lead to displacement of the very people park advocates are trying to serve? Benepe doesn't have easy answers, but he says that park groups are increasingly interested in finding them.

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“You can't stick your head in the sand and say, ‘It's not our fault,’” he says. “What are the positives and negatives? You have to deal with it.”

New parks have often been borne of the adaptive reuse of outmoded or abandoned infrastructure because, generally speaking, abandoned rail lines, brownfields, dockyards, and old shipping corridors offer affordable, easier-to-obtain parcels on which to build. By their nature, these areas are marginalized spaces—and don't attract lots of wealthy neighbors.

“Now you have new residents moving into former industrial area[s], and they're asking, ‘Okay, where are the parks?’” says Benepe. “Cities are scrambling to provide park access to new young residents. Almost no cities have forward-thinking plans for park development.”

According to Duda, the DePaul housing researcher, the 606 and the surrounding area offer a perfect example. When it was a postindustrial railway, the old Bloomingdale Railway, it was a drag on local property values, making nearby areas more affordable relative to the neighborhood. Duda's team found that certain communities living near these post-industrial areas—low-income renters, seniors, those with large families—were

the most likely to be cost-burdened (paying more than 30 percent of their income on rent) and faced a higher risk threat of displacement, forming a kind of leading indicator.

These parks can speed up development and threaten displacement, even before they open. Take, for example, the High Line, which opened in 2009: Property values within a five-minute walk from the trail rose 103 percent between 2003 and 2011. In 2016, Queens College political scientist Alex Reichl studied the demographics of park visitors and discovered that fewer than 7 percent of High Line users were black or Latinx, despite the presence of large black and Latinx populations in nearby housing complexes.

From a strictly financial standpoint, these park conversions offer excellent value for urban land contaminated by past industrial use. Many of the renovation projects can tap into funds set aside by the Environmental Protection Agency, and parks and pathways present fewer regulatory hurdles than housing.

“This kind of green space is a great way to create value in urban space without having to make as significant an investment,” says Winifred Curran, a DePaul professor who teaches sustainable urban development. “It’s easier to build a park than a housing complex.”



A boy walks on abandoned railroad tracks in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood. In March, 2016 it was revealed that this track would be converted into a bike trail called El Paseo. | Shutterstock

Will Chicago's proposed El Paseo trail better reflect neighborhood needs?

Right now, advocates and leaders in Chicago are asking how to respond and plan for these new types of parks. In the neighborhoods around the 606, it's more a matter of reaction.

"We want investment, too, but responsible investment that grows our communities, not displace them," says LUCHA's Linares.

There are still ways to blunt the impact of the park, says Linares. LUCHA and other organizations have promoted a [606 Preservation Ordinance](#), a policy tool that would raise the fees that come from demolitions and [teardowns](#) to preserve existing buildings and use the proceeds of increased development to fund affordable housing. That initiative will be voted on by the city council later this month.

In addition, LUCHA, which currently operates roughly 200 units of affordable housing, has come into ownership of six parcels of land adjacent to the trail and plans to build additional affordable units, including ones that meet the passive house standard—a measure of extreme energy efficiency—to cut down on tenant energy costs. Linares also wants to focus on cultural preservation through the arts, and to celebrate the neighborhood’s Latinx heritage with mural art.

Even Mayor Rahm Emanuel and his administration, which saw the 606 as a [pet project](#), has [promoted programs](#) focused on neighborhood equity. His \$1 million rehabilitation fund for homeowners along the 606, which would provide up to \$25,000 to repair homes, has preliminary approval by city aldermen, and he’s also pitched a \$30 million citywide Chicago Opportunity Investment Fund to help create more affordable apartments.



Mural Park, a proposed development in Pilsen near the path of the [El Paseo Trail](#). | Images courtesy of JGMA



An early rendering of the [ParkWorks](#) site at the northeast terminus of the proposed El Paseo Trail. | Property Markets Group/Cordogan, Clark & Associates

But many believe the real solution to this park-influenced property inflation is better planning. Caroline O’Boyle works for the trust for Public Land as the Director of Programs and Partnerships for the 606. She believes one of the biggest challenges for the 606 and other projects like it is time. Chicago’s rails-to-trails project went from green light to a ribbon cutting in four years, a relatively fast pace.

“I tell people, ‘A long timeline is your friend,’” says O’Boyle. “Use the time needed to raise funds to benefit the community. Is there going to be job training? Is there a way to link development to affordable housing? Some solutions are emerging, and one [solution] is planning well before the project breaks ground.”

Farther south, in Chicago’s Pilsen and Little Village neighborhoods, community members are trying to avoid a replay of the 606. The [El Paseo Trail](#), a proposed path and greenway that would connect these traditionally Latinx neighborhoods, is still in very early stages. First proposed by the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization more than a decade ago, the concept has been [championed by the mayor](#), and the city has investigated the possibility of creating a 4-mile trail that cuts through land poisoned by a

former smelting factory and invested some capital but still needs money, especially EPA funds, to fully rehabilitate the soil and renovate.

But [the community](#) and developers have already acted on the potential. DePaul's Curran foresees impact similar to the 606, since even the *idea* of the trail is [spurring development](#), and could reshape the fast-changing neighborhood, raising fears of [increased displacement](#) and [increased attention](#) from developers. Between 2000 and 2015, [Pilsen's Latinx population](#) decreased by 26 percent.

“There are real estate developers already advertising properties as ‘on the El Paseo’ before they’ve even moved a blade of grass,” Curran says. “There’s nothing there yet, it’s just the assumption. But this is about building the real estate market in a neighborhood that’s already hot. It’s a marker for those outside the neighborhood as opposed to those inside the neighborhood.”

Curran's big concern is the project's potential to create a “gentrification corridor,” as its current proposed path is bookended by two large development sites. [ParkWorks](#), on the northeast end, the site of a former fruit wholesaler, may be turned into 500 apartments by a New York developer. And on the western terminus, the former Fisk Power Plant site presents another prime area for new construction.

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Curran says the city has tried to “talk the talk,” pitching El Paseo as a family gathering place within a neighborhood that prides itself on being multigenerational and close-knit, but hasn't taken the kind of preemptive action that may help dampen the community impacts of new infrastructure and increased development.

“The trail isn't happening by itself,” Curran says. “Activists in the neighborhood can't find time to come up for air. It's one huge hit after another.”

Community groups have organized and pushed for equitable development and guaranteed community benefits. Byron Sigcho, a leader of the Pilsen Alliance, says the group is pushing for a community-led zoning ordinance, as well as potential tax relief for residents along the trail. He wants to make sure El Paseo helps residents, and doesn't just become another real estate amenity.

“Luxury business and housing is coming into Pilsen,” he says. “What we want is balance. What makes this area beautiful is the diversity, culture, and murals. It's all about the people. How do we keep them here?”



The Pilsen Mexican Independence Day Parade, taken in September 2017, commemorates Mexican Independence. It features traditional folkloric, equestrian, and Aztec dancing. | Shutterstock

Can the next generation of parks plant deeper community roots?

Nobody has found a simple, straightforward answer to the problems of parks and property impact. But many groups are searching for one. Benepe says the Trust for Public Land received a \$170,000 grant to study parks and displacement, and will soon launch studies in three different cities.

[The High Line Network](#), a coalition of planners and developers, is working on best practices for park projects and methods to track infrastructure impact over time. According to Adam Ganser, the group's vice president for planning and design, the organization plans to hold a public convening in 2019 to discuss these topics.

Some of the problem may be the focus on blockbuster projects as opposed to smaller neighborhood parks. Benepe points to a program in New York City working to [transform schoolyards into community playgrounds](#), the "low-hanging fruit" of neighborhood parks. It's a resource that every city has, and the New York initiative has already transformed 300 such playgrounds. Both Chicago and Philadelphia have initiated similar programs.

Many see great potential in a project taking shape in Washington, D.C., the [11th Street Bridge Project](#). The forthcoming park project, in the city's fast-changing [Anacostia neighborhood](#), has a much more explicit social justice and equity platform. The \$45 million proposal to turn an unused bridge into a community recreation area includes an equitable development plan that features affordable housing and job creation programs. The nonprofit Local Initiatives Support Corporation has signed on to provide an additional \$50 million in early childhood education, food support, and other services in the neighborhoods bordering the park, while JP Morgan Chase plans to invest \$5 million over the next three years, some of which will fund a community land trust.

"The question we've asked ourselves about the park is, 'Who is this for?'" project director Scott Kratz told [Next City](#). "First and foremost, we're building a park for the residents who helped design it."

The 11th Street Bridge project also looks toward the long-term with plans to turn renters into owners, and help them capture the value that comes from being near a sought-after amenity, while also helping local businesses sign long-term leases and gain some measure of insurance against rising land costs.

Projects and proposals like these show how the conversation has evolved, says the Trust for Public Land's O'Boyle, and how perceptions of what can be done have shifted. She says the 606 has been a case study, one that's helping turn park development into neighborhood development.

“Keeping people from being displaced has become the No. 1 question,” she says. “The question is out there. Now we have a CEO who talks about affordable housing, and we partner with experts to make sure it’s a key component of what we’re working on. We completely understand that we have to [think about] housing and affordability to be in the park business.”