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Neighbors have embraced The 606 even as gentrification and crime create a divided playground

By WILLIAM LEE and MORGAN GREENE
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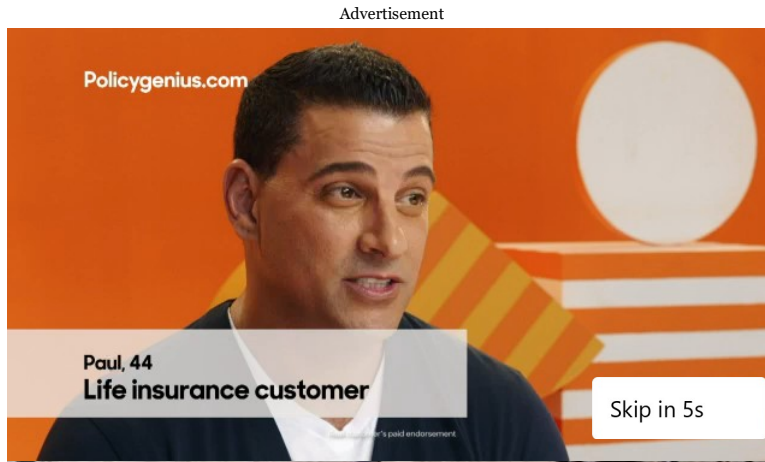
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Pedestrians use The 606 trail near the 1800 block of North Wolcott Avenue on June 11, 2019, in Chicago. (Armando L. Sanchez / Chicago Tribune)

On clear, sunny days, The 606 offers everything its drafters likely imagined when it was first conceived.

A diverse group of bicyclists, joggers and pedestrians share the commuter bridge that crosses four bustling Northwest

Side neighborhoods along its 2.7-mile path. One moment, a brown-haired man on a bicycle zips past walkers, his speakers playing “Willkommen” from “Cabaret.” The next, a young woman with a ponytail speeds by on her bike, playing rappers Drake and Lil Baby.



Trail users heading west from Bucktown along what was a [century-old railroad bed](#) are treated to a feast of colors, surrounded by heavy greenery and a vibrant mix of new modern and traditional architecture on either side of the trail, or puppies at play at the Churchill dog park below. Several moms sit on blankets with their children in the park, as a black-domed surveillance camera keeps a watchful eye.

A relatively small number of criminal incidents are connected to the trail, officials said. But the recent gang-related shooting death of a young father on the trail, the first since its opening in 2015, has cast a pall over the elevated pathway.

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Still, daytime users seem undeterred — they rely on the path, known as the Bloomingdale Trail, to get to where they need to go or just to enjoy the views.

“I probably travel over here three or four times a week, even at night. I typically ride at night, and there is usually no one here,” said Dionte Rutues, 25, of Belmont-Cragin, as he sat near the start of the east trail beside an elderly couple talking quietly.

FEEDBACK

Visitors to The 606 trail near the 1800 block of North Winchester Avenue take advantage of the mild weather on June 11, 2019, in Chicago. (Armando L. Sanchez / Chicago Tribune)

Some residents still remember the old days when gangs and violence were ever present in swaths of Humboldt Park and Logan Square. “(The neighborhood) did not look like this when I was growing up,” recalled Felicia Lewis-Grant, 25, who sat chatting with a friend on the trail’s west end in the same area [where Alejandro Aguado was fatally shot last month](#).

But the demographics have changed in both Logan Square and Humboldt Park on the western end of The 606 in recent years, as more affluent white families, young professionals, and trendy restaurants and bars have moved into the neighborhood.

As a result, critics say the trail has become emblematic of the city’s struggle to invest resources in cash-strapped neighborhoods, creating a divided playground connected to rising rents, [gentrification and displacement](#).

“The trail really accelerated the gentrification that we were already seeing,” said Norma Rios-Sierra, president and chairman of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, which initially welcomed the addition of a linear trail like New York’s High Line, London’s Hogsmill River Park and Paris’ Promenade plantée.

The organization has since pushed for city assistance in keeping longtime residents as many are priced out by skyrocketing property values.

“I would say that you still have those systemic issues, issues of difference in status, difference in class, difference in equity that have risen and really have become part of this urban walkway,” said Brandon Harris, an assistant professor at the University of Arizona who authored a 2017 study on the trail’s positive impact on crime. “And the question becomes, how do we integrate these things into these diverse communities and facilitate interactions in a way where it benefits everyone involved — so it’s all about that equitable distribution of this really, really wonderful resource that the city of Chicago and other cities are trying to provide to everyone.”

Early successes

Although more than 1 million trips were counted on the trail last year, traffic dipped in 2017 and 2018, according to a recent study.

Those who spearheaded the project suspect the dip can be attributed to the loss of novelty and fewer tourists.

Researchers at the University of Minnesota and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service in Evanston looked at use and traffic on the trail during the past three years of operation.

The western end of the trail saw about a 16% decline in cumulative trail traffic (from 1.2 million in 2016 to just over 1 million in 2018), the paper said. On the eastern end, traffic declined about 12% (from nearly 1.4 million in 2016 to just over 1.2 million in 2018).

And usage for the first five months of 2019 is tracking closely and surpassing 2018, said Aaron Koch, the Chicago area director of the Trust for Public Land, the San Francisco-based nonprofit that helped bring The 606 to life.

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Still, the trail has matched and exceeded some of the early organizers’ wildest dreams, said Ben Helphand, president of Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail.

“It’s used in five or six different ways, from very practical ways of getting to school and work, to recreation and fitness, and building social connections,” he said. “And this is really one of the things that differentiates it from, say, the High Line, which does not allow bikes.”

Helphand said that from the beginning, the trail had a dual purpose of bridging a transportation corridor with neighborhood parks. “And it’s really in my estimation achieved that beautifully,” he said.

But to some, The 606 is representative of divisions across neighborhoods.

“The trail has kind of taken on a dichotomous feel, or a binary feel,” said University of Arizona professor Harris, who noted qualitative data for a forthcoming study has shown some residents stick to one end of the trail.

While Bucktown and Wicker Park — at the eastern end of the trail — have undergone years of redevelopment dating

back to the 1980s, efforts to renovate Logan Square and Humboldt Park's industrial and working-class sections at the western end have only begun recently.

"There's the reputation of Humboldt Park that has played a part in it, but it's also some of the things I've heard about the aesthetics of the trail — vegetation not being as well maintained, graffiti maybe not being cleaned up as quickly as it is on the eastern sides of the trail," Harris said. "Conversely ... you have a lot of the residents from Humboldt Park and some of those longtime residents from the neighborhood who ... don't want to go into those eastern segments of the trail because they feel as though they're not welcome or they're profiled."

Ald. Roberto Maldonado, 26th, said resources are allocated to the park at the expense of surrounding neighborhoods, and there is also a difference in resources allocated to the western and eastern parts of the trail. For example, there are currently nine security cameras east of Western Avenue and seven cameras to the west, according to the Chicago Park District.

"The factor of public safety was not equally taken to heart by the people that were building it, like everything in Chicago," Maldonado said.

Hardly a trouble spot

In the light of day, The 606's tranquil setting makes it an easy choice as a meeting place for teenagers or families playing in its parks. Older residents, some in wheelchairs, can often be found enjoying a warm day out. On a daily basis, it narrows to accommodate the glut of runners, dog walkers and pedestrians.

But after dark is another story, according to many. Regular trail users like Jennifer Murphy, of Bucktown, said she enjoyed the convenience and easy passage through the community and felt safe using it most days. "I love it," Murphy said during a bicycling trip with her young son and his friend. "It's close to our house, so we can ride (our bikes) without having to go to the lakefront, so it's quicker to just hop on the trail and hop off and go to dinner somewhere," she said.

But that love evaporates when the sun goes down.

"I would not go on the trail at night, regardless of which section," she said. "I just wouldn't use it at night."

Fears about personal safety on the trail at night were likely bolstered by the May 28 shooting death of Aguado, 22, a Portage, Ind., man who grew up on the city's South Side and spent his short life avoiding gangs, according to his family.

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Aguado was walking with two other people on the west end of the trail when four strangers asked if they were members of a neighborhood street gang, according to the Chicago Police Department. After pressing them on their gang affiliation, one of the assailants shot all three before fleeing on foot.

Aguado, father of a 2-year-old daughter, was wounded in the chest and back, and died before police had a chance to speak with him. A surveillance camera on a nearby building captured grainy images of the attackers running away. No arrests have been made, and police believe none of the victims were tied to gangs.

After the shooting, police in the two districts that cover the trail noted an ongoing turf war between two gangs that frequent different sides of the neighborhood, but officers patrolling the path told the Tribune few problems unfold during daytime hours, aside from complaints about neighborhood kids riding wildly on the trail.

Park District security, working with police, has increased patrol officers around the clock, "with concentrated attention on areas of concern," spokeswoman Michele Lemons said.

Statistics from police suggest it is hardly a trouble spot. Thirty-three criminal incidents — including the May homicide — have been reported on the trail between its partial opening to the public in January 2015 through mid-June this year, according to police. This includes 11 batteries, 10 robberies, three criminal damage to property incidences and one sex offense, police spokesman Tom Ahern said.

A new incident occurred Wednesday when two young men were accused of a noon robbery on the trail's western end. Two people were arrested and charged with robbery, police said.

"It seems like such a positive place, and to hear that someone got killed is just really shocking," said Camille Harper, 23, of Oak Park, who joined a Bucktown friend to check out artwork mounted along the trail.

While the homicide alarmed some trail users, others are familiar with the sight of gang members doing their own patrols for rivals and menacing young people they don't recognize.

A bicyclist from Logan Square chatting with a friend at the trail's Humboldt Boulevard rest area said he only recently returned to the trail after gang members harassed him and a group of friends last summer.

"I was with my sister, and they just started throwing gang signs," said the man, who asked not to be identified. The neighborhood has changed drastically in the 20 years he has lived there, he said, calling last year's incident jarring. "I didn't know people still gangbanged around here. I haven't seen it in a long time so I was surprised."

Other users said the shooting likely would have little impact on their daily routine.

"Generally, I would say I feel safe, and I feel safe when it's well-lit," said Dan Hagen, 40, of Wicker Park, who exercises on the trail during the day but has ridden his bicycle there as late as 11 p.m.

Sitting near the western end of the park as the sun set, Hagen noted the increased awareness by police and residents after the shooting. "I'm a little more watchful, but that's just about it. I mean I live in Chicago, where things happen everywhere sporadically, even in some of the more affluent places."

Accelerated gentrification

Chatting with a friend at a table near the spot where the young father was fatally shot, Lewis-Grant, who grew up in Logan Square, said gangs and violence used to be more prevalent.

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"Everything is different now. Rent around here is crazy," Lewis-Grant said. "It's mostly Caucasian people now, but back then it was a lot of Hispanic and black and a little bit of Polish. It wasn't like it is now.

"But it's cool, I don't mind," she added.

The demographics have changed in some neighborhoods along The 606 and have been accompanied by increasing rents. By late 2016, DePaul University's Institute for Housing Studies reported that [home values were rising fast](#) along the \$95 million project's less-affluent western reaches in Humboldt Park and Logan Square.

In May 2015, the median sales price for a detached single-family home in Logan Square was \$477,500, an increase of 27.5 percent from two years before, according to data from Midwest Real Estate Data. In Humboldt Park, the median sales price for a detached single-family home was \$100,000, an increase of 52 percent from May 2013.

In May 2019, the median sales price for a detached single-family home in Logan Square was up to \$785,000, and the median sales price for an attached single-family home like a condo or townhouse was \$415,000. In Humboldt Park, the

May 2019 median sales price for a detached single-family home was \$220,000, more than double the \$100,500 price in 2015. The median sales price for an attached single-family home in Humboldt Park was \$235,000, compared with \$100,188 in 2015.

Citywide, the median sales price was \$239,900 for a detached single-family home in May 2019 and \$323,000 for an attached single-family home.

Near the opening of The 606 in 2015, the Tribune reported Mayor Rahm Emanuel called rising property values “a good thing,” but pledged to protect longtime residents from getting priced out.

“For the people who have property there, that’s a good thing,” Emanuel told the Chicago Tribune in June when asked about gentrification around the trail. “Increased housing values are not a bad thing.”

Many of the affordable housing examples Emanuel offered were a mile or more from the trail.

“Change is going to come, it’s coming. It’s just whether or not people like me are going to be able to stay here,” said the Logan Square Neighborhood Association’s Rios-Sierra, 38, a mosaic artist and educator who has lived in Logan Square since she was 8. “I feel very privileged that I can be here, because if my parents had not bought a place, I wouldn’t be able to live here.”

Rios-Sierra decried what she called years of neighborhood neglect from city officials that ended only when deep-pocketed outsiders arrived to “clean up” the neighborhood, while pushing out residents.

“It highlights all of the things that are wrong with how the city is managing this. And it makes it easier for them to say ‘This is a good thing. This is going to bring positive change.’ It’s like you’ve ignored us for so long, and now you’re just pushing us out.”

Since 2000, Logan Square’s Latino population has fallen by more than 20,000, while its white population has grown by more than 12,000, making them the majority, according to an analysis by WBEZ.

Rios-Sierra, who lives in the home her family bought across the street from James Monroe School, where she graduated from and her son now attends, also pointed out a cultural difference. “As Latinos, we don’t buy homes as investments, we buy homes for stability,” she said. “To give our families that sort of safety net.”

FEEDBACK For some of the longtime stakeholders in the park and trail, The 606 is only one piece of a complicated puzzle causing [change throughout neighborhoods](#), even if it became a prominent symbol.

“I think it did accelerate the rate of gentrification, especially for those first couple of years right after it opened,” said Helphand, of Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail. “But I do think that the Bloomingdale Trail is one of many factors that have contributed to the gentrification of the Northwest Side.”

As the trail was being built, demolition permits spiked in the western neighborhoods. There was also upzoning along Milwaukee Avenue that attracted residents, leading to a “perfect storm.”

“It does not happen in isolation,” Helphand said.

New challenges

Now, proponents and critics alike are trying to curb the domino effect of gentrification.

“The trail has been almost, in some ways, so successful that it’s caused a high level of desirability and people wanting to

live next to the trail,” said Koch, of the Trust for Public Land. “So there is a challenge that is associated with that change and with the success of The 606 that we believe is important for community organizations, our organizations in the city to be aware of and think about. What are some solutions that are needed to help folks that are dealing with rising property values and increased housing costs and those issues?”

Helphand said he would like to see affordable housing reform citywide.

Ald. Maldonado said he plans to reintroduce an ordinance with Ald. Carlos Ramirez-Rosa, 35th, and Ald. Daniel La Spata, 1st, that imposes steep demolition fees on expanded construction and restricts rezoning to units with a set percentage of affordable housing, with an aim to slow gentrification.

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Rios-Sierra warned that displacements in 606 communities could make similar projects like the El Paseo project, a proposed 4-mile path that would link Pilsen and Little Village on the Southwest Side, a harder sell to those neighborhoods.

“It’s a cool concept, an elevated pathway, and you’ll see the same fear over there because of all we’ve seen with what happened with The 606,” she said.

Projects in other cities, like the 11th Street Bridge Park greenway planned to be completed in 2023 in Washington, D.C., are trying to curb gentrification before the trail exacerbates it, implementing equitable development plans that address hiring neighborhood residents, stabilizing affordable housing and connecting neighborhoods on opposite sides of the river.

Right now, near the west end of The 606 trail, a former glove factory that the Trust for Public Land purchased in 2014 is being developed as a public park, as well as 150 units of affordable housing, Koch said. Land acquisition is expected to be completed next month, he added.

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Koch said there are also conversations about extending The 606 east to connect to the Chicago River.

“You could get on your bike some day at the west end of The 606 and be in downtown Chicago without hitting a stoplight,” he said.

William Lee



William “Will” Lee has been a reporter with the Chicago Tribune since July 2009. Since then, Will has covered cops, courts, politics and entertainment, reviewing video games and interviewing celebrities. He also worked as a legman to Page 2 columnist John Kass. Will covered similar topics for the SouthtownStar and the Daily Southtown.



Morgan Greene



Morgan Greene is a metro reporter for the Chicago Tribune who covers human interest stories, breaking news, the park district and everything in between. A Cleveland native, she graduated from the Theatre School at DePaul University, joined the Tribune in 2015 as an editorial assistant and still enjoys seeing a good show on a night off.

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