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## Joe Louis Greenway could bring a big boon for nearby homeowners



The Warren Gateway to the Joe Louis Greenway in Detroit. (City of Detroit Flickr)

 By **Nick Manes**

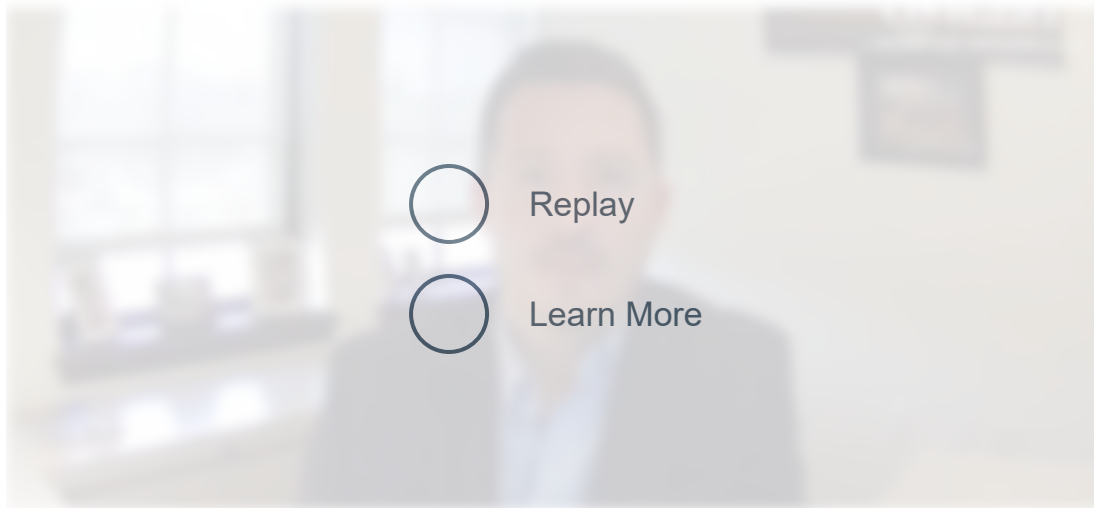
Last Updated March 25, 2026 01:53 PM EDT

If the past is a predictor of the future, those living in the vicinity of the Joe Louis Greenway in Detroit and surrounding communities may see a bump in property values.

From Atlanta to Indianapolis to Chicago, recreational trails such as what's being

built locally have a lengthy history of contributing to rising property values in the neighborhoods the trails wind through — sometimes quite substantially. A boon for longtime landowners to be sure, the rising values also make it more expensive for those seeking to live near such amenities.

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The impact of rising property values from urban trails — such as the nearly 30-mile Joe Louis Greenway, which winds through several Detroit neighborhoods as well as parts of Hamtramck, Highland Park and Dearborn — have been dubbed “**green gentrification**” by some.

While Detroit planners say they’ve worked upfront to make the trail an equitable resource for visitors and nearby residents alike, they also say that Detroit’s slower population growth may ease some of the rapid acceleration seen elsewhere.

“A lot of the research studies have focused on places like Manhattan or Atlanta are in metro areas that have seen a lot more population growth than Greater Detroit,” Detroit Planning Director Alexa Bush wrote in an emailed statement to Crain’s. “In those cities, a new investment very rapidly caused changes in housing and real estate (costs), (and) while certain neighborhoods might not have been seeing growth previously, the larger trends of the region were there.”

Many of the Detroit neighborhoods the greenway passes through are areas of the

city where investment has been minimal for years.

As a contrast, Bush pointed to the Dequindre Cut Greenway in Detroit that runs north from the east riverfront. Several parcels along that roughly 2-mile trail remain undeveloped despite active use of the former rail line for nearly two decades, she noted.

Since the Joe Louis Greenway's early planning days, planners have sought to be cognizant of the advantages and drawbacks affiliated with such an investment.



The Joe Louis Greenway crosses Woodward Avenue in Highland Park. ( Nick Manes/Crain's Detroit Business)

A **2021 framework plan** from the city lays out goals in the development of the trail that include ensuring spin-off development that results from the trail promotes “equality and equity,” and focused on preventing displacement. Such initiatives are

“an explicit goal” with the trail’s development, according to the report.

“By holding inclusive economic opportunity at the center of all Joe Louis Greenway implementation, the greenway can be more than a multimodal network,” the plan reads. “We have the opportunity with this project to enhance quality of life, stabilize housing and build wealth, create jobs, spur new development and increase fiscal resources for service delivery in ways that provide all people — regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability, or socioeconomic status — the opportunity to flourish in their experience of the greenway.”

Philanthropy has also played a role in other elements for the planning of the greenway and immediate surrounding areas.

The Rocket Community Fund last year, in collaboration with the Gilbert Family Foundation’s **Detroit Home Repair Fund**, rolled out a home swap pilot program that included a few homes in the Barton-McFarland neighborhood on Detroit’s west side that abuts one part of the Joe Louis Greenway.

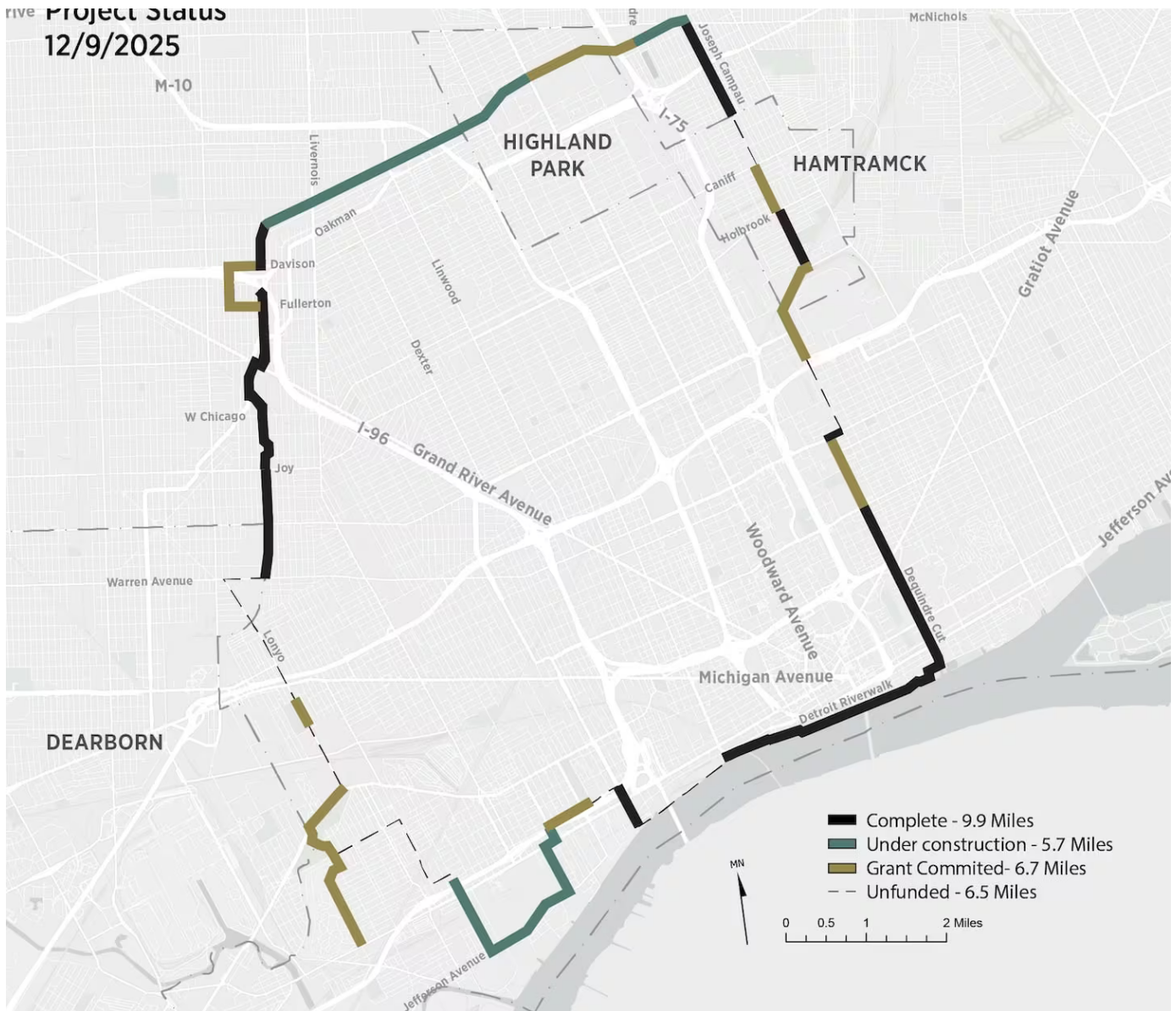
Three of the homes in the neighborhood were thought to be eligible for home repair grants, but were “too far gone,” according to Laura Grannemann, executive director of the Gilbert philanthropy initiatives.

Rather, they found homes in the neighborhood within the inventory of the Detroit Land Bank Authority and moved the residents into those homes and then commenced repairs on the more dilapidated properties.

Such an undertaking was critical, Grannemann told Crain’s.

“(We recognized) that the greenway has the real opportunity, in a good way, and challenge potentially associated with it, which is that property values will rise, and that there’s opportunity to connect more to jobs and commercial corridors,” Grannemann said. “And so that economic development investment was meant to do that connection, and also to keep people in their homes that are immediately adjacent to the greenway.”





A map of the in-progress Joe Louis Greenway project. (City of Detroit)

Work on the Joe Louis Greenway commenced in 2021 and the project is expected to **hit its halfway mark** this year, with several new stretches getting completed.

That includes:

- Joseph Campau to Dequindre
- Woodward to Intervale
- Southbound Fisher Service drive from Junction to Clark
- Lonyo between Arnold and St. John
- Intervale (Romanowski Park)

- Dix to Vernor through Patton Park

An exact completion date for the entire project is unclear.

## Lessons learned from around the country

Detroit is hardly the first city to build a large recreational trail and confront some of the opportunities and challenges that come with it.

Indeed, many planners spent considerable time in Atlanta in the build-up to construction of the Joe Louis Greenway to study the southern city's 22-mile Beltline network of trails, according to Darnell Adams, vice president for Detroit community initiatives with the Gilbert Family Foundation.

Those trips helped inform "what not to do and what worked and what didn't work," Adams said. "And I think the city did a great job of protecting land around the Joe Louis Greenway to help to inform future development based on the needs of the neighborhood, and not by private investment."

Experts in Chicago, where the 2.7-mile elevated 606 trail opened a decade ago on the city's northwest side, say there are also lessons to be taken away from the Midwest's largest city.

Just more than a year after The 606 opened, a report by the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University found that **home values rose quickly** — about 48% — on the western edge of the trail, per a report at the time from Crain's Chicago Business.

In an interview with Crain's this month, the institute's executive director, Geoff Smith, said that those rapidly rising values to the west were in an area where home values had long been lower, compared to the eastern edge where values had already been high.

Planning is paramount because speculators move quickly, according to Smith.

"The lesson is to be proactive and to make sure that that you're kind of thinking

about the housing affordability implications, for owners and for renters in advance of building of the trail,” said Smith, the author of the 2016 report. “Because once you’ve opened, the market’s already basically moved.”

Bush, Detroit’s planning director, said they’ve yet to see that kind of activity play out in Detroit, particularly with the Dequindre Cut, which opened nearly 20 years ago.

“To me, it gives more context for why we didn’t see runaway market and housing values along Dequindre Cut, because the larger metro region is not seeing as much growth to pull from,” Bush said. “Again, it doesn’t mean we’re not thinking about it in Detroit and watching closely. We just haven’t seen that kind of market movement yet and hope that we continue to stay ahead of it with proactive planning.”

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