

606 trail inspires excitement, fear from neighbors

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When John Paige moved into Wicker Park more than 35 years ago, it was a "rough-and-tumble" neighborhood filled with "bars, brothels and bums." Train tracks that were built in the 1870s and later elevated to decrease frequent fatalities had slowed to the point that cars painted like a circus parked over the city for days.

Even then, the young urban planner understood the area's appeal — its architecture, liveliness and diversity. Today, crime has dramatically lessened. Transportation, restaurants and entertainment options have multiplied. And as the city finishes landscaping The 606 trail, two blocks from his condo, he said, the neighborhood is on the cusp of its greatest change in living memory.

The 606, a 2.7-mile-long park on the former train tracks, is set to open June 6, and Paige and others believe it could have a dramatic effect on the surrounding communities. While buzz and excitement build up to the long-anticipated opening, so does trepidation from some who wonder if they will be able to enjoy its benefits.

Unlike at train-to-park conversions in New York and Paris, Chicago's 606 will allow pets and bikes, Paige, a docent at the Chicago Architecture Foundation, points out proudly.

"They're going to have festivities, and police are going to patrol it, and it's going to be lighted at night, and they're going to sweep the snow off in the wintertime," Paige said. "What they're doing there is a wonderful thing. It's going to be a great resource for the neighborhoods."

The ultimate impact on surrounding streets and commercial corridors may take as long to materialize as it will take for trees and bushes to mature, but Paige has high hopes, one of them being that the trail will someday connect to the lakefront.

"My vision is ... of a corridor of arts and culinary pursuits — ice cream shops or coffee shops or art galleries or bike shops or cross-country skiing," he said. "I see commercial developing along the trail in kind of cool, small venues along the way."

For now, the 14-foot-wide multi-use trail along the narrow Bloomingdale Avenue runs through four neighborhoods — Bucktown, Wicker Park, Logan Square and Humboldt Park. The trail has been described by organizers as a charm bracelet, with The 606 linking to six other parks in the area. Organizers hope that will help address an area in Logan Square that was identified 10 years ago as one of the most park-poor in the city.

Once a massive barrier between neighborhoods, it will now, ideally, connect neighbors, said Beth White of the Trust for Public Land, which manages the project.

"It kind of became a no-man's land," White said. "It wasn't safe. It was tough to get up there, and now we're taking this incredible piece of our industrial heritage ... and opening it up for everyone to enjoy."

Erik Harmon, executive director of the Wicker Park Bucktown Chamber of Commerce believes businesses directly off the trail will benefit most.

"People are going to want to go to the trail and check it out. They'll spend some money in the neighborhood while they're here," Harmon said.

Concerns such as safety, traffic, parking and a lack of bathrooms have long been discussed with community partners, according to White. How those community issues play out, along with the ways bikers, dog-walkers and runners negotiate the space, are yet to be seen, Harmon said.

Jennifer Yu, president of the West Bucktown Neighborhood Association, says she hopes the trail will evolve as a place for art and music and will show off Logan Square and Humboldt Park. Personally, she plans to take her kids to explore areas west.

"For so long, areas west of Western were considered a fringe area," Yu said. "It's something that we really were striving for with the neighborhood, to bring people together to show what a great mixed community we have."

The thorniest worry of residents, particularly for those west of Western Avenue, is that those who have been in the neighborhood through its ups and downs will not be able to stay to enjoy the new amenity.

David Rocco Faccini owns a condo in the Bloomingdale Arts Building just west of Western and has lived in Wicker Park since the 1990s.

"You look at change and see what it yields, and the biggest fear is that you take away the community," Rocco Faccini said. "The people continue leaving."

Letters that those east of Logan Square were receiving 10 years ago from developers expressing interest in purchasing property are now coming to her friends and family, said Delia Ramirez, of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, who has lived in the neighborhood for 25 years.

At a recent meeting at Armitage Baptist Church dedicated, in part, to the trail's opening, questions were raised about how long families in the community will be able to stay.

"My question is, how can my family be a part of it?" Jennifer Velazquez said.

When those in the room were asked to raise their hands if they knew people who had moved out of the neighborhood in the past few years, half put their hands up. For Ramirez, the overwhelming sense she has around the trail is one of urgency.

"Even this past Friday, as I sat at my window, as I looked at the for-sale signs, it came to mind, six months from today, my immediate block could look different, unrecognizable," Ramirez said.

Rents are rising for some by \$300 a month, said Lucy Gomez of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, forcing longtime families to move out.

The Logan Square Neighborhood Association is pushing for a property tax abatement along the trail's corridor. In the meantime, the organization is encouraging everybody in the neighborhood to be part of the celebrations on opening day.

Lebster Pabon, an instructor at West Town Bikes, which has been holding after-school programs for schools along the trail in connection with the opening, sees the trail as a tool to expose young people to new sights.

"I've taken kids from Humboldt Park to Wicker Park on bike rides, and they think they are in another world, and it's awesome," Pabon said. "This trail is going to be able to share the center of the city in a safer way. It's going to be huge."

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