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An invigorating redevelopment project of an old railway line in Chicago, Illinois, that is now transformed into a new system of parks, access points, and a multi-use pathway for the surrounding communities to enjoy.
HISTORY

The 606 is a redevelopment project in Chicago that renovated an old railway system called the Bloomingdale Line into a multiuse parkway that now stretches 2.7 miles long for people gather and to walk, run and bike on. The 606 runs east to west and connects four distinct neighborhoods: Logan Square, Humbolt Park, Bucktown, and Wicker Park (The 606 2015). This location of the 606 traces back to when a man named August Steinhaus, a highway commissioner, established the Bloomingdale Road, now Bloomingdale Avenue, in 1857 (Banich 2012). After the devastating Great Chicago Fire in 1871, approval by the City Council allowed the Chicago & Pacific Railroad to build a new railroad line on Bloomingdale Road (Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail 2015). The Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad Company later took over the Bloomingdale Line when the company purchased it in April 1880 (Coorens 2015). The Bloomingdale tracks eventually created problems for the locals. Many people opposed the tracks once they were laid down; the railroad crossings resulted in many injuries and even deaths making the residents want to act out for safety measures (Banich 2012). Finally, this problem was addressed when the City Council ordered that all tracks be elevated within the next six years; the Bloomingdale Line officially had all of its tracks elevated by 1915 (Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail 2015). The picture below shows the process of builders elevating the Bloomingdale Line in 1914.

Elevation of the Bloomingdale Railroad in 1914
After completion of the elevated Bloomingdale Line, industry seemed to pour in and fill up the district surrounding the tracks. The St. Paul Railroad Company took advantage of this opportunity to gain revenue as it hauled goods to and from industries along its route (Banich 2012). Many companies including the Northwestern Yeast Company, Churchill Cabinet Company, Samuel Olson Manufacturing Company, and the H.N. Lund Coal Company serviced themselves alongside the railroad line with their own switch tracks. The companies relied on the Bloomingdale Line to ship things in and out for daily business operations (Banich 2012). The Bloomingdale railroad then served the manufacturing district in the northwestern part of Chicago for a long time and thrived as these industries continued their business activity.

Problems Arise

When World War II came around many changes occurred throughout the country. Industries had to focus a lot on providing for the war. When the war ended, many of these industries, such as the automobile industry, were finally able to come back to concentrating on making their original products. This post war period “heralded a golden age of the automobile in the United States” (Banich 2012). All over people went crazy to go buy the new releases of passenger cars. The popularity of these cars in turn affected many of the nation’s railroads, including the Bloomingdale Line.

Railroad is useless and grass overgrows on top of it by the 1990s
The slow decline of Bloomingdale railroad was also a result of the development of the Interstate Highway System in 1956 (Banich 2012). Cars and trucks were being used a lot more making freight trains almost obsolete. By the end of 1977, the St. Paul Railroad Company had filed for bankruptcy as well as nearly one-third other railroads across the nation (Banich 2012). With the regression of the Bloomingdale Line, came the decline of the industries around it. The surrounding neighborhoods eventually turned from manufacturing buildings to residential homes. A new community was beginning to live there as the Bloomington Line depleted away. By the 1990s, the train line was pretty much out of use and it turned into more of a nature trail with overgrown weeds and grass sprouted over it as shown in the picture to above (Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail 2015).

Proposal and Planning Process

Planning for what to do with the rundown railroad line began to take hold in the 1990s. Originally city planners had an idea in 1997 to make the Bloomingdale Line a part of a Bicycle Facilities Development Plan (Coorens 2015). It never went through, though, because some people foresaw a low demand. In the midst of meetings and planning for what could be done to the Bloomingdale Line, some city staffers even suggested a demolition (Placemaking Chicago 2008). However, into the early 2000s, the City of Chicago realized a concern with the Logan Square neighborhood. It needed 99 more acres of open space built into the area in order to be brought up to city minimums (The 606 2015). So, the idea to transform the Bloomingdale Railroad Line was eventually considered to be a portion of the 2004 Logan Square Open Space Plan during meetings with the City of Chicago, Dept. of Planning and Development, CDOT, and Chicago Park District (Placemaking Chicago 2008).

In 2003, a local resident named Josh Deth and a group of neighbors formed an organization called the Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail to advocate the community about the Bloomingdale Trail project. They held their own meetings to plan out their vision of the new trail, and they became the leading group to propose the project (Placemaking Chicago 2008). The Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail were even able to get in contact with the Trust for Public Land, a nonprofit organization that protects land for people, who really pushed the plan forward (The
The Trust for Public Land held many meetings to discuss essential components of what the design and function of the new park should be. A major contribution by the Trust for Public Land was when they held an important three-day design meeting in 2011 in the local community (The 606 Chicago 2015). Leadership under Major Rahm Emanuel moved the process along even further. Ever since Major Emanuel was elected in 2011, he has hoped to “create 800 new parks, recreation areas and green spaces throughout Chicago” (The 606 Chicago 2015). His determination heralded the Bloomingdale Trail project, later to be called The 606.

Design and Construction

The Trust for the Public Land served as the leading project manager for The 606 project, and they partnered with the Chicago Department of Zoning and Land Use Planning to determine design aspects of the park (Kirk 2013). Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates and Collin Engineers were assigned to design the first phase of The 606 project (Kirk 2013). Their designs focused on repairing “37 century-old viaducts; construction of a new bridge to provide overhead clearance for trucks; and environmental remediation of areas with contaminated soil” (Kirk 2013). This phase also included constructing ramps along the trail for exiting to the streets and handicap purposes as well as incorporating landscaping. Below is a picture of one of their ramp designs. These aspects to the trail were really important because it was the part that was able to
really connect the neighborhoods together. Frances Whitehead was also assigned for phase one of the design process, but he was in charge of The 606’s art installations (The Red Line Project 2014). During planning, Whitehead explained, “the design team has done a delicate job, providing a minimalist design. Sometimes less is better” (Kirk 2013). Her mission was to bring life to art and she focused a lot on incorporating Chicago’s environmental and social aspects into the project.

In August of 2013, the Walsh Construction Company II LLC was given the contract to build the new Bloomingdale Trail (Red Line Project 2014). On August 27, 2013, Major Emanuel and other officials broke ground for the start of construction for the project (The Red Line 2014). The first part of ground level work construction then began throughout September of 2013. On December 19, 2013 the old railroad tracks and railings were removed from Ashland Avenue to Sawyer Avenue, and bridge improvements started later in March (Red Line Project 2014). After about twenty-two months of construction, The 606 was officially completed and ready to open on June 6, 2015. The total cost of the project was about $95 million, and the project received $54 million in public funds and $18 million from private donations (The Trust for Public Land 2015).

**Minimal Issues**

Very little opposition was set forth when the plan to transform the Bloomingdale Trail was released. Most local citizens around The 606 site were eager to await the newly elevated trail that was going to be built near their homes. It wasn’t until closer to the date of opening and even after that in which conflict arose. Some people worried about privacy issues, but the major concern discussed was the gentrification that would take place in the area. A director of the Latin United Community Housing Association (LUCHA) spoke out about her concerns with the project questioning, “Six months from now, will I even recognize the community I live in?” (Hernandez 2015). After the opening other activists explained how newcomers did seem to be pushing the current residents out.

Alderman Robert Maldonado and Alderman Joe Moreno worked with activist organizations such as the LUCHA, Take Back Chicago Branch, the Puerto Rican Agenda, and more to host
workshops for people in the community to take action to the property tax reassessments (Kiernan 2015). The establishment of the 606 had raised the home values and really increased property taxes in areas such as Logan Square and Humboldt Park (Paulson 2012). Local residents were and still are put on the edge for such costly affects.

**Efficient Impacts**

Immediate impacts seemed to take place as The 606 was opening. Logan Square and Wicker Park have become increasingly popular and are seeing quick sales because of their location. The neighborhoods surrounding the 606 have now great access to reach other forms of transportation to get to the downtown area. Sasha Lekac, a reporter from the Chicago Tribune, explains that “instead of moving out of the city, homebuyers are more willing to find neighborhoods farther out, but accessible” to the more central part of Chicago (Lekach 2015). For younger, single-families the northwest neighborhoods are a perfect walkable location, especially for those who don’t want to commute. The 606 is also a direct link to the Blue Line, and people can easily walk there without having to get in their car. The 606 has provided this great resource that has really influenced not only the eyes of young homebuyers but developers who want to build more in the area too.

Developers aware of The 606 project started to take advantage of it. On 1600 North Richmond Street in Humboldt Park a new row of five single-family homes were built and sold in the spring right before the park opened (Spula 2015). These homes, as shown in the picture to the left, are less than a ten-minute walking distance from The 606, and they demonstrated the start of the spur of the real-estate prices around The 606 starting at $389,000
(Hernandez 2015). The Bloomingdale Trail also heated up prices in real estate homes that had no renovation. An example was a Bucktown Timber Loft, which is located right up against The 606 trail. The two bed and two bath loft was priced at $425,000 in March of 2011, and in August of this year the asking price was $599,000 (LaTrace 2015). This shows that the value raised about 40.94 percent in less than four years, and The 606 was a contributing factor to that rise in the cost. These surges in prices were the exact fears that many of the local residents dreaded about the new project in their area. Higher costs of living meant higher income individuals coming into the area. So far not much evidence is shown for gentrification, although The 606 has only been open for about six months.

Despite some examples of new construction and rising prices, overall The 606 hasn’t harmed enough prices to make a big enough affect on the community so far. In a fifteen-year period prices have slowly increased but inflation and the economy over the years could have had more an effect than just the recent parkway that has been built. The two maps below demonstrate the northwestern part of Chicago that holds the four neighborhoods that are now connected to each other by The 606. The yellow outline is the neighborhoods’ zip codes. The first map represents the median rent prices by census tracts around The 606 area in 2000 and then the second map shows it in 2015. The lighter the shade of color means the lower rent costs, and darker shades show higher costs. In the outlined zip codes the majority of the four neighborhoods had very light shades of color in 2000, but in 2015 the majority of the rents are darker shades. The maps show a major change in median rent in the northwestern part of Chicago over the last fifteen years. Planning for the project began in the early 2000s, however, The 606 has only been open for the past six months and cannot be the underlying effect on the increase in rent prices. It just goes to show how over the years rent increase is inevitable and projects like The 606 will affect the market in ways, but it won’t be until a few years from now the accurate data can show whether or not The 606 had a dramatic affect on housing costs in the area.
Despite recent housing changes in the area, The 606 overall really transformed the once depleted railroad line to a much more used public space of greenery and a path for many to venture on. The biggest impact that The 606 provided was a joining of the four neighborhoods of Logan Square, Humbolt Park, Bucktown, and Wicker Park (The 606 2015). Steve Baird of Baird and Warner explained that “The 606 also takes something that was previously a neighborhood divider, and it turns it into a neighborhood connector” (Dickman, 2015). People are more closely connected with The 606 in the area then ever before, and the diversity is now spreading. The 606 also connected six major permanent parks that can be accessed throughout the route of the trail. The use of space now has increased plenty.
What used to be a place of graffiti and drug use is now a space for friends and family to walk about safely in a friendly atmosphere. The 80,000 people who live just a ten-minute walking distance from The 606 can now come to their “urban oasis” at ease (City of Chicago 2015). Mary Schmich (2015) interviewed four young women who were jogging on the path to ask them how they felt about The 606, which was only open for a little over a month at the time. The young girls claimed that almost every day they have come to the trail in the past few weeks to either walk or jog and sometimes ride bikes (Schmich 2015). Positive health effects are being noted because of the new-elevated park. More adults are reported to be commuting on foot or bike than by car because The 606 makes it a lot easier to get to places that are a short distance away such as the grocery store, because they no longer have to fight the traffic on the streets (Schmich 2015). The picture below shows two individuals riding their bikes with no interference. Because of this easier “getaway” from the busy streets below, people in the community now feel safer to go out and exercise without worrying about things getting in their way.

**Evaluation**

If I were on the City Planning Commission, I would add more detail to design on the parkway and give it more of a natural trail feel. As the women interviewed expressed that the 606 gives
them a break from the bustling traffic below, it should also feel like a sort of “getaway” that people yearn for while up there. Not much greenery is surrounding the pathway, however it has only been about six months since the opening, and there is still time for more trees and plants to grow and be planted in.

Other cities with old and unoccupied railroad lines should consider redeveloping their lines into public spaces like The 606. In fact other places have already tried their own transformations of depleted railroads. The High Line in New York was created even before the 606 was in Chicago, and many people often think The 606 was trying to surpass the High Line being a similar renovated parkway. Critiques propose that The 606’s design aspects do not really meet expectations when compared to New York’s park, but The 606 simply is meant for a different purpose. It’s not really meant for a tourist attraction, but instead a new trail to get from one place to the next, mostly for bikers too. People can sit down and enjoy the view, but many who venture on The 606 will find it more purposeful to get some exercise in, to walk their dogs, and to easily get to other neighborhoods and parks. To compare it to the design of the High Line was a mistake on the planners’ part. Being nearly five months after the opening of The 606, not much national attention has been made and it did not live up to its counterpart’s overall design and layout. The 606 may not share a lot of detail in its architectural design, but it really created a purpose for it’s space that the neighborhoods appreciate and that was the point of the entire project in the first place.

Critiques may argue that the 606 isn’t really a “must see” when visiting the great city of Chicago. But, in the end, the park wasn’t build by the Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail to attract tourists from all over the world. Instead, they planned for many years to restore the public space to help improve the surrounding communities and to provide for the individuals who already live in that Chicago area. For that purpose, I would say that The 606 was a successful renovation to the decrepit Bloomingdale Railroad line that was no longer needed. It did make a useful land of public space that individuals can now use at ease. The 606 is now a huge resource for local residents and it creates more of a connected community that was not present before. Many may argue over the gentrification issue and rising prices for households, but, overall the park is a plus for many and it really was a step forward in Major Emanuel’s push for a “greener” Chicago.
Bibliography


