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Was gentrification around the 606 inevitable?

That's what two professors contend, saying lower-cost housing was bound to be pushed out of neighborhoods because of the way the rails-to-trails project was planned.

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The 606 trail.

Lower-cost housing was bound to be pushed out of neighborhoods along the 606 trail by more expensive replacements because of the way the rails-to-trails project was planned, a pair of academics claim in a scholarly journal.

"The public and not-for-profit sector did the infrastructure—the parks and the transportation route—but then housing was left to the marketplace," said Alessandro Rigolon, a professor of recreation, sport and tourism at the University of Illinois and one of the authors of the article in the November issue of *Cities*, an international journal of urban policy and planning.

"And of course, if you leave it up to the marketplace, gentrification is almost inevitable around such a desirable amenity," Rigolon said.

In [the *Cities* article](#), titled "We're not in the business of housing," Rigolon and his fellow author, Jeremy Nemeth, a University of Colorado urban and regional planning professor, argue that a comprehensive scheme that coupled plans to preserve affordable housing with development of the 606 could have mitigated the inevitable gentrification.

The 2.7-mile trail on an elevated former rail bed opened in mid-2015, and by late 2016, De Paul University's Institute for Housing Studies reported that **home values were rising fast** along its less-affluent western reaches, in Humboldt Park and Logan Square. It has continued ever since, prompting aldermen and activists to call for rent control, **home-improvement grants to help longtime owners stay in their homes** and not sell to developers and other measures to help limit gentrification.

Making "housing prices subject to some form of governmental control [could have] ensured that these people who have been in the neighborhood can share in this new phase of economic growth," Rigolon said.

Representatives of two non-profits that played big roles in getting the 606 built both said the professors' conclusion is overly simple.

"Gentrification was going on for some years in these neighborhoods before the 606," said Ben Helphand, a founder and current board president of 15-year-old Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail. (Officially, the pathway is called the Bloomingdale Trail, and the network that includes it and the parks along it is called the 606.) "There are a lot of layers going on in the 606 story," including the recession and recovery, he said. "The 606 may have accelerated gentrification, but it didn't cause gentrification."

Aaron Koch, the Chicago-area director of the Trust for Public Land, a lead non-profit on developing the 606, concurred. The article, he said, "really misses the mark. It doesn't recognize that gentrification was well under way" before plans for the trail began to solidify in the years before construction began in 2013.

The trail's potential to accelerate gentrification, Koch said, "was something everyone talked about in the process, from the mayor's office of planning on down."

Nevertheless, Helphand said the velocity that gentrification would ultimately reach was beyond what anyone anticipated.

"The trail was being planned during the recession," Helphand said, "and then it opened as the recession was ending, and everything comes out of the gate at like 1,000 miles an hour." The jump in home values, he said, "was astounding to everyone."

Among the factors contributing to the velocity were a vibrant dining and drinking scene in the area, and the presence of many young professional workers who, because they either hadn't owned a home during the housing bust or had lived in affluent areas that were only