

An action plan for projects similar to the High Line and the 606 to prevent gentrification and benefit local residents.



■ Actions (goals to achieve outcomes)
 ■ Policies, Funding & Support (Dan's Facilitatory Role)

■ Outputs (results of actions)
 ■ Outcomes

* TOP - Tenant Opportunity to Purchase | CMAQ - Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality | TAD - Tax Allocation District

Equitable Design - Just Outcomes for Park Projects

Introduction

A central philosophy to landscape architecture is the democratization of space. Parks, as opposed to private estates or gardens, are meant to benefit all regardless of socioeconomic status. Their presence in the neighborhood improves physical, community, and economic health of surrounding neighborhoods. Yet, recently high-profile linear park projects such as New York City's Highline and Chicago's 606 have challenged this philosophy by catalyzing gentrification. Increasingly, only wealthy residents and tourists may enjoy these parks, while low-income, minority families are pushed out of their homes.

How can outcomes of new multimillion-dollar park projects in the U.S. propose to (1) create economic opportunity for local residents, (2) maintain and create affordable housing, (3) establish cultural connections between diverse neighborhoods, and (4) improve quality of life for all residents, regardless of income or background? To answer these goals, a theory of change diagram was created (page 1) through researching various equitable development plans in U.S. cities: D.C.'s [11th Street Bridge Park's Equitable Development Plan](#), Chicago's [Our Equitable Future](#), and Atlanta's [Beltline Equitable Development Plan](#).

As the diagram follows actions to outcomes, my role of a city planner is facilitatory – it's what enables the actions to become outcomes. This is done through connecting decisionmakers such as municipal officials, design teams, and stakeholders of hypothetical park projects to policies, funding, and support that achieve just, equitable outcomes for their project. Tasks might include researching funding sources and supportive policies, grant writing, reaching out to donors, and connecting private, public, and nonprofit groups to each other who have similar equity goals.

Economic Opportunity for Local Residents

The first outcome is concerned with employment and small business support for local residents. I can use several techniques to ensure low-income residents are prioritized when contractors look to employ construction workers in the park design bid process or when a city looks to make maintenance and cleaning contracts for upkeep, post construction. The federal Work Opportunity Tax Credit is an incentive for employers to hire people who have barriers to employment. These include low-income people (Supplemental Security Income recipients), long-time unemployed and ex-felons. A city or contractor can be incentivized to hire local, marginalized groups with this program.

Enforcement of hiring local residents is seen through the First Source Hiring or Employment program, listed in several U.S. cities. For instance, in D.C. the majority of new construction labor for government assisted projects over \$5 million must be given to city residents. To further protect groups with barriers to employment, D.C.'s 11th street bridge equitable development plan advocates for "Ban the Box", stopping government employers and developers who use public funding to ask about criminal background during the application

process. A Ban the Box policy is active in 11 U.S. states. Through these incentives and enforcements, pre- and post-construction employment contracts can go to local groups in need.

New parks similar to the 11th street, linear trail bridge in D.C. can also encourage small business creation from surrounding neighborhoods. Tax and permitting breaks as well as cheaper stall rental fees can be given to local, pop up retail and food vendors along the trail. Increased trail traffic has tourists spilling onto neighboring streets, where local entrepreneurs can create new businesses by applying for grants such as Chicago's Neighborhood Opportunity Fund, which funds commercial projects in disinvested areas. These new business owners can be connected to banks, nonprofits, and corporate partners to mentor their business development.

Maintained and Created Affordable Housing

There are several policies and funding opportunities that can be used to promote affordable housing for renters and homeowners. Including grassroots, community groups' support to fight gentrification is key. In Chicago, the 606 Pilot Act drafted by 3 local alderman looks to charge \$300,000 - \$650,000 plus additional fees to developers who replace existing with new housing along the 606 trail. Any fees collected, which the developer can avoid by designating 50% of new units as affordable, go toward local, affordable housing.

Rental voucher numbers and subsidy amounts can be increased for local residents to afford apartments. Source of Income Protection legislation, which prohibits landlords from discriminating voucher holders, is active in 10 states and several counties. Landlord incentive programs are also popular in U.S. cities. These give funding to landlords who rent to homeless, veterans and voucher holders, as well as reimburses them for property damage caused by tenants. For landlords, this takes the risk out of renting to groups they may view negatively.

Several policies exist for homeowners to maintain and purchase affordable properties. D.C.'s Tenant Right of First Refusal policy, which allows renters being pushed out by gentrification to buy their buildings with funding from nonprofits, can be copied in other cities. The federal Neighborhood Homes Tax Credit can support existing low-income homeowners to rehabilitate their properties, thus increasing value.

Building Bridges Across the River (BBAR) heads the 11th street bridge park project in D.C. and has set aside \$55 million in equitable investment to curb gentrification and income inequality. For instance, BBAR gives low-interest loans for local business owners. BBAR created the Douglass Community Land Trust, which looks to spend 3 to 4 million dollars to acquire property and convert it to affordable housing. Cities where new parks are located need to follow D.C.'s lead in setting aside tens of millions for equitable investment.

Cultural Connections Between Diverse Neighborhoods

The 606, the Highline, the Beltline, and the future 11th street bridge linear parks transect low to high income neighborhoods. A user can walk or cycle beginning in one income demographic area and end up in another. This physical aspect of design brings together users of segregated neighborhoods to interact on a more consistent basis.

Several techniques promote communities of different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds coming together. Community benefit agreements (CBAs) can be made between developers and locals to ensure negative construction impacts are mitigated. For example, the 11th street bridge equitable plan advocates for CBAs to help local and African American artists use new exhibition spaces. The plan also uses a sliding scale for park space rentals by artists and business owners to pay what they can afford. A sliding scale payment system also applies to ticketed events of the park, such as concerts and festivals. Also, promoting informational kiosks about local groups throughout the park teaches users about various cultures.

Improved Quality of Life for All Residents, Regardless of Income or Background

With other outcomes in place, low-income residents will not be displaced and can experience improved quality of life that comes with new park projects: alternate commutes via bicycle for long trail projects, increased access to open space and exercise opportunities, and stress reduction through contact with nature. This is done through a variety of funding sources. For example, Chicago's 606 acquired \$50 million of the \$95 million budget through the federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality program. Atlanta's Tax Allocation District financing, also called TIF in other U.S. cities, forgoes future increases in property tax revenue that the city would realize from a public improvement project such as a park to finance the park's construction. In addition to researching these public funding options, my facilitatory role also includes connecting the project to philanthropic partners such as corporations and nonprofit groups.

The High Line and the 606 are displacing local communities surrounding them. Cultures present in Chicago and New York are being lost due to these parks not having equitable development plans. Only when high-profile projects prioritize the protection of local people can the integrity of and diversity of our metropolitan areas be maintained.

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