

Chicago Tribune

The 606 trail debuts to sunshine, happy crowds

By Greg Trotter | June 6, 2015



Large crowds flock to the 606 Bloomingdale Trail, which opened in Chicago on June 6, 2015.

Under sunny skies, the 606 opens. "I think it's wonderful, man."

The people traversed the elevated trail on foot and by bicycle, on skateboards and scooters, and some even on giant tricycles with hand-rigged sails.

Once an overgrown railroad track littered with urban debris, the 2.7-mile path known as the Bloomingdale Trail was bustling with movement and good vibes on its inaugural Saturday. Shrieking children ran amok. Babies snoozed while tethered to parents or pushed or pulled in strollers or wagons. Earbudded joggers darted through the crowd. Dogs of all sizes pulled humans on leashes.

And somehow, quite miraculously, the thousands of people who showed up to experience the opening of The 606, Chicago's new elevated trail and park system, all managed to share the trail with little incident.



The 606 trail in Chicago is filled with people on opening day, June 6, 2015.

An American Akita dog looks out from the deck of the family home at all the activity on the 606 Bloomingdale Trail.

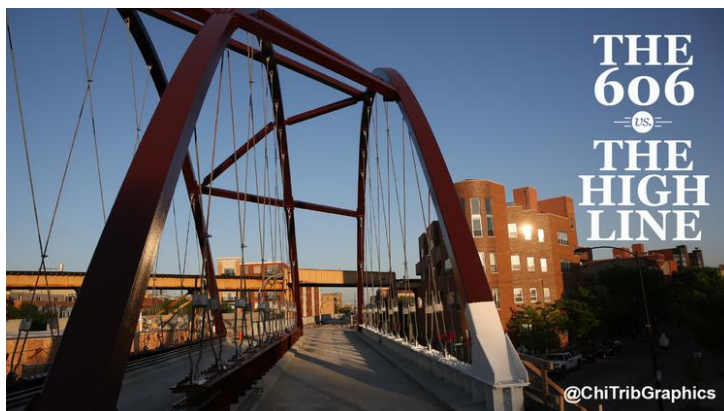
Neither The 606 nor its fundraising is complete. There's still \$20 million of private money to raise for the \$95 million project, as well as another \$3 million in state grant money that's frozen by the governor's executive order. But on a sun-drenched Saturday, with music and festivities along the trail, the diverse crowd seemed happy to just enjoy the moment.

"I think it's wonderful, man," said Joaquin Flores, 38, of Logan Square, looking down at his two young daughters riding bicycles on the trail. "You get connected with your community and with your neighbors."

A couple blocks north of North Avenue, The 606 runs west from Ashland Avenue, near the Kennedy Expressway, to Ridgeway Avenue, just past the McCormick Tribune YMCA in Logan Square.

Flores said he's noticed positive change in Logan Square, notably when the Julia de Burgos Park, a key piece in the development of The 606, opened in 2012. On Saturday morning, one of his daughters participated in the ribbon-cutting ceremony at Julia de Burgos, one of several such ceremonies at the 606's street-level access parks.

Bernadette Day, 55, of West Humboldt Park, wore an event staff shirt and handed out trail maps. No one in Day's family owns a car, she said. They prefer to ride bikes. Now, she hopes The 606 will drive other bike-related improvements on the Northwest Side, such as more designated bike lanes.



The 606 vs. The High Line

Day also said she was well aware of the concerns of some, particularly in Humboldt Park, that the trail would drive up property values and ramp up gentrification.

"It feels good when you live around here and something good happens. It doesn't happen a lot," Day said. "But it's hard when you think about it because you want it to get better, but you don't want it to get expensive where you can't afford it anymore."

Brad Syler and his wife, Jennifer, pushed their 2-year-old son in the stroller. An engineer, Syler said he'd been looking forward to the trail opening for years. He was happy to see some of the industrial structure retained as part of The 606.

"It's fantastic," said Syler, 41, of Logan Square. "They didn't suburbanize it too much. They made it nice without taking the character out of it."

The complaints were few, though several people mentioned the need for more trash cans and water fountains. There were some near-misses given the opening-day crowds — a dog snarled at a skateboarder whizzing by, and several times the screeching of bike tires could be heard as collisions were narrowly avoided.

For the most part, though, opening day on The 606 went as planned.

"I'm delighted, absolutely delighted," said Beth White, Chicago director for the Trust for Public Land, as she looked around the festival on Humboldt Boulevard. "It shows that everyone's really embraced the trail."

As White pointed out in previous interviews leading up to the opening, the work's not done. Saturday's opening marked the first phase of the completion. The California-based Trust for Public Land will continue to serve as an "owner's rep" and project manager, in collaboration with the Chicago Park District and the city.

A key part of that role will be fundraising. About \$50 million of the \$95 million project is being paid for with federal funds, according to trust officials. Another \$5 million in city, state and county funds is contributing to the project.

Of the \$20 million in private money raised so far, about 45 percent has come from corporate sponsors, such as Boeing, Exelon and the CNA insurance company, with the rest coming from individuals and foundations, White said.

Another \$20 million is needed to complete the project, including the two "bookend" parks at the east and west ends of the 606. And \$3 million in state grants were designated for the project but frozen by Gov. Bruce Rauner months ago, as part of a broader freeze on state Open Space Lands Acquisition and Development grants.

If those grants aren't restored, that's another \$3 million in private funding that would need to be raised, White said.

In a recent interview, Mayor Rahm Emanuel said the fundraising push would continue, invigorated by the buzz created by Saturday's festivities. He compared the debut of The 606 to those of Maggie Daley Park and the city's downtown Riverwalk, which were both usable but not completely finished upon recent openings.

"We've raised half and I believe we'll finish the job," Emanuel said recently. "A part of the opening is it will give us the energy to finish the stretch."