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## THE BLOOMINGDALE TRAIL: IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO MAKE A PARK

Seven years ago, in an ornate ballroom at the Hilton Chicago, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association and 13 other lead agencies in LISC Chicago's New Communities Program unveiled comprehensive plans for the future of 16 underserved neighborhoods.

It was a time of rejoice, relief and optimism that a multi-year planning process had yielded 14 bound volumes with pretty pictures and detailed maps pointing toward what everybody hoped – on one level – would be better infrastructure, better schools, better parks, better odds that those neighborhoods would be able to sustain themselves for years to come. On another level, they just hoped the plans were worth more than the paper they were printed on. Because they'd seen plenty that weren't.



Renderings from The Trust for Public Land show a depiction of how the trail will look – and be used – upon completion.

Among the Logan Square Neighborhood Association's (LSNA) principal strategies laid out in its NCP quality-of-life plan was expanding and improving parks and recreational programs and creating new community spaces. It specifically mentioned the Bloomingdale Trail, an abandoned 2.7-mile railroad embankment named after Bloomingdale Avenue, which parallels the tracks and runs through four neighborhoods – Logan Square, Humboldt Park, Wicker Park and Bucktown. LSNA – and many other people and organizations – wanted to convert the elevated thoroughfare into a cycling/pedestrian path and park.

But a lot can happen in seven years. And it did. Elected officials came and went. Community interest waxed and waned. Financial calamity – the greatest the country had witnessed since the Great Depression – resulted in lost jobs, abandoned homes, and serious questions about the future of public and private funding for any and all neighborhood improvement projects.

So when Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced alongside Beth White of the [Trust for Public Land](#) (TPL) earlier this spring that sufficient funds – thanks to contributions from Exelon (\$5 million), Boeing (\$1 million) and CNA (\$1 million), coupled with a \$20,000 grant and \$30,000 project initiation loan from LISC, via TPL, \$2 million from the Chicago Park District, and \$37 million in federal funding – would allow construction to proceed, it was cause for celebration by TPL which led a persistent coalition of neighborhood organizations, determined residents, creative planners, resourceful city officials and generous corporations who worked long and hard to make the trail a reality.

The Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation, the NCP lead agency in Humboldt Park, also included the Bloomingdale Trail in its quality-of-life plan, but LSNA had a particular incentive to make sure the deal got done. According to a 2004 open space study, Logan Square has the second smallest amount of park space out of Chicago's 77 neighborhoods, with only one-half acre of open space for every 1,000 residents.

"We didn't take the lead on this," said Lucy Gomez-Feliciano, LSNA's health outreach director, who's spent the last few years organizing support for the project. "Residents took the lead (and formed an organization, Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail), but we were looking for something that would allow residents to be more active – to have more places to exercise – and the trail would do that. But it's not like Englewood, or the West Side here. There are no vast parcels of available land. This was a genius idea. We need green space. These are dense communities."

No houses will be knocked down, no property seized.

Property, for access points to the trail, did have to be acquired, though, and LISC, in addition to helping shepherd LSNA's quality-of-life plan, provided critical early investments through \$50,000 in grants and loans, leveraged by the TPL, for a pocket park and access point between Albany and Whipple. TPL, a national organization that helps agencies and communities conserve land for public use and helps raise funds for those purposes, is managing the trail conversion. TPL has furthermore established the Bloomingdale Leadership Council that will continue working to raise private funds for the project. It says the 2.7 mile-long trail will be the longest elevated park anywhere in the world.

"When an affordable piece of land for an access park became available six years ago, we had to move quickly," said Beth White, director of TPL's Chicago office. "The project initiation loans and swift action by LISC were absolutely critical during our first acquisition. LISC, along with the NCP lead agencies, sees the potential of investing in communities and recognizes parks and open space are essential factors in building healthy neighborhoods."

Conversion of the rail line isn't expected to be completed until 2014, but when it is Gomez says it will serve not only recreational purposes – similar to the hugely successful High Line on Manhattan's West Side, which has become a major New York City tourist attraction – but will also be a boon to pedestrian and cycling commuters.

"A wonderful thing is that residents have been so proactive about this," said Gomez. "Some people were concerned that the trail will raise property taxes or that there would be unknown or unintended consequences. Our role has been to engage people who normally are not in these decision making circles."

For example, LSNA, working with After School Matters, enlisted 30 young people participating in the Logan Square Youth Leadership Institute to do a community action research project on the potential impact of the trail, focusing on jobs, safety, community outreach/involvement, affordable housing and youth involvement. The students interviewed 150 people who lived near the trail, and through those interviews came up with suggestions and recommendations ranging from trail maintenance projects to creating job opportunities through bicycle repair shops.

If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes several villages – in the forms of LSNA, the Trust for Public Land, the **Friends of Bloomingdale Trail**, the public and private funders, etc. – to make a park.