The Cost of Going Green:
Environmental Gentrification and Community Resistance in New York City and Chicago

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Abstract 3
II. Introduction 4
III. Differentiating Gentrification and Displacement 5
IV. Tensions Between Environmental Justice and Urban Development 6
V. Defining Environmental Gentrification 7
VI. Community Strategy and Participatory Justice 9
VII. Recognition Justice and Preventing Environmental Gentrification 10
VIII. Setting and Background
  a. New York City and ESCR 11
  b. Chicago and the 606 Trail 14
IX. Methodology 18
X. Findings
  a. New York City and ESCR
    i. Initial Community Impressions of ESCR 20
    ii. Emergence of Organizing and Community Divides 23
    iii. Racial Segregation & Neighborhood History 26
    iv. The Role of Local Elected Officials 28
    v. Is Gentrification Actually a Concern? 29
  b. Chicago and the 606
    i. Logan Square and Gentrification 33
    ii. Initial Community Impressions of the 606 34
    iii. Emergence and Phases of Organizing 36
    iv. The Role of Elected Officials 40
    v. Successes and Future Lessons 41
XI. Policy Recommendations 46
XII. Conclusion 48
XIII. Works Cited 50

Abstract

Environmental or "green" gentrification, a concept which has recently been named in environmental justice literature, is the process by which public initiatives intended to improve the environmental conditions or sustainability of a given area ultimately drive the displacement of low-income residents. Environmental gentrification may arise as an unfortunate and unintended consequence of environmental projects, or such projects may be intentionally used by city planners and high-end developers as a means of boosting property values or furthering other economic goals. This paper seeks to identify **which strategies are effective in community organizing around mitigating gentrification and displacement risks in the face of urban environmental initiatives, and whether similar strategies can be applied across cities**. These questions are answered through a series of interviews with members of community-based organizations (CBOs), employees of City agencies, local officials, and neighborhood residents involved with public action surrounding the East Side Coastal Resiliency Project (ESCR) in New York City and the 606 Bike Trail in Chicago. Findings indicate that the construction of new green space amenities – or improvements upon old ones – must be recognized as potential catalysts for gentrification, and communities and Cities together must take action preemptively to protect existing residents from the pressures of gentrification and neighborhood change.

Introduction

The potential for gentrification and displacement following environmentalist projects in urban areas is steadily growing in American cities, particularly as gentrification becomes an increasingly ubiquitous reality. Census tract data from the nation's 50 largest cities indicates that nearly 20 percent of neighborhoods with lower incomes and home values have experienced gentrification between 2000 and 2015, compared to 9 percent between 1990 and 2000 (Maciag, 2015). Following the completion of well-intentioned projects, such as waste site cleanups and sustainable infrastructure improvements, surrounding areas often have the potential to become more attractive to developers and wealthy city residents, driving up the cost of living and potentially making said areas inaccessible to longtime residents that these projects initially sought to protect. The term *environmental gentrification* has risen to increasing prominence in environmental justice literature since its coining in 2008, and is conceptualized as "the coincidence of environmental enforcement and gentrification" (Hamilton & Curran, 2012).

There is a consensus among environmental justice scholars that environmental harms and burdens – which include gentrification and displacement – can best be avoided through active engagement with communities and neighborhoods closest to project sites. Often, the inclusion of community voices in environmental decision-making does not come as second nature to City governments and must instead be pushed for through local organizing efforts. In the case of urban environmental initiatives with associated threats of gentrification and displacement in their surrounding areas, power dynamics among neighborhood stakeholders and local leaders can heavily impact the responses of communities to such plans, including their goals and strategies (Krings & Schusler, 2020). As of yet, there is no consensus as to which strategies lead to what a community might deem a "successful" or "unsuccessful" response to a given initiative.

The East Side Coastal Resiliency Project (ESCR) in New York City and the 606 Bike Trail in Chicago have both seen clear instances of community pushes to amend and improve plans associated with gentrification in two very different cities. By comparing the various ways and socio-political settings in which these efforts were organized, I identify **which strategies are effective in community organizing around mitigating gentrification and displacement risks in the face of urban environmental initiatives, and whether similar strategies can be applied across cities**. I also examine the differences in the political structures of New York City and Chicago that might play a role in the magnitude of risk posed by gentrification and displacement in different areas and whether concerns about these risks are heard. Displacement of longtime neighborhood residents is often driven by gentrification and community disinvestment in combination with one another (Krings, Copic, Schusler, 2020). Thus, the history of disinvestment, segregation, and gentrification in the areas surrounding these two projects – that is, the relationship between the neighborhoods in question and their City leaders – must be explored as well.

Differentiating Gentrification and Displacement

The term "gentrification" and the processes it encompasses have evolved gradually over the years, and definitions vary by discipline. At its core, however, gentrification is typically defined in urban and environmental studies literature as "the process of neighborhood change that results in the replacement of lower-income residents with higher-income ones" (Kennedy & Leonard, 2001). The process is considered to occur in cities with tight housing markets and in a select number of neighborhoods (Ibid).

Drawing the analytical distinction between gentrification and displacement is important in the context of these studies (Zuk, et al., 2017). Displacement is not a process that happens in

isolation, but instead requires a number of pre-existing conditions in order to occur. It has been noted that displacement in a given area arises out of a combined history of divestment from the pre-existing community, especially when they consist primarily of marginalized groups such as People of Color and the working class, and ongoing gentrification. Krings, et al. (2020) refer to the experiences of environmentally vulnerable residents in Austin, TX to illustrate that divestment is often more immediate of a concern than gentrification for many vulnerable communities. This can create tension within communities that face risks of gentrification; some people may welcome opportunities for investment in the neighborhood after years, if not decades, of being ignored by city officials, while others may not believe present investments are worth the cost of potential future displacement. Displacement is thus considered distinct from gentrification, although the two often come hand-in-hand (Zuk, et al., 2017).

For the purposes of this study, I will be regarding displacement as a key characteristic of gentrification and a likely outcome of environmental gentrification in historically disenfranchised communities. My focus will be on how various communities plan to address environmental gentrification, whether by attempting to eradicate the threat altogether or by mitigating some of its negative consequences, especially displacement.

Tensions Between Environmental Justice and Urban Development

Environmental justice is an ever-expanding field of activism and scholarship whose goal is to equitably distribute environmental risks and benefits, with a particular focus on recognition and justice for low-income communities of Color (National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, 1991). The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless

of race, color, national origin or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies" (2020).

The Principles of Environmental Justice, written by delegates of the first National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, state that environmental justice "affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples" and is thus principally opposed to the products of capitalism and colonial expansion. Environmental justice opposes the occupation and exploitation of lands by the military and multinational corporations, and encourages individuals to use as little of Earth's natural resources as possible (National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, 1991). For many urban studies scholars and historians, urban development is inherently linked to the development of capitalism through population growth, the market economy, accumulation, and expansion (Fields, 1999; Harvey, 1978). There thus exists a tension between the goals of environmental justice and the goals of urban development, which leaves many environmentally-burdened communities vulnerable to the threat of displacement and removal as cities expand and seek to generate increasing amounts of revenue.

Defining Environmental Gentrification

Environmental or "green" gentrification, a concept which has recently been named in environmental justice literature, is the process by which public initiatives intended to improve the environmental conditions or sustainability of a given area ultimately drive the displacement of low-income residents (Smith & Greenberg, 2021). It flourishes within the intersection between environmental justice activism and late-stage capitalism, two forces which are fundamentally in opposition with one another (Checker, 2011). Environmental gentrification

may arise as an unfortunate and unintended consequence of sustainability projects, such as parks, bike trails, and waste cleanups, that intend to alleviate the disproportionate environmental burdens imposed upon low-income communities (Krings, et al., 2020). On the other hand, environmental projects may be purposefully used by city planners and high-end developers as a means of boosting property values or furthering other economic goals (Ibid; Smith & Greenberg, 2021). These decision-makers are said to appropriate the language of the urban environmental justice movement and utilize supposedly apolitical "sustainability" strategies in order to garner popular support for initiatives that ultimately increase tax revenue in an economically beneficial manner (Checker, 2011).

Whether or not the increase in land values is considered to be a favorable result of urban sustainable initiatives, their outcomes are often the same: low-income neighborhood residents are forced out, most likely to another site that has yet to be "greened" (Smith & Greenberg). Environmental gentrification, then, exists at the crossroads between contradictory forces, thereby presenting a complicated paradox: those who most need improvements to their surrounding environments rarely get to enjoy them once they are made. Displacement, then, stems from a combination of gentrification and historical disinvestment in low-income communities (Krings, et al., 2020). However, some advocates firmly believe that equitable resilience measures are capable of addressing climate gentrification and potentially exacerbated inequities, so long as governmental action balances investment in resilience infrastructure with investment in affordable housing and locally-owned businesses.

Community Strategy and Participatory Justice

Environmental gentrification is often presented as a pathway for future exploration, as it is still an emerging corner of environmental justice literature. The rapidly rising cost of living in large American cities, in combination with the ever-evolving threat of global climate change, has radically strengthened the urgent need for safeguards against environmentally-driven gentrification and displacement. However, there are very few studies that have documented the success of pushes for such policies. There is no one set of strategies that is proven to yield adequate protections for vulnerable low-income residents of "greening" neighborhoods, but the indispensable role of community involvement repeatedly appears (Krings, et al., 2020; Hamilton & Curran, 2012). Krings, et al. (2020) found that residents often organize to promote neighborhood affordability in the absence of more effective government intervention, and that many organizers, activists, and community development practitioners often create models for success in building long term collaborations with residents across issues and neighborhoods that City governments can learn from and scale upward.

The Principles of Environmental Justice stress the importance of community participation in every step of the environmental decision-making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation (National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, 1991). Environmental justice "calls for the institutions of mainstream environmentalism to be transformed to include the voices of those most affected by the environmental burdens. Otherwise, harmful environmental practices are likely to continue" (Figueroa, 2006). This concept has been termed *recognition justice* in existing literature (Ibid).

Decision-making that is driven by the desires and viewpoints of local residents, however, does not *a priori* result in the most equitable outcomes for all nearby communities. Purcell

(2005) cautions against "the local trap", the assumption that political processes at the local scale will *a priori* result in more democratic, socially just outcomes than larger scales. This assumption is held by many urban studies scholars and activists, and it is important to push back against the assumption that community-based solutions are inherently anti-racism and pro-justice. Instead, community relationships and proposals must be carefully interrogated when incorporating voices into urban policy, and a variety of perspectives must be considered.

Recognition Justice and Preventing Environmental Gentrification

The importance of recognition justice shows through in several environmental gentrification-related studies. In one of few case studies documenting struggles against environmental gentrification, Curran and Hamilton (2012) tell the story of a group of long-term residents in Brooklyn, New York, who built strategic alliances with gentrifiying entities to challenge further gentrification and to secure environmental amenities and benefits. They recognized the impact that gentrifiers could have on the political opportunity to achieve change, and created a common set of norms and values which has since been shown to promote the maintenance of a working, clean waterfront. In their analysis of environmental justice organizing in Pilsen, Chicago, Krings & Copic (2020) implore community workers in gentrifying areas to recognize that residents of place-based communities hold differing ideas about who can and should represent them, and to use an intersectional approach to issue selection. They encourage intentional recruitment and leadership development strategies that reduce structural barriers to participation, such as translation services at community meetings, outreach through multiple languages and media sources, and meetings held in family-friendly locations.

While the two studies mentioned above are important additions to the growing body of literature surrounding the intersection between environmental justice issues and urban gentrification, their findings are limited in generalizability due to the localized nature of place-based works. Given that they take place in New York and Chicago respectively, two cities that have as many shared characteristics as they do differences, it is difficult to discern which successful strategies for organizers in Brooklyn would garner similar outcomes for organizers in Chicago neighborhoods. I build upon the prior work of Krings, Copic, and Schusler, as well as the work of Curran and Hamilton, by conducting a comparative analysis of two different case studies in these same cities. My aim is to strengthen the prior findings of other researchers while analyzing which strategies work across cities and urban structures and which ones do not. I hope to understand which differences in city structures – both socio-political and physical – prevent the applicability of strategies for success in place-based struggles for environmental justice and displacement prevention.

SETTING AND BACKGROUND

Lower Manhattan, NYC and the East Side Coastal Resiliency Project

In October of 2012, Superstorm Sandy brought unprecedented devastation to New York City. Given its geographical position at various points of convergence between the East River, the Hudson River, and the Atlantic Ocean, New York City has long been highly susceptible to flooding due to natural disasters. After Sandy, over 50 square miles of the City were inundated, resulting in the deaths of at least 43 City residents, $19 billion in infrastructural damage, and the destruction of thousands of homes, schools, businesses, and livelihoods throughout the city (SIRR, 2013).

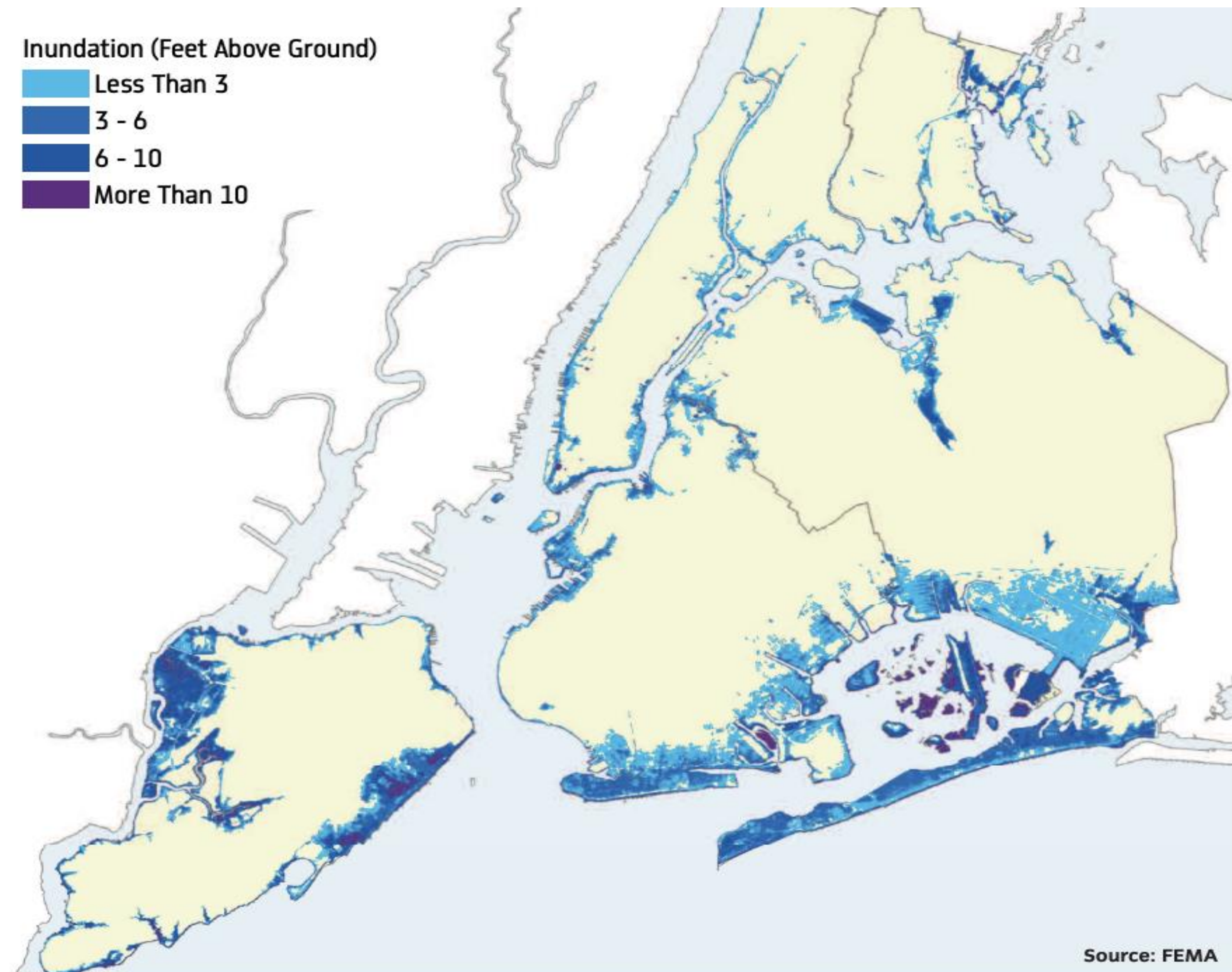

Figure 1: Inundation Levels in NYC Following Hurricane Sandy. Source: New York City Special Initiative for Rebuilding and Resiliency, 2013.

Among the areas most affected by Sandy's impacts were the Lower East Side and Chinatown, both of which are situated along the East River coastline of Lower Manhattan. These two neighborhoods encompass several communities which are home to public housing developments owned by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). 400 of these buildings lost heat and power due to the flooding caused by Sandy, and many residents were deeply impacted by the effects of the storm (Ibid).

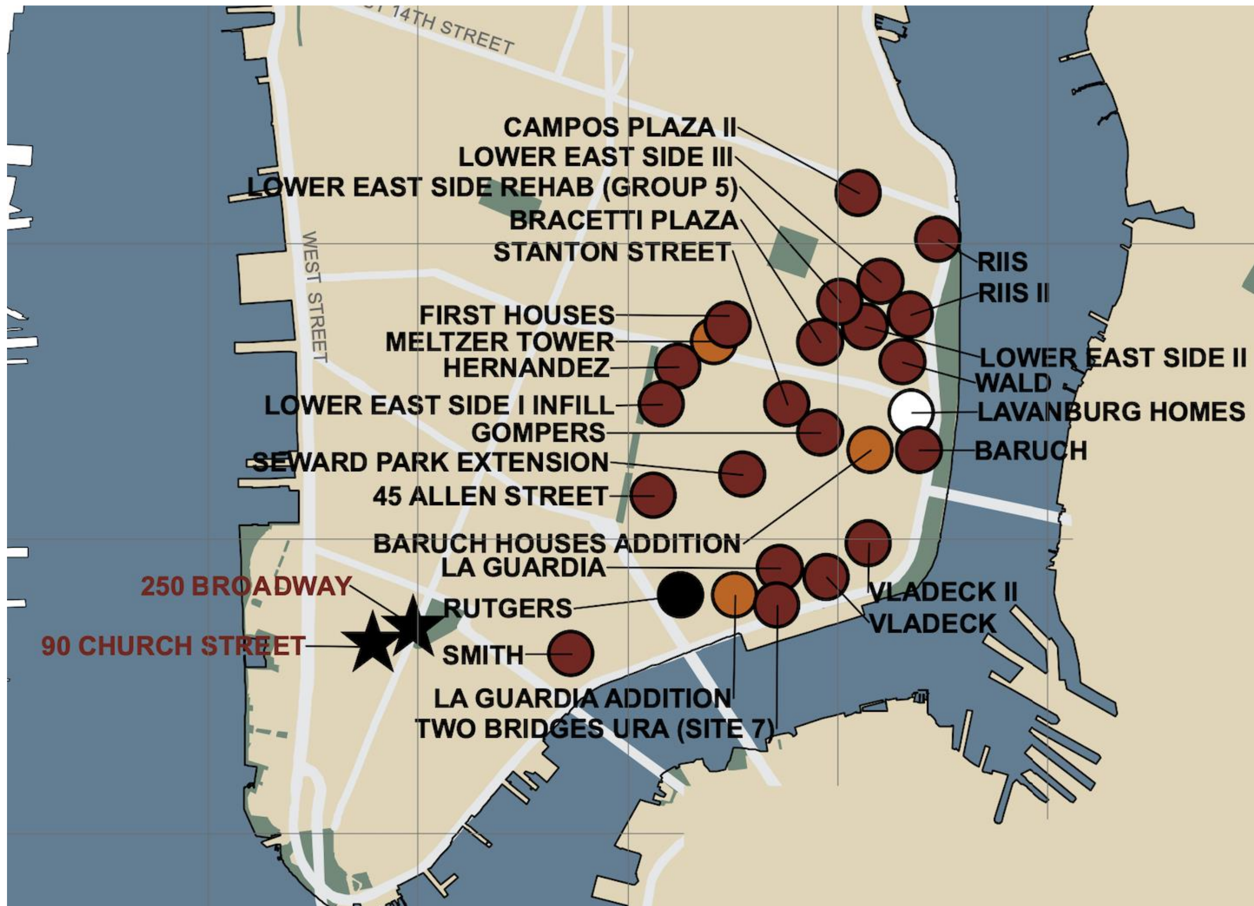

Figure 2: Map of NYCHA Developments in Lower Manhattan. Source: New York City Housing Authority, 2022.

In response to the devastation caused by Superstorm Sandy in 2012, the New York City government developed the East Side Coastal Resiliency Project (ESCR), a plan to elevate East River Park by eight feet in order to protect Manhattan's East Riverside from flooding. The newly reconstructed park would contain state-of-the-art recreational facilities and public amenities. The newest version of the plan, which had suddenly overhauled a previous iteration yielded from months of community input, received prominent backlash from several community groups across the affected neighborhoods after concerns were raised about the potential for displacement. During the hearings and rallies protesting the new alternative for ESCR, many residents of the East Village and Lower East Side suggested that City officials were more invested in the

environmental resiliency and sustainability of wealthy, white communities than that of low-income and/or minority communities. An unspoken corollary to this conclusion is the possibility that, once East River Park is made newly resilient against rising water levels and made anew with amenities such as “flexible, open lawns,” waterfront access, and “state-of-the art recreational facilities” (NYC Parks and Recreation, 2020), the areas surrounding the park may become more attractive to developers and wealthy city residents, driving up the cost of living in the area and making the area largely inaccessible to low-income, longtime residents in an already-gentrifying area. Demands to phase construction into two parts – so the park could always be partially accessible – were expressed through public statements by elected officials, rallies, blogs, online public feedback forums, and Community Board meetings. The request was ultimately granted, and the City Council voted in favor of the plan the following month. Construction was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and began in Fall 2020, with an expected end date in 2025. For this reason, the impact of ESCR on property values and displacement in the area cannot be empirically determined until after the project is complete.

Logan Square, Chicago and the 606/Bloomingdale Trail

Logan Square is a neighborhood on the Northwest Side of Chicago. It is home to many migrant families from Puerto Rico, Mexico, and other Latin American countries. The 2015-2019 American Community Survey (ACS) reports that the neighborhood was 50% white and 39% Hispanic or Latine during those years. However, due to ongoing pressures of gentrification, the racial makeup of the neighborhood has changed significantly; between the 2011-2015 and 2016-2020 ACS periods, Logan Square’s Latine population dropped by around 24% (Kang, 2022). It is also a very mixed-income neighborhood; between one-fifth and one-sixth of the neighborhood population belongs to each Census income bracket, respectively. Logan Square had among the

least green space per capita in Chicago in the 1990s; the idea to convert the former railway into a traffic-free bike trail was born in response to long-standing community pushes for more green space in the area. Due to the area's profile prior to the trail's construction as a low- to moderate-income neighborhood, its position at the West trailhead of the 606, and its relatively low property values prior to the trail's construction, it is considered to be highly vulnerable to

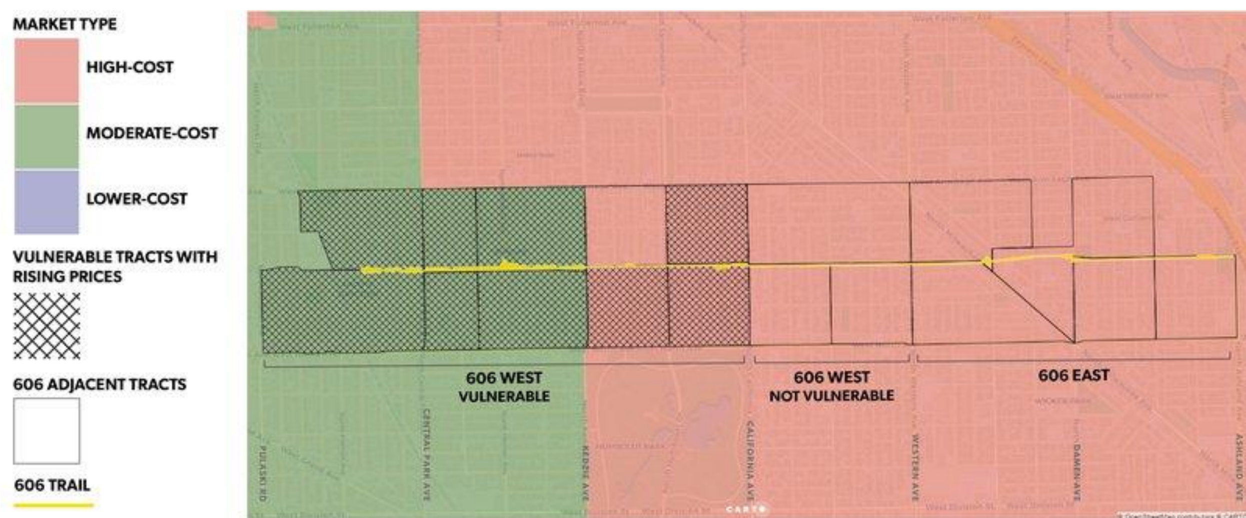

Figure 3: Housing Market Type and Resident Vulnerability to Displacement in Census Tracts Adjacent to The 606, 2018. Source: Depaul Institute for Housing Studies, 2020.

gentrification as a result of the 606 (Institute for Housing Studies, 2020).

The 606 Bike Trail is an multi-use elevated trail that extends for 2.7 miles through three distinct Chicago community areas – West Town, Humboldt Park, and Logan Square – and six ground-level parks (Gobster, et al., 2017). Developed in collaboration between the City of Chicago and various community groups, the trail was initially intended to break ground in 2017, but Rahm Emanuel's mayoral administration expedited the design and construction processes significantly, leading to its opening in 2013. The trail has attracted a large number of users since it broke ground; as of 2020, 1.3 million people ride bikes and walk along the trail per year (Ibid).

After the trail broke ground, the Logan Square neighborhood very quickly became a target for wealthy land developers, leaving middle- and low-income households on the West side of the trail vulnerable to replacement. Estimates place the rise in housing values along 606 West at 48.2% between the trail's groundbreaking and 2016.

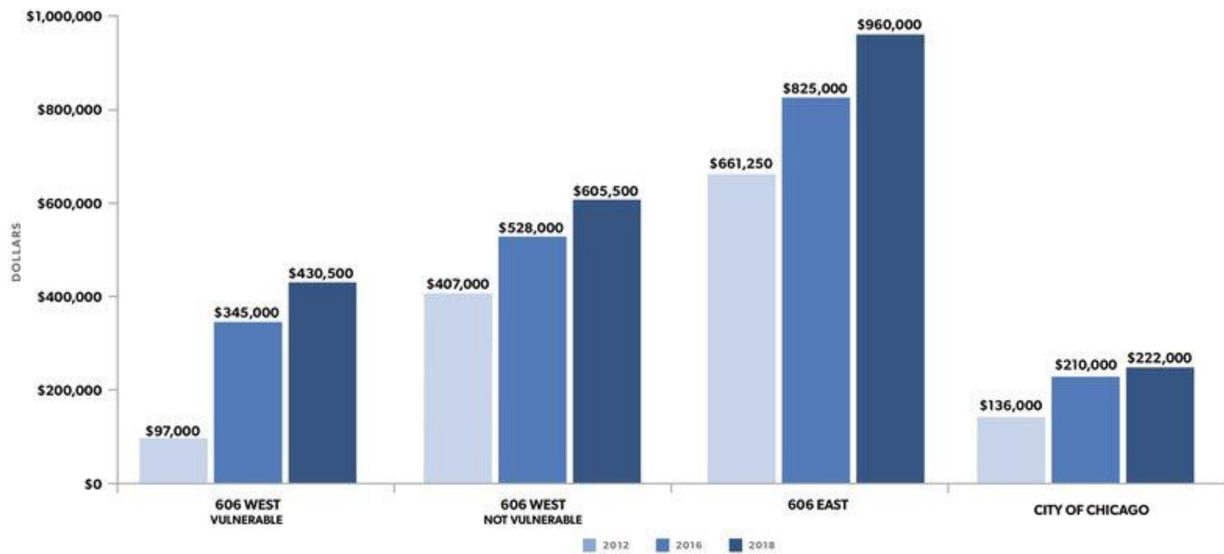

Figure 4: Share of 2 to 4 Unit Building Sales Less than $300,000 in Moderate-Cost Census Tracts with Rising Prices and Vulnerable Populations in Hermosa, Humboldt Park, and Logan Square, 2018 to 2019. Source: Depaul Institute of Housing Studies, 2020.

In addition to outcry from nearby community members, many Chicago residents who do not live near the 606 have expressed concerns about its contribution to environmental gentrification in their own neighborhoods. In response, a six-month moratorium on demolition permits for residential properties near the trail was passed in January 2020 in order to slow the rate of gentrification and provide time for developing policies to address the rapid loss of affordable housing along the trail. The moratorium was extended to March 2021 by an anti-deconversion ordinance by the Lightfoot administration, who also passed a *permit surcharge ordinance* – a policy that requires developers to pay $15,000 for each demolition permit, or

$5,00 per residential unit – that took effect in April 2021. Proposals for other policies have included rent freezes and other interventions to mitigate its impacts (Byrne, 2020). The effort to introduce and pass these proposals is currently ongoing. In addition to actively pushing Lori Lightfoot and local community wards to protect residents, several nearby community associations are developing new strategies to retroactively reduce the harm that the 606 has caused (Black, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

In this study, I conducted in-depth, virtual interviews with 12 different individuals involved in public action surrounding the 606 trail and the ESCR project. Among the interviewees were workers affiliated with local community-based organizations (CBOs), employees of City agencies, local officials, and local residents affiliated with campaigns or coalitions organized specifically to address or resist the nearby projects. Using the key informant model to gather specific and highly-localized knowledge, I created a standard set of questions that was altered according to each individual's position in relation to the project in question. Each interviewee's affiliation of interest to the projects and surrounding areas, as well as the project with which each was affiliated, is detailed in Table 1.

Affiliation with Area/Project	**# Of ESCR Respondents**	**# Of 606 Respondents**	**Total # of Respondents**
CBO Member/Employee	1	5	6
Local Government/Official	1	1	2
Activist Group/Campaign (Project-Specific)	2	0	2
Scholar/Researcher	1	0	1
Developer	0	1	1
Total	5	7	12

Table 1: Interviewee Relationships to Projects.

In addition to their role in public action surrounding their respective projects, many of the interviewees are residents of the areas most directly impacted by the projects in question and consider themselves members of the communities upon which this study places its focus. Table 2 indicates the number of local residents in each interviewee pool.

Resident of Project Area?	**# Of ESCR Respondents**	**# Of 606 Respondents**	**Total # of Respondents**
Yes	4	2	6
No	1	5	2
Total	5	7	12

Table 2: Number of Interviewees who Identify as Neighborhood Residents/Community Members.

The initial questions pertain to each interviewee's perspective on the project they are close to, its purpose, and whether or not they think it is an effective or worthwhile strategy for improving sustainability in their city. The questions that follow focus on their experiences of the

decision-making process for the project and whether or not the surrounding community was adequately included before pivoting to a direct reflection upon the community response to the potential gentrification and displacement effects of the project, the manner in which the concerns arose, and how they have been (or are actively being) addressed according to the interviewee. Finally, the informants are asked to provide an analysis of whether or not the community efforts to mitigate housing inequality have 1) been heard and addressed by City officials, planners, and other authorities on the project, and 2) made a significant positive impact thus far in terms of protecting low-income residents of nearby residents from potential displacement as a result of the project. The list of questions below is the template I used for each interview, though the order and specific questions varied slightly depending on the subject and the nature of their involvement.

1. How long have you lived in your neighborhood? Can you tell me about your community there?
2. What is your perception of the state of gentrification in your neighborhood?
3. When you first heard about the current iteration of the plan to construct the 606/ESCR, what were your initial impressions?
4. What was your perception of your community's reaction to the proposal and passage of the project? What were people's initial concerns?
5. When and how did concerns surrounding the potential for gentrification and housing inequality begin to emerge?
6. How quickly after the project's passage did organizing efforts begin to address people's concerns?
7. What forms did community response to the plan take – were they formally organized, or did they exist outside of local/city government?
8. To whom were these collective concerns addressed – City government, city planners, the mayor, fellow residents, et cetera?
9. Do you believe the community responses to the plan have been successful in mitigating

the risk of gentrification and housing inequality brought about by the 606/ESCR? Why or why not?

10. How do you think the relationship between your neighborhood residents/leaders and city leadership affected whether or not the community's concerns were heard and addressed?
11. When thinking about the processes by which community concerns over the 606/ESCR and its potential contributions to gentrification in the neighborhood, what went well? What could have gone better?

New York City and ESCR

Initial Community Impressions of ESCR

When asked about their initial impressions of the revised iteration of the ESCR plan, all five interviewees noted that they felt – or observed within others – intense anger directed towards the City. Four interviewees mentioned that community members felt "upset", two said they felt "pissed off," and two observed feelings of "shock".

One interviewee from a local community organization posited that the city's justification for including the demolition, elevation, and reconstruction of the park in the new plan had to do with the feasibility of the initial, community-developed plan. "I think a big piece of it was the technical aspect of what the community could put forward. It was just not technically possible when you think about certain infrastructure needs." This respondent took issue, however, with the opaque way in which the City came to make this decision. "The original proposal [was started by] some organizations on the south side. And so they worked together, put so many hours into making this community proposal, got so many people – I think 800 people – to come together to write this plan, and then the city teased them. Put a little carrot in front of their face, and then went silent for six months, and then came up with this whole new thing. The aftermath of that was shock and feeling like all of these efforts were wasted."

Another interviewee, a nearby resident whose involvement with planning efforts for coastal resiliency went back years prior to Sandy, was incredibly frustrated to see their work and input disregarded by the city. "[It was upsetting] for me to spend nearly a decade of my life trying to figure out coastal resiliency and plans for this neighborhood, [and then] for the city to come back and say, 'oh, wait a minute, oh, that input, we're gonna have to change it, because we decided that it wasn't actually feasible to construct.' [...] We were partners with a lot of the agencies that we're working with, especially the original office of resiliency. We spent many evenings, dozens of meetings, talking about this project, coming up with every little part of the project, and then silence for three months. And then they told us that this was a new plan. So [...] there was a sense of betrayal by the city, and a loss of trust, and that trust hasn't necessarily been rebuilt. And I don't think the city can do anything, now, to rebuild that trust."

After talking to experts and an independent consultant, however, this individual eventually came to agree that the City's revised proposal was a better plan. They believe that the primary problem with the revised plan was the lack of transparency on the City's part, but not necessarily the plan itself. "If they had just involved the community as they were discussing changing the plan, instead of just going silent for three months, and then coming out and saying, 'Oh, by the way, this is a new client. Sorry, we didn't tell you before.' I think that's where the city messed up. If they didn't, if they had changed their approach, I think they would have had a different outcome. And I don't think we would have had a controversy now." This posed a conflict for many residents who felt unheard by the city, but simultaneously recognized the urgent need for a resiliency plan. "What do you do when the city and all the agencies basically don't keep you in a loop, and they change the plan," they said, "but you look at it, and you say,

‘Okay, this is actually a better plan to protect the park, and the protective people behind it?’ Do you still fight it?”

For many community members, the answer was yes. Two interviewees remained adamantly against the new plan to reconstruct the park, and saw it as an instance of environmental racism in itself. One of these respondents, another neighborhood resident, viewed the plan as an extension of the City’s long-standing divestment in the community. “Folks do not consider low-income Black and Brown communities to be advocates for environmental justice. Or that they care to learn about how environmental justice and climate change impacts our communities. Because we're struggling with so many other things, this is [supposedly] not at the forefront of our minds. [...] And we saw that firsthand with Sandy. And, you know, for us, it was really problematic, the fact that we didn't have access to food, the fact that we didn't have access to water, we didn't have electricity, et cetera, you know, those were all lifelines that we depend on every single day to communicate to the outside world. And we were just abandoned.”

When approaching a particular policy or project through an environmental justice lens, a primary question often arises: that of who lives in closest proximity to the project area and who is thereby the most affected by its implementation. The aforementioned interviewee pointed out that, in the case of ESCR, one must consider both the impact of floods and that of “destroying two and a half miles of parkland,” and that Black and Brown NYCHA residents would be primarily impacted by these two events. That the City planned to deny access to open green space – the largest in the area – for a number of years on end made the plan “immediately [seem] like environmental injustice.”

It is clear that, while the vast majority of interviewees recalled widespread negative reactions to the initial announcement after the initial designs were foregone, community

impressions of the plan itself were nonetheless varied. While some came to appreciate the newer aspects of the design and ultimately support its implementation, others perceived the demolition of nearby green space as an expression of indifference towards and divestment in local communities of Color and thus led to impressions that the plan was unjust.

Emergence of Organizing and Community Divides

The complex, far-from-monolithic attitudes towards the new proposal marked the beginning signs of a splintering community – a sentiment that was affirmed by all five of the New York interviewees. "During those [Community Board] meetings after they changed the plan," said one interviewee who was present for said meetings, "some went to 11 o'clock at night, people yelling, and a lot of blame, and unfortunately, it sort of divided – no, didn't 'sort of' – divided the neighborhood." Dr. Naomi Schiller, an interviewee who works as a housing and environmental justice researcher at Brooklyn College, noted that community members were primarily split across prominent racial and class divides. "At the beginning, there was widespread outrage and very tenuous unity across the neighborhood," said Schiller, "but that really quickly dissipated. And what emerged was a divide between established organizations and leaders in the neighborhood, and particularly WoC [Women of Color] leaders who were elected leaders of their public housing developments, some other CBOs [community-based organizations], and people who were very new to participating [...] in politics in the neighborhood and really had never paid attention before to local politics, and had never been to community board meetings, had never participated at a local level. Considered themselves liberals, some considered themselves progressives, but really had never engaged at a community level and had very little sense of how New York City politics work[ed]. And they really didn't

know much about the grassroots organizations, the CBOs, the nonprofits, either, that are very powerful in this neighborhood to a different degree."

An interviewee who works for a local CBO noticed that active resistance to the plan arose "almost immediately," but that protests came in phases. "Just because people are protesting, they're not always the same people protesting. So the groups that worked with us on the original plan started to make a plan immediately after the aftermath of Sandy. Come 2019 or 2018, when the city changed the plan, more or less those same groups, that same base, mobilized to protest what's going on, and got concessions from the city."

These concessions included the formation of a *Community Advisory Group* (CAG), a collection of leaders in the area appointed to the board by the local City Council member who serve an advisory role to the ESCR project team. These leaders "get reports on the ongoing construction and how the process is changing, but also get to give meaningful feedback about that and are kept updated in a very real and transparent way," says an interviewee. Another large negotiation with the City was the phasing-out of construction; in order to enable access to at least one portion of the park at all times during the building process, the timeframe for the construction of ESCR was extended from three years to five. These successes were, in the aforementioned interviewee's view, due in part to these groups' devotion to the root motivations behind their negotiations with the City. "There was always a mindset of being based in that tragedy that happened during Sandy and being grounded in the fact of the aftermath from that. Everybody knew that this needed to get done, that there needed to be flood protection, especially considering the budget was gonna run out if we didn't start construction. So it was, there was a sense of urgency too, with, 'okay, we don't like what they put forward, but what can we force them to do?'

The respondent then mentioned the second phase of protesting after these negotiations were settled upon. “[Once] that group [was] satisfied, that coalition [...] kind of stopped with their protests. But then, after all of that work has been done negotiating with the city, then comes in a new group of protestors or activists who are now finally jumping in after kind of not being involved to then protest again, but without really a tenable alternative.”

Another interviewee noted that this same group mainly advocated for the conservancy of the park, and were able to organize quickly after the change. “That group splintered into multiple [...] groups, which also divided some communities and neighborhoods in the process. And people lost some friends also. When that happened, that ramped up the organizing efforts.” This interviewee said that this group – which consisted primarily of educated, middle-class members – was clearly organized and well-funded, which exacerbated the visible community divides across racial and class lines (although the interviewee did not specify the racial makeup of this particular group). “They were able to hire lawyers and get money and get donations. [...] A lot of them are very educated and know people. So it's very easy for them to form a 501c3, you know, raise money [...] within a space of a few months. That usually doesn't happen in low-income neighborhoods [...] They're not retired and there aren't, you know, 10 engineers living on the same block, or 10 lawyers working on the same line. They came at odds with those folks who live in the lower income or nicer buildings, basically saying, ‘stop taking our voice. We're speaking and you're taking our voice.’”

They noted that this conflict is still prevalent today in the push against misinformation about the plan and its true motivations. “Those folks who are very, very organized, well-funded, as I mentioned, and able to control the message, able to spread whatever information they want to spread. The folks who live in low-income neighborhoods are constantly on the defense and

constantly trying to correct misinformation. I think that's where we are right now, even though the project is moving forward." The interviewee did not give details about the specific false messages being spread by this group or the ways in which they are being spread.

Racial Segregation & Neighborhood History

One individual affirmed that many of the people willing to proceed with the plan were public housing residents who were most directly affected by the impacts of Sandy. "I've heard a lot of people who live in public housing say that the people who don't want the plan to go through don't care about the families and the homes along the waterfront that are low-income housing," they said. "And in that way, it's just another example that these loud, vociferous groups that are based in the more gentrified area of the East Village are out-yelling the voices of the people who are in public housing." They were careful about their use of the word "gentrification" in their analysis, however. "Gentrification is not necessarily a fair word here, because those loud voices who live in the more affluent housing are not necessarily gentrifiers. They've also been in the neighborhood for a really long time, but are they the ones that are most impacted by a closure of the park or by flood protection? Not really, because their homes weren't nearly as damaged as the ones along the waterfront were."

An interviewee who lives in public housing, however, strongly disagreed with this sentiment. "Now [some community members] are just saying that people that are against this plan are racist, right? And that people that are against this plan are just people that moved in, gentrifiers," they said. "It's pinning the community against one another, because the reality of it is that the people that are in this fight, they've lived here longer than I have lived here. They've been here 50, 60 years. [...] It's really wrong, what's happening in our community specifically. I

was very upset by it. You know, we mobilized tons of people, we got 3000 petition signatures indicating that the people did not want this part to be destroyed, that they wanted to have, you know, more conversations about this."

Dr. Schiller argues that the neighborhood was always set up to be divided across racial lines due to the neighborhood's history of housing segregation and discrimination against Black and Latine people. "[These] community relationships around housing are long-standing and shape the contemporary dilemma about how to think about climate adaptation." She spoke about a number of privately-owned co-op buildings near the waterfront that were all built by progressive labor unions. In the 1970s, these co-ops were sued by a local legal defense fund for racial discrimination and were found guilty. "It was very clear that, for decades, they discriminated against Black and Puerto Rican people who were applying for apartments. They kept it 96% white." Racist and classist sentiments persisted, Schiller said, in the solidification of NYCHA as low-income housing for mostly people of Color. "[It was] not accidental either. These are state processes, and individual acts of racism that came together. So that is a history that this neighborhood has not reckoned with and people do not want to talk about. That history is absent from the official history of [the co-ops], for example, but it's a real issue about the transfer of intergenerational wealth. New York City hugely subsidized the building of these apartment buildings [near the waterfront], which then privatized, which meant a huge transfer of wealth to white families. This happened right here, and it happened up through the 1990s. This is not ancient history. And nobody wants to talk about that." Schiller's analysis clearly illustrates the inequitable history of housing in the area, and it is clear that this history has an existing legacy on community relations today.

The Role of Local Elected Officials

When asked whose attention organizers were trying to capture in conversations about ESCR, two interviewees did not have a clear answer. “I know that there were protests done in front of City Hall, directly after the City chose their own plan. I remember signs [...] that were directed against De Blasio, and I know that our City Council person specifically was really helpful in directing and stuff in the city, but from a political perspective of who was making the decisions, I honestly don’t know,” said one interviewee. “The decision maker on the ESCR is… I think it was the mayor. I don't know.”

“There was a lot of confusion among community members in some ways about who our primary target or interlocutor was around these questions,” said Schiller, affirming the prior interviewee’s lack of clarity. “When De Blasio changed the plan in 2018, it had passed between city agencies. So the Department of Design and Construction took over the project as they tried to shepherd it into the design and construction phase. [...] So I think people were really unclear.”

The role of the local Community Board – a group of individuals who are appointed by City Council to represent their communities in City decision-making – has been a point of confusion for many residents, according to Schiller. “It’s rather unclear what power the Community Board holds. Officially, it has advisory power, so it can vote in support of something or against something, but it doesn’t really matter. Even if it doesn’t support something, the project advances anyway. It’s kind of a level of censure, you know, it shows, if the project doesn’t get approval from the Community Board, it shows that [...] there’s some friction there with local elected officials about what's going on. [...] Sometimes the borough president and the council member go along with the Community Board, but rarely when a Community Board votes something down does that actually result in the Council member and the Borough President

voting something down. So it’s confusing.” The lack of clarity surrounding who made final decisions about ESCR thus may have somewhat undermined organizing efforts, as there was no singular entity that the protest groups were attempting to address.

Is Gentrification Actually a Concern?

One interviewee noted that many low-income residents along the East River waterfront seemed to believe their displacement was a primary goal of the project. “When people started finding out what the new design was, and realized that they were going to turn something that wasn't completely flat into something completely flat, I think that was really the element that generated a lot of that suspicion that this [was] for building.” This suspicion, the interviewee said, was heightened by the fact that gentrification has been an ongoing process in the area for decades. Another interviewee noted that the amenities of the future park were changed from the initial iteration of the plan, which further indicated an aim to cater to affluent residents. “They decreased the number of basketball courts and increased the number of tennis courts,” the individual said. “They slightly changed where the green space was gonna be. Just small things like that. I felt like they were preparing this new park to be a park for luxury developments that are gonna keep on climbing up the waterfront.

Three interviewees pointed out that these fears surrounding gentrification and displacement, though understandable, are mostly founded on misinformation about the City’s intentions for the park. One interviewee said it would be “very unlikely” for the park land to become development space for luxury developments. “That would be an incredibly egregious break in all kinds of laws about what one can do.” Another interviewee agreed that “the way you use a park is, legally, you need to keep it as park use. If you wanna change that park use to

something else, that's [...] a very long, very intensive process where you have to go through the state and the City to change the zoning. And so there's been some messaging from other groups that have tried to say that [...] they're trying to change this from a park into zoning for condos or luxury apartments or whatever else. And that's not really the case. The zoning still needs to be a park."

"I don't think the park itself is going to create gentrification," said one NYCHA resident. "I don't necessarily think that making things equal for people or making neighborhoods equal is gentrification. Gentrification generally occurs when developers come in and build buildings, not from repairing sidewalks or making a park nice, or giving resources to people who live in a community for 20 years, and they finally get a decent playground. But I do think that just because you live in a moderate-income or poor-income neighborhood [doesn't mean] you can't have a decent park." They acknowledged, however, the potential for the park's impact on the forces of gentrification more broadly, but noted that there wasn't much conversation around that aspect. "The other areas [around the park] may or may not be affected, but I really don't think so. There was a beautiful park there before. This is just a new park with the same existing programming, same soccer fields, same baseball fields, but it's just raised eight feet. Will it be nicer? Of course it'll be nicer. It better be nicer, after one and a half billion dollars. Does that make it more likely that that the tenement building in Alphabet City or, or the area might want to charge more because it's a brand new park that's protected from flood protection? Sure, but I really haven't heard that. I've just heard people talking about putting towers in the park." They stressed that the misinformation about the City's intentions for the park "has exhausted a lot of people."

Schiller notes that, while misinformation among certain groups has been a problem, people's fears about displacement and gentrification is still warranted. "Many people have responded that this project is clearly not for us, as people have said. That, you know, 'this is a fancy park, they're trying to push us out, they've never cared about us before, why are they doing this, it's clearly because they're building this for somebody else, which means they're gonna push us out.' [...] I don't think that the city plans to develop the park itself, but I think that there will be huge pressures placed on the neighborhood through resiliency gentrification, through the fact that it's a fancy new park with all kinds of new amenities, and that it will lower the price of flood insurance for homeowners nearby, so it should drastically change the kind of risk that insurance companies measure, that landowners have in this neighborhood."

There is a clear lack of consensus among the community regarding the extent to which ESCR will bring with it the potential for gentrification and displacement. The notion that the project is a means of acquiring land for the sake of later private development is not based in truth and has been debunked by a number of interviewees. However, it is important to note that while the parkland itself may not be grounds for gentrifying entities to build luxury developments, a new park with a number of high-quality recreational amenities could make the surrounding areas more attractive to affluent families, which would create a market for development along the waterfront and thus spark the potential for gentrification. In other words, the potential for gentrification does not only bring up questions about displacement, but can also impact which groups have access to public spaces and amenities.

The status of NYCHA as a federally protected public housing authority adds nuance to the conversations surrounding gentrification along the ESCR project area. According to Dr. Schiller, the *Environmental Impact Statement* for ESCR – an official statement that outlines the

potential environmental harms and effects that the project might bring to the area – concluded that there would be very little impact on housing and gentrification pressures. "They [the City] consider NYCHA stable and not gentrifiable. People are not going to be displaced from NYCHA, so there's a certain amount of built-in stability in the neighborhood. And to some extent, that's true," Schiller said. But despite the relative stability of NYCHA compared to market-rate housing, Schiller said its developments are still subject to changes and privatization efforts depending on City and Mayoral policies. "When this process began, [former Mayor] Bloomberg was trying to push through what he called "Next-Generation NYCHA," which was a plan to develop empty space on NYCHA housing developments to develop market-rate housing in order to fund NYCHA," she said. The plan did not go through due to large amounts of pushback, but the notion that NYCHA is somehow protected for all time, Schiller said, "is ridiculous." This once again illustrates the need to understand gentrification as a process of neighborhood change, not solely as a driving force of displacement. That NYCHA is entirely stable, and that its residents are protected from displacement, is a potential distraction from the pressures of neighborhood change to which NYCHA residents can still be subject as a result of gentrification in surrounding areas.

Chicago and the 606

Logan Square and Gentrification

Gentrification had already been occurring in Logan Square prior to the opening of the 606 trail. One interviewee, who has lived in Logan Square their whole life, explained that the neighborhood is home to many economic refugees from Mexico, Latin America, and Puerto Rico. "We come here in search of a better life, so we suffer this trauma of leaving everything we know behind, and starting over in a neighborhood like Logan Square. And then, you know, a

couple decades later, the people who grew up in the suburbs realize, ‘oh, actually, we wanna live in cities. Actually, Logan Square’s a really cool community.’ And then they come here, and buy our land, and tear our affordable housing down. And then that creates a cycle of destruction of housing and family networks.”

Another longtime resident of Logan Square affirmed the ongoing process of gentrification outside of the 606. “If the 606 didn't even exist, if you just erased it from the earth, we still had gentrification moving this direction, because people were getting priced out from Wicker Park and Bucktown, just East of us. And so people were being pushed West. And that was pushing our people West. But we really believe that the 606 fueled gentrification.”

Initial Community Impressions of the 606

Three interviewees indicated that they were advocates of the plan when it was first announced. “Initially, I thought it would be a good thing,” said a former nearby resident. “I thought, like, green space, reuse empty public space, bring walking space, and much-needed activity space to an area that I would still consider is predominantly Latinx [... near] the end part of the 606, by Pulaski. So I thought of it as a potential positive.” However, their perception quickly changed once the trail broke ground. “Very quickly, the question became, “how do we preserve affordability and support the preservation of affordable housing throughout that process, and make sure that individuals that are there are able to stay in their homes?” So I don't think we [the community] initially had thought about the potential gentrification and displacement challenges until the project started happening.“

“Between 2003, 2010, roughly 2011, I helped manage a project that was looking at how the built environment impacted childhood obesity,” said one interviewee, who had long been

involved with a local CBO. At the time, the philanthropic community was investing money towards efforts to reduce childhood obesity, and one organization had given two grants to fund green projects in Logan Square to promote mobility and physical activity in the community. "So there were multiple projects that we worked on and brought together a coalition of sorts to work on different projects. And I was introduced to some other founders of this idea of transforming this not abandoned, but unused rail line into green space. [...] So I was introduced to the gentlemen – it was mainly bicycle guys – who had this idea, which eventually then became part of the Logan Square open space plan. So by me being involved, through my role [at my organization], as a way of promoting space for people to be physically active, was really how it made a connection to my work." Another interviewee, who works for the same CBO, affirmed that their organization supported the effort to develop the Logan Square open space plan. "We did so from the perspective that we wanted more green space for children in the community, because at the time, data showed that Logan Square had some of the lowest green space per capita in the city of Chicago," they said. "And so for a long time, the 606 was not happening, I think, for those reasons, because it was gonna be a public investment to benefit People of Color, and people who are working class, and living in poverty."

This individual believed that there were political and monetary motivations behind the push to complete the construction of the 606. "Rahm Emanuel came along. And 2013 is two years into his first administration, and Rahm Emanuel is, you know, a hardcore neoliberal who thinks that market solutions are gonna improve Chicago. And so he and his people, and the developer community, saw the potential for flipping Logan Square rapidly with this new amenity. And so Rahm wanted something to brag about for his re-election, and that's why the plan was accelerated, and announced, to 2013." They also affirmed that concerns about

gentrification and impacts on housing stability did not arise until the trail broke ground. “For a lot of people in the community, there was this sense that, great, there’s all this momentum toward an elevated trail, a lot of foundations, a lot of public support coming through, and this idea that ‘we’re doing this because all these Brown and Black people have diabetes, so we’re giving them a trail to run on and bike on, and blah blah blah.’ So that’s how it was talked about at first, right? But then once the trail was built, it was obvious that this was a marketing tool for the development community to attract new buyers to live in Logan Square. ‘Hey, come live near this new, walkable amenity.’ [...] It really created this demand for suburban living near this elevated trail.” Another interviewee said that Emanuel’s push for its completion threw many residents and organizers off-guard. “Here I was, promoting this project in my Latino [...] neighborhood, and I really believed in the project, because, you know, we deserve green space. I was hopeful that the issue of trying to preserve long-term homeowners and renters could be addressed. But when the mayor put it on fast track, we were kind of caught off guard, because we were in the middle of a foreclosure crisis. And we thought we had more time to plan because they said 2017. So they broke ground for five years before they had anticipated breaking ground.”

Emergence and Phases of Organizing

The changes that the 606 made to the neighborhood had an immense impact on neighborhood residents. “When the 3-flat across the street gets bought or foreclosed and torn down and replaced with a million-dollar single-family home,” said an interviewee, “now my parents’ building, when their property taxes are assessed, they’re compared to the new luxury house across the street. So even though my parents bought the house at $100,000, now it’s being

valued for $600,000, because the building across the street sold for a million. But my parents are still [...] making a little above minimum wage, barely making ends meet. And so when the taxes go up, they're forced to possibly raise the rents, which could displace the family and friends who live in the other units. And that's really hard because, you know, they're not just tenants. It's literally family." Residents who are priced out of their homes due to increased property taxes often have the opportunity to sell their homes, which also contributes to the cycle of displacement. "Another gentrifying entity, like a rich family from the suburbs or some kind of rich corporation, comes in and tear the building down, and then my neighbors are at risk. [...] So that's why it's so important for us to organize, to win policies that can preserve these family-sized units, these 2-flats and 3-flats."

One interviewee remembered two "tracks" of organizing in response to the plan. The first of these tracks took place prior to the trail breaking ground and aimed to engage people in the community who normally wouldn't have heard about the project. "These kinds of projects get promoted and listed and certain demographics. White cyclists, you know, that kind of community. So part of my role was to engage more People of Color, people who wouldn't who normally wouldn't be part of those networks." During this effort, the interviewee says they were met with a lot of skepticism among residents. "People at that time [...] were telling me, 'you know, I've lived here 40 years, and the city haven't hasn't done anything new. But all of a sudden, we're getting all these new conversions. And, you know, this project is not for us, it's for the new people coming in.' And they were right." The second wave this interviewee remembered was when the City announced that the trail was going to break ground. "We tried to scramble and talk to anybody and everybody who listened to us at City Hall. And to say, look, we can see the writing on the wall, you can too, and let's work together to try to minimize the impact of

displacement." These efforts, however, "fell on deaf ears" and did not result in tangible change on the part of the City.

When it became clear that the City government would not take initiative to mitigate displacement, a well-established CBO stepped in to build power among local residents. "The only thing that Rahm Emanuel and these Alder-people who control zoning near the 606 care about is power. And in order to have power, you need money, and you need votes. And by creating the 606, and by rezoning a lot of the neighborhood for the interest of developers, that's a great way to fundraise for your political campaigns. Developers are known to give you a couple thousand in exchange for better zoning for them to make a profit. So we knew that the only reason Rahm would care about how this is impacting us is if we mobilized voters, and if we were able to influence the upcoming election."

This CBO, to which two of the aforementioned interviewees belong, uses a four-step model of organizing. The four steps are as follows:

a. Individual and community stories;
b. Research;
c. Taking action;
d. Debriefing.

As the 606 was breaking ground, this group canvassed on "every door in the 606 area" and tried to determine what local neighbors were experiencing on the ground. "The things that kept coming up were [related to] displacement. 'My building just got sold, I have a month to leave.' 'My property taxes just went up, so I have to sell my building.' 'My rents were just doubled and so I have to leave.'" There were also extensive concerns about the impact of ongoing demolitions. "'My neighbor's home was torn down and now I'm suffering because of

asthma and the pollution it created.' `There's so much noise in the neighborhood, there's so much pollution, these new buildings are leading to higher property taxes, bringing in new neighbors who call the police on us,' et cetera." These multitudinous stories illustrate the neighborhood changes that are brought on by gentrification besides displacement.

After these stories were collected, the group conducted research into the practical and financial considerations that went into demolitions and developments. "If you're a developer who wants to tear down a building, what permits do you need to do that? What do you have to pay to get those permits? Who do you have to submit paperwork to? And we found out that, in Chicago, it costs $500 to get a demo[lition] permit. But we know $500 is not the cost of a demolition." This interviewee pointed out the environmental and social costs that come with building demolitions.

This community group incorporated their youth program into the "action" step. "The teenagers [...] had done a lot of the canvassing, a lot of the surveying of the community. And they were the ones who started saying, 'we need to make it as difficult as possible for these people to demolish buildings for profit.' And so they worked with a volunteer lawyer, who was like, 'okay, kids, we're gonna write an ordinance together.'" This collaboration resulted in the drafting of a demolition ordinance, which stipulated that developers had to pay $100,000 per demolished unit, the sum of which would go toward building and preserving affordable housing.

The ordinance, upon being publicized, was not received well by the local development community. "Everyone in Logan Square lost their minds," said the interviewee. "What do you mean, you're gonna make developers pay $100,000? [...] It's like, 'we're the job creators. We're making the neighborhood livable.'" Another interviewee pushed back against this logic, and stressed that much of the community effort surrounding the 606 was not undergone with the goal

of preventing development from occurring in the area completely. “We're not against development, we're against displacement,” they said.

By the time the ordinance had passed, the organization “[wasn’t] getting anywhere,” says the previous interviewee, due to *aldermanic prerogative,* an informal agreement between Aldermen that ensures mutual support for each other’s goals for their respective wards. “The alderman we had at the time was very pro-development. And the alderman has a lot of say in zoning [and] what gets constructed because of aldermanic prerogative.” The organization did not give up hope, however. “We kept organizing hard after that,” said the respondent. “And that was the year when the data showed that Logan Square had the highest number of demolitions in the city of Chicago. So, we made that our story, we marched, and we registered voters and we had protests and press conferences. We testified in City council. And we didn't win the policy that we wanted. But what we did win was that the narrative around gentrification and the 606 changed.”

The Role of Elected Officials

The interviewees had complicated views on the role of local elected officials in the outcomes of the 606 and the subsequent organizing. One individual was confident that elected officials had the power to maintain injustice and inequity in communities like Logan Square. “As long as people are busy filling their pockets, or worried about not getting reelected, then, you know, we'll, we'll just continue to live in this segregated world.” Another interviewee, who has been involved with other anti-gentrification projects in Logan Square, believed that City officials felt powerless to affect much change. “There's always people in government that are either like, ‘that sounds amazing, let's meet about [this idea],’ or like, ‘no, that sounds terrible. I'm super resistant to it.’ But the way that bureaucracy works, either way, even the people that feel really

enthusiastic about it sometimes are like, ‘but I can't do anything about it.’ So they're receptive to maybe talking about things, but not necessarily about doing anything. Or, you know, maybe it wasn't in their power at all.”

One interviewee had much to say about the role of Aldermen in development and zoning around the 606. This interviewee says that, historically, aldermanic prerogative has been used to block affordable housing and equitable development. They gave an example of one set of towers that house 200 units of luxury housing. “Ten percent of the units are affordable. But the community at the time was completely against the towers, right? But the alderman had to make a choice. ‘In my reelection, is it better that I don't piss off these 50, 60 people? Or is it better for me to get $300,000 from the developer? Which one is going to help me get elected more?’ And [...] gentrification was seen as a good thing or a desirable thing.” Subsequently, the 1st Ward Alderman at the time decided to side with developers in order to build funding for advertisements, canvassers, and other campaign tools, which would make up for the votes they lost as a result of their decision. However, this interviewee had a positive outlook on how Aldermanic prerogative could be used to the community’s advantage in the face of organizing. “By changing the narrative, we show to the Aldermen in the area that, actually, the people are against gentrification, and if you side with the developers, that's going to make it a lot harder for you to get elected or reelected,” they said. “I feel confident that progressives have more political power than the developers. Why? Because we're organized, and the developers can donate a lot of money. But it's not enough money to make up the difference, that of the voters that you lose by supporting gentrification.”

Successes and Future Lessons

Four of the interviewees believed that the community organizing that took place around the 606 led to increased conversations about gentrification and housing equity in neighborhoods like Logan Square. “I do think the narrative has changed,” said one interviewee. “I think topics of gentrification were more in the news and were brought to public discourse here in Chicago. I think studies and data was and is now published about it, in a way that it wasn’t. I think there are individuals that got assistance as a result of the work, and there were people that were able to keep their homes and families that were able to stay on an individual level.” Another interviewee affirmed this view. “It used to be a controversial thing to say that gentrification is bad, gentrification is racist. Now, I think the overwhelming consensus is that, you know, it’s true, gentrification is horrible. It’s terrible for people. And it does reinforce and recreate systemic racism. [...] So I’m happy the perception has changed.”

This change in perception around gentrification has also created opportunities for new equitable policy that could slow the process of gentrification near the 606. The affordable requirements ordinance, which requires developers to make a certain percentage of the units in their buildings affordable, has been raised from 15% to 20% in recent years. A minimum density policy for new homes was also passed. “It used to be that anyone could buy a 2-flat or a 3-flat and then convert it into a single-family home,” said the aforementioned interviewee. “Now, along the 606 area, you need a zoning change in order to go from multi-unit to single-family. So that’s deterred a lot of deconversions and gentrification. And then we were very proud that, for 14 months, we had a complete ban on demolitions near the 606.” This ban has transitioned into a pilot for a demolition impact fee of $15,000 fee per unit demolished. A group of nonprofits and mission-driven developers in the area have also been able to start a Community Land Trust of

about $1.5 million dollars to start buying their own land to build and preserve affordable housing. "But, of course, in a neighborhood like Logan Square, $1.5 million is, [...] in the context of development, it's, like, pennies," says a member of the Trust. "So with that, we can buy maybe two homes and renovate them and sell them to families."

The public conversations about housing and environmental justice have also spurred movements in favor of Equitable Transit-Oriented Development (ETOD), which has allowed hundreds of affordable units to be built near transit stations. Two of the interviewees are on the team currently working to build a new affordable housing development in the area, near a CTA stop as well as the 606. It was born out of a collaboration between another public trust, a mission-oriented housing developer, and a local CBO, to try and change the relationship between the 606 and nearby residents. One interviewee said that the CBO started the conversations with residents and other community groups to decide how to best go about developing the site, while city staff and developers made many of the financial and feasibility decisions. "I've met with various different aldermanic offices, and community groups and [asked], where are their properties? Where can we really be combating gentrification?" they said. "That's what we really hope comes out of this site. [We are] trying to create a trauma-informed approach to development, to really make a protective, safe space for families and children to grow and develop and thrive in the middle of the city. And so that's the piece that I'm most excited about, is having spaces that are created in this community where there's safe space for people to take their kids out and play and not be as worried about neighborhood violence or other things. And just the amount of amenity that the 606 brings to the housing itself, and having that connection, that close to something that people can easily access and be utilizing."

The two interviewees affiliated with this development affirmed that the City of Chicago is, in fact, enthusiastic about its completion. “From a funding standpoint, the City is very supportive of this project, and in a lot of ways are actually pushing this project to move faster,” said one, noting that it is seen as a means for them to tangibly address the concerns about gentrification and housing in the area. “They see this as one of their signature projects coming out of the Department of Housing (DOH), I think, as a way of addressing what's happened with the 606 Bloomingdale trail, so they're cognizant of […] all that's happening in this community.” The City also seems to have an awareness of the racial, ethnic, and class implications of the issue at hand. “The fact that [Logan Square] is a Latino community, largely, I think they see the value in addressing housing in a community that hasn't always had as much [*sic*] affordable housing dollars from Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and DOH and the state,” the respondent said. The case of this particular development shows a level of commitment on the City’s part to retroactively remedy the harms of displacement that gentrification has placed upon the neighborhood – a notable divergence from other respondents’ negative impressions of City attitudes towards the issue in the years prior. This could indicate a shift in administrative focus from profitable development to equitable development as City agencies gain awareness of open space projects as potential catalysts for gentrification and displacement.

When asked what could have gone better about the organizing process around the 606 before and while the trail broke ground, one interviewee stressed the importance of preemptive measures to prevent gentrification. “ I believe in this theory that gentrification has a phase zero, or a pre-development phase, and that pre-development phase of gentrification happens when property values are low, and there aren’t intentional government policies, public policies, or practices that preserve that value,” they said. “I think we should have passed some sort of

ordinance, law, or policy prior to the establishment of the 606 where long-term tenants or residents there could have their property taxes frozen if they were, you know, older adults, which is actually already a policy. You can get a senior freeze or a senior exemption, but it should just be universally applied to a certain region near the 606, a certain geography.” Another interviewee also advocated for more comprehensive policy on freezing property taxes for homeowners. “When you sell, you pay back what you would have normally paid the difference. So let's say my taxes are $10,000. And based on my income, in order to protect me from being pushed out, I can only afford five. But there's some agreement that when I sell, I paid back the city, that $5,000 difference that I couldn't pay when I was living here.” They acknowledged that similar policies have been tested in the past, but wish to see it expanded upon in the Logan Square area. “So often, within the affordable housing community, there tends to be a focus of rental units. Which is hard and important, but [...] one of the things that is often forgotten is the homeowners, the mom and pop homeowners like me, who want to stay in this community and who made the largest purchase in their life, and how property taxes increase because of the value. [...] I'm a single mom, and I work in nonprofits. So I think there should be a way to be creative about protecting people like me from being pushed out because I can't afford my property taxes.”

Other recommendations included rent control and regulations, zero-interest loans or grants for homeowners to repair their houses, and other universally-applicable policies that resemble the pilot ordinances that are currently being developed. “I don’t think any of these are really realistic [on a large scale], given the very neoliberal, capitalist lens that we have,” said one interviewee, “but I’m not sure that all of those topics were explored, and if they were pushed at the city level.” While many of these policies have not been explored by the City, and certainly

not on a city-wide scale, there is some evidence that City agencies are applying the lessons learned from the 606 to their approach to new projects, such as the proposed El Paseo trail in the Pilsen and Little Village neighborhoods. One interviewee formerly involved with organizing around the 606 hypothesized that the DOH's newfound investment in protecting communities from gentrification comes as a direct result of the backlash from the 606. In late 2018 or early 2019, when the city was proposing the Paseo project, they were at a meeting "with representatives from a lot of different local organizations [where] the City Department of Housing came out, [saying] they will be proactive." The interviewee held some skepticism about the Department's true motivations, but ultimately appreciated their efforts. "I don't know how genuine they were, but at least they were saying that they were worried that this Paseo project was going to negatively impact homeowners and affordability in the community."

According to another interviewee, Logan Square had the highest rate of demolitions in the city of Chicago in 2017, and hasn't been at the top of the list since then. Leaders are moving forward with cautious optimism. "The situation is improving. But, you know, the minimum-density policy, the demolition fee, the land trust, these are common-sense and effective interventions, but right now they're pilots, and they're experiments. So they're not happening at the scale that we need to actually make a difference. So, yeah, long story short, things are better, but things are better because people organize, and because we want policies to make things better, and even though they're better, we still have a long way to go."

Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study have many implications for low- and moderate-income urban communities who may be at risk for gentrification, displacement, and other housing injustices in

the wake of environmental initiatives. In Logan Square, the forces of gentrification and displacement were slowed by the passage of policies such as the demolition ordinance, the affordability requirement ordinance, the Community Land Trust, and the construction of more affordable housing units. However, while these policies prevented the displacement of many neighborhood residents, they did not undo the harm that the 606 had already imparted onto the community. Therefore, it is important to identify areas that are at potential risk for gentrification and displacement due to low property values, especially areas in close proximity to sites that are intended to become environmentally-focused projects such as open green spaces. Improved public amenities, such as parks and green spaces, must be recognized as potential catalysts for gentrification, and action must be taken preemptively to ensure that long-time residents are able to enjoy the benefits of high-quality open green spaces without fear of displacement. In the case of the El Paseo trail, for example, it is important that the Department of Housing continue to show support for initiatives that preserve affordable housing in impacted areas once the trail breaks ground. Future resiliency efforts in New York and other coastal cities must also maintain awareness that reducing flood risks and other environmental hazards could make a given area more attractive to affluent buyers, and must thereby include measures to ensure that the improvements can be enjoyed primarily by low-income communities for whom flooding has historically been a larger threat.

In the case of the 606, the existing ordinances as they stand are also highly localized to the area immediately surrounding the trail and are thus very limited in scope. This includes freezes on property taxes for homeowners. As the findings suggested, the natural next step for these policies is to expand their scope so that they can be universally applied to the entire

community area, and so they can be applicable to homeowners of all age groups and household sizes.

One way to ensure that effective policies are put in place to protect nearby residents from the detrimental impacts of environmental projects is to elevate the role of community voices in decision-making around these initiatives. This is distinct from approaches to community engagement that only seek to affirm the community's support for a given plan or agenda. It is evident to constituents when City agencies view community engagement as a means to an end, but do not truly incorporate community concerns and feedback into their plans. Effective community engagement is a long, comprehensive process that ideally reaches as many different community groups and factions as possible. According to the environmental justice framework, not only do community voices need to be heard by people in power, but they must be present among those with decision-making ability. Increasing the power of groups such as Community Boards and Community Advisory Groups that liaise between local residents and local City Council members or Aldermen would assist in communicating possible blind spots or unintended inequitable outcomes that would otherwise not have been acknowledged. However, as has been made clear throughout conversations with interviewees, community voices are not always one and the same, and some may have conflicting desires and interests. It is thus important for cities to adopt a nuanced, balanced understanding of the various attitudes that arise among communities and do their best to address a variety of concerns, prevent misinformation, and come up with multi-faceted solutions to apparent problems.

Conclusion

Individuals from various community groups and coalitions have divergent views on whether or not community responses to the projects in question found “success” in being heard by the City. Perceptions of success and failure depend on which aspects of the policy or plan the group is attempting to amend; a moratorium in addition to a pre-existing construction plan, as with the 606, retroactively addresses the negative consequences of environmental projects in low-income neighborhoods, while a proposed amendment to the plan itself, as with the ESCR, aims to alter outcomes completely. This led to a significant difference in the City’s receptiveness to the suggested changes and willingness to accommodate community demands. Previously-established relationships between the affected residents and City leaders– whether or not communities trust their officials to listen or complete projects and amendments they commit to – could impact the magnitude or nature of the ideas community networks end up proposing to the City.

The nature and scope of the environmental project itself had a large impact on what kinds of actions could be made to mitigate its associated harms. The 606 and ESCR are projects of vastly different scopes, sizes, and senses of urgency and immediacy. Because closed railways have been converted to public trails in other cities such as New York and Atlanta, there was some precedent for a project like the 606, which meant organizations had a body of literature and evidence to refer to when approaching the City with its concerns. Community concerns about the risks of gentrification were relatively uniform among residents. A more radical and unprecedented project, such as transforming the pre-existing East River Park in its entirety, led to a wider variety of reactions among community members, including a sense of fear and uncertainty. The urgency and stakes of flood resiliency initiatives in New York City, considering

the impending threat of climate change, made these reactions emotionally charged. It is important to note that, in both cities, concerns about gentrification did not have solely to do with the risks of displacement, but also addressed other kinds of neighborhood change that would make the area less accessible to low-income residents and residents of Color, such as increased police presence, increased food prices, and inequitable access to public amenities.

A sense of clarity and structure in organizing efforts proved to be beneficial for community groups involved with action around the 606. The four-step advocacy process of story collection, research, action, and debriefing lent to the development of actionable steps towards mitigating the threats of gentrification and displacement. So, too, did early community protests surrounding ESCR find success in identifying actionable steps towards reducing harm to the community, such as phasing out construction to allow continuous park access and implementing a CAG. However, the later protest groups suffered from a lack of tenable alternatives to the plan they were against, and all New York City groups encountered the roadblock of uncertainty surrounding the true decision-making bodies for ESCR and associated planning.

Communities in the Lower East Side clearly encountered a significant amount of internal conflict and tension regarding how to proceed with ESCR and what to push back against. As the findings indicated, many of these community divisions were the results of pre-existing fractures along racial and class lines that have a long-standing legacy in housing segregation.

In Logan Square, many concerns about gentrification and displacement went largely ignored by the City, also due to a history of housing segregation and divestment in communities primarily consisting of People of Color. I argue that it is essential for City governments to adopt an equity-oriented approach to community development in low-income neighborhoods and address the root

causes of housing injustice in large cities – namely, systems of racial oppression and discrimination – and continue in the struggle to dismantle these systems.

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