

The Joe Louis Greenway's Warren Gateway.

Nick Hagen

Here's how Detroiters are working to ensure residents benefit from the Joe Louis Greenway

PATRICK DUNN | MONDAY, APRIL 1, 2024

A robust community engagement process is informing greenway development in myriad ways, ensuring that the greenway reflects residents' history, serves their needs, and offers them economic opportunity.



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Nick Hagen

Greenway Heritage Conservancy co-founder RuShann Long, City of Detroit Planner Michele Flournoy, Joe Louis Greenway Partnership Executive Director Leona Medley, and City of Detroit Chief Greenways Planner Christina Peltier.

This story is part of Equity in Our Parks, a series highlighting the people and organizations advancing equity through Southeast Michigan's parks and related programming. It is supported by Oakland County Parks and Recreation, Wayne County Parks and Recreation, Huron-Clinton Metroparks, City of Detroit, and Detroit Riverfront Conservancy.

Leona Medley says that when it comes to Detroit's ambitious Joe Louis Greenway project, "equity is ownership."

That means that residents of the many distinct communities located along the greenway's planned 27.5-mile loop through Detroit, Hamtramck, Highland Park, and Dearborn should feel as though the greenway reflects their history, serves their needs, and offers them economic opportunity.

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equity component is looking at this project as a method to really

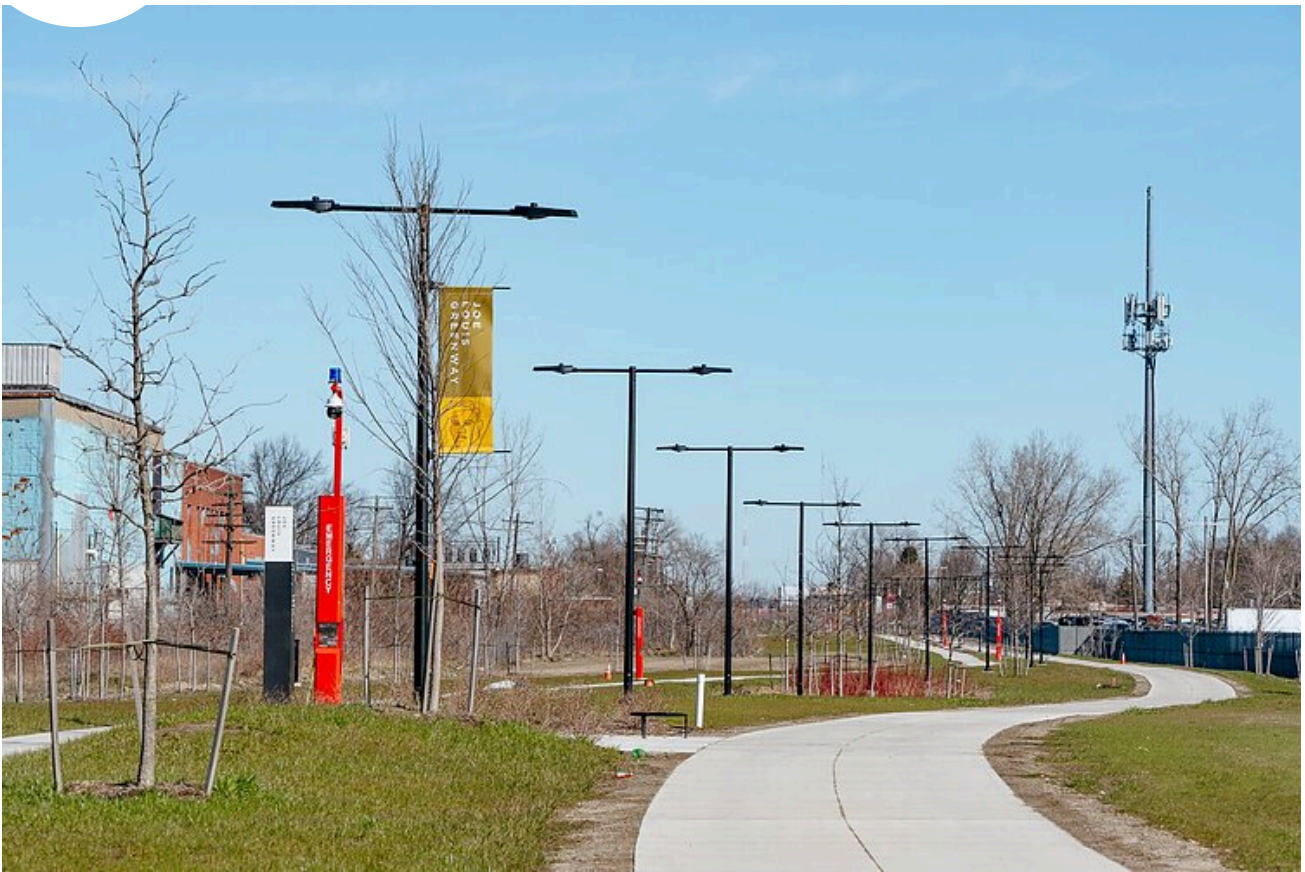
...ome tangible impact, positive impact, for the residents that live
and use the greenway," says Medley, executive director of the Joe Louis
Greenway Partnership, a nonprofit stewardship organization.



The Joe Louis Greenway's Warren Gateway.

The city of Detroit's 2021 framework for the greenway established equity as a key goal for the project, which has since manifested through a robust community engagement process that is informing greenway development in myriad ways.

For residents along the greenway, the potential payoff is immense. RuShann Long is a longtime resident of Detroit's Midwest Tireman neighborhood, which directly abuts one of the first opened sections of the greenway. Long is also a member of the Joe Louis Greenway Partnership board and a founder of the nonprofit Greenway Heritage Conservancy. She has fond childhood memories of walking down the railroad tracks in her neighborhood – which have now been converted into greenway – to reach a vibrant business district that has since faded and fallen into disrepair. When she first learned about the greenway, she says she saw it as "a great thing" that could help revitalize
Sign Up Today neighborhood.



The Joe Louis Greenway.

"We saw what could potentially happen and needed to happen, as far as the clean-out and what that could do as far as bringing a more positive environmental space in the community," Long says. "So that's what motivated us to keep working towards this and keep trying to get other people in the community excited about it."

Community engagement

Medley says a key element of the equity strategy for the greenway is "rooted in old-school community engagement and community organizing, going where the residents are and asking for space in their already convened spaces." That approach was informed in part by a trip city staff and Greenway Heritage Conservancy members took to the Atlanta BeltLine, a 22-mile urban trail built on former railroad tracks in Atlanta. While the BeltLine is in some ways a successful analogue to the planned Joe Louis Greenway, it's also drawn criticism for driving gentrification.

way, or near the greenway, in Atlanta did not feel like they were part of it. Long says Christina Peltier, chief greenways planner for the city of Detroit.



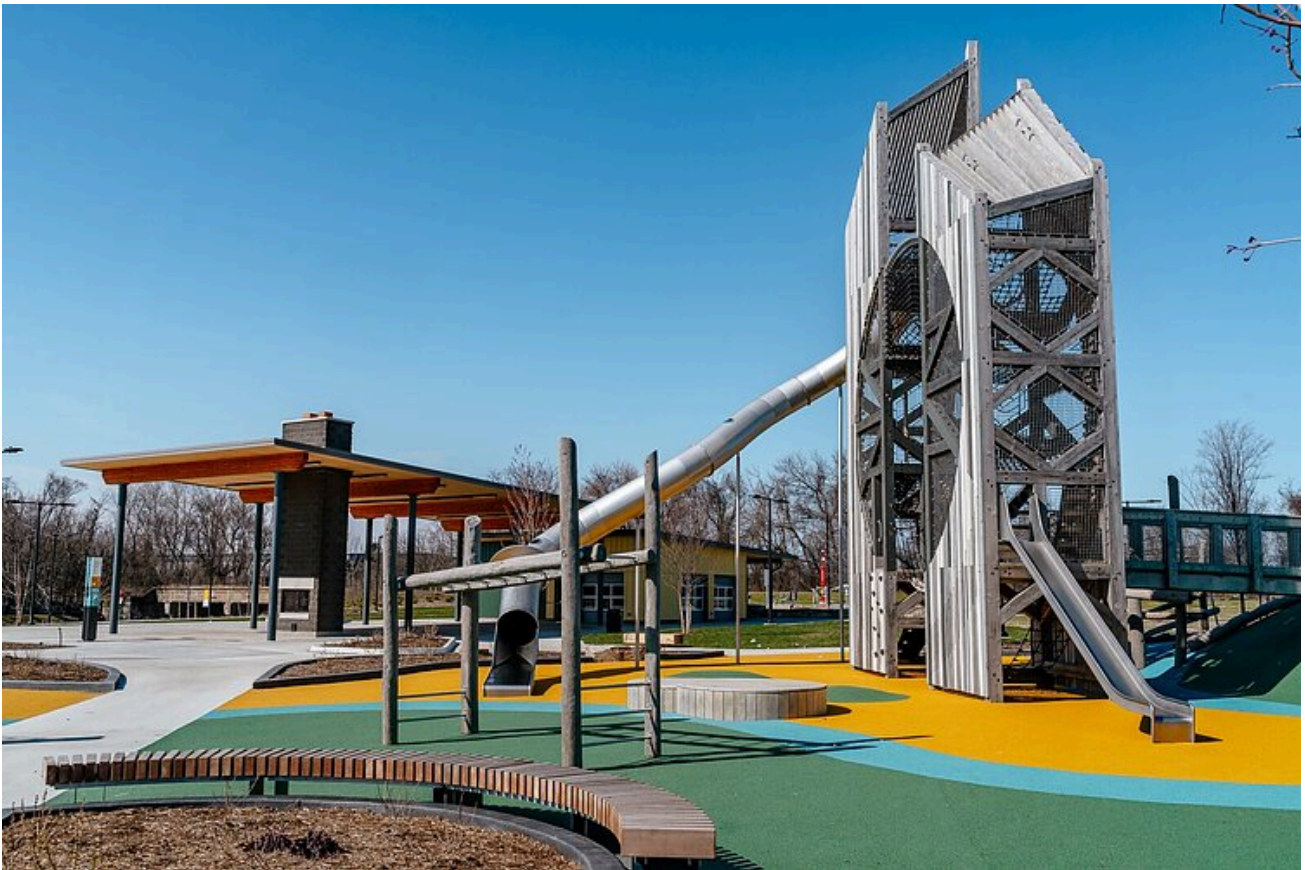
The Joe Louis Greenway.

Joe Louis Greenway stakeholders have gone to great lengths to ensure residents along the planned route didn't have that same experience. During the creation of the city's greenway framework, city staff held 14 public meetings to gather community input, but also engaged residents at 44 neighborhood events. The city has also invited community leaders, artists, and others to participate in working groups, and created community leadership teams of neighborhood residents. The Joe Louis Greenway Partnership and Greenway Heritage Conservancy have conducted their own community engagement events as well.

Long says she's been extremely satisfied with the ways community feedback has been incorporated into the stretch of greenway adjoining her neighborhood as a result. She says residents successfully advocated for a pavilion at the trailhead for community meeting space, as well as paths connecting the greenway to nearby parks.

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...that was brought up at those [engagement] sessions, they did take
me ... and they put in those things," Long says.



A playground and pavilion at the Joe Louis Greenway's Warren Gateway.

Residents are also taking an active role in deciding how the greenway represents the character and history of their communities. In Midwest Tireman, that meant designing murals along the greenway that represent not just the neighborhood's longstanding Black community but also its newer Latino and Middle Eastern residents.

The city has also launched the Neighborhood Stories pilot project, which will result in interpretive signage along the greenway highlighting the history of the Midwest Tireman and Barton-McFarland neighborhoods. Residents will be paid to gather stories from their neighbors and participate in the design of the signs.

"It's not just, 'Hey, thanks for the stories,'" Peltier says. "They're actually deciding what those signs look like."

11. In the longer term, greenway stakeholders are working to ensure that existing residents will be able to enjoy the economic benefits that will likely come with a popular new attraction in their neighborhoods. While gentrification has followed in the wake of the similar BeltLine project, Medley says Detroit can take a different path with the Joe Louis Greenway. She says she's not concerned about what kind of businesses arise around the greenway so much as who owns them.

"As I think about neighborhood development and the retention of existing residents, it is [about] how we can be a partner to nurture the type of economic development that facilitates entrepreneurs who are already here to be able to grow and scale their businesses," she says. "... We can have Black-owned coffee shops in predominantly Black and BIPOC communities. And we can have Black-owned health and fitness studios, or Latino- or Middle Eastern-owned or Bengali. We can have all of that ownership in our neighborhoods and we can have a diverse assortment of businesses. And that's really where the neighborhood development is."



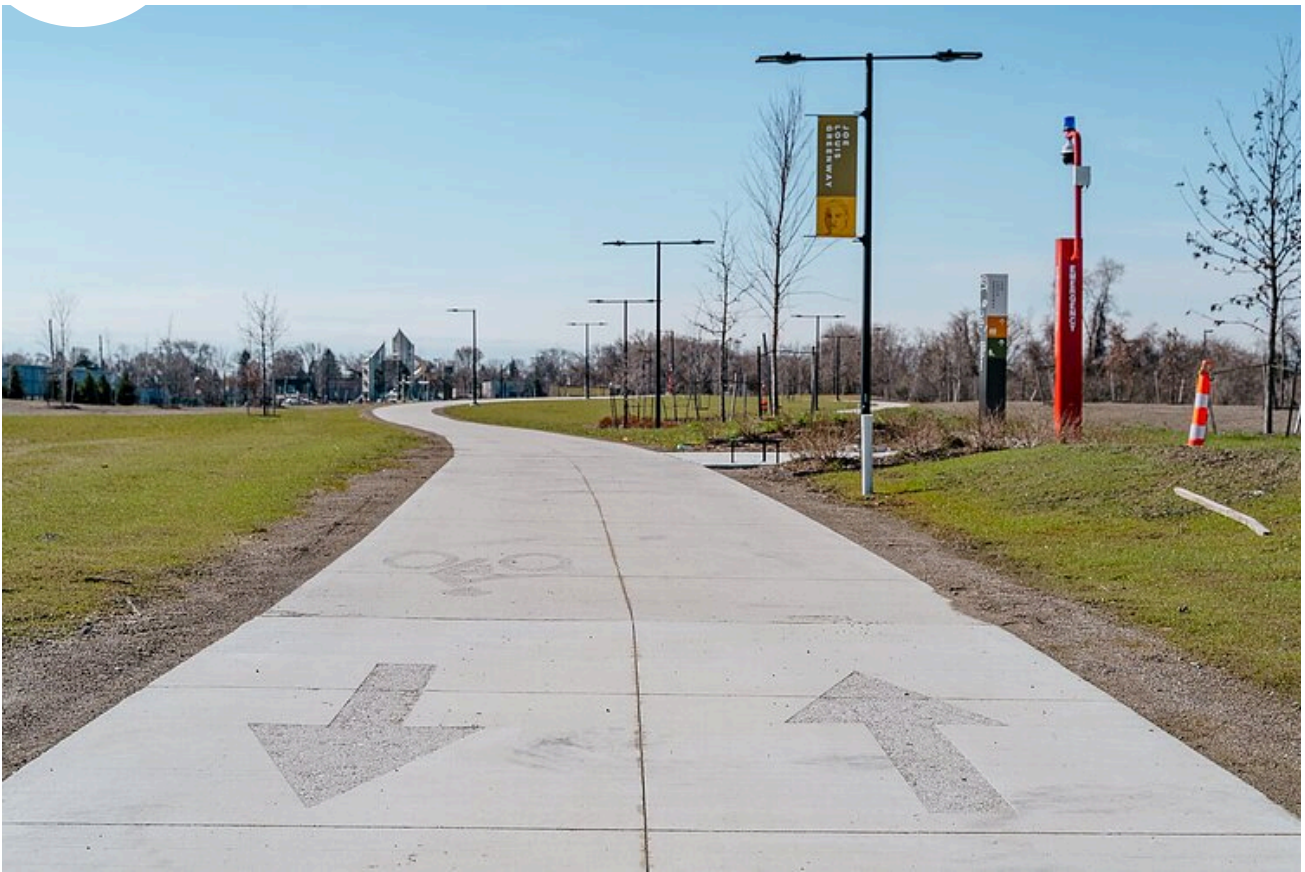
Leona Medley.

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It's a kind of psychological displacement usually takes place before physical development, gentrification, and displacement happen, as residents feel their communities beginning to change and slip away from them. She hopes to counteract that by ensuring that residents adjacent to the Greenway have the ability to access resources that empower them to take the lead on development in their neighborhoods. In one early example of that, the Joe Louis Greenway Partnership has co-applied with the nonprofit Equity Alliance of Michigan for a grant to redevelop its community center adjacent to the greenway.

City of Detroit staff also hope to contribute to resident empowerment through the ongoing Joe Louis Greenway Neighborhood Planning Study. The study will provide neighborhood-specific recommendations on land use, design guidelines, and policies to support beautification, housing, jobs, industry, and mobility along the greenway. Michele Flournoy, project manager for the study, says blight removal and downzoning industrial properties will be key to stabilize neighborhoods and enable economic development along the greenway. As opportunities to create retail businesses arise, she anticipates that the city's community engagement work will prime residents to seize them.

"As people have an idea, you're already connected and you know that you can reach out to the [Joe Louis Greenway] Partnership or reach out to the [Detroit Economic Growth Corporation] and be first in line," she says.



The Joe Louis Greenway.

Long hopes that the result of all this work will be that her grandchildren will see the return of the thriving neighborhood business corridors she knew as a child. She says "there is so much positive to come from the greenway," but equity is the key to doing it right.

"Equity means that we have a seat not just at the table, but we have input, ... we have a buy-in, that we have the opportunity to have input that's valued, and whenever possible, that you lean towards those things that we identify as a community," she says. "So to me, equity is that the benefit from this greenway benefits the community."

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Patrick Dunn is the lead writer for the Equity in our Parks series. He's also the managing editor of Concentrate and an Ypsilanti-based freelance writer and editor.

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By **Nick Hagen.**

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