

Is The Joe Louis Greenway a Pathway to Success?

Residents of Midwest see the development as a first step toward reviving a neighborhood left behind by the boom

By **Ashley Winn** - January 27, 2020



An artist's rendering of the Joe Louis Greenway. // Image courtesy of City of Detroit

It's no secret Detroit's neighborhoods haven't experienced the same revitalization that's been seen in other areas of the city, such as Corktown, Midtown, and downtown. While those areas flourish, thanks to billions of dollars from private investors — Dan Gilbert's projects alone have funneled \$5.6 billion into downtown — many residential areas continue to struggle with blight and lack of public services. The disparity has been well-documented even by national news sources such as NPR, *Forbes*, and *The New York Times*.

One such neglected burrow is Midwest, a triangular area that borders Core City to the northwest. Like many areas, it was hit hard by the depopulation of Detroit, which began in the 1950s and was accelerated by the race riots of the '60s. By 2000, the city had lost nearly 50% of its population.

Now, about half of the neighborhood's houses sit abandoned and all of its schools are shuttered, requiring the parents of more than 3,000 children to ferry them to outside schools or bus stops and reconcile this with their work schedules. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that many don't have their own transportation. This all serves to place additional strain on parents' employment in a community with a median household income already below \$23,000, compared to more than \$55,000 nationally. The neighborhood's challenges don't end there. There is not a single bank or community center in the area, and there are few parks or businesses, aside from a horde of auto repair shops.

For more than five years, RuShann Long — a resident of the neighborhood for nearly 60 years — has been working with other members of her community to secure funding from various levels of government to aid the Midwest district. The block club Long joined, which is a part of the Midwest Civic Council of Block Clubs, had tried to work with the City Council, the Detroit Landbank Authority, the district manager, and various city departments to get dilapidated houses in the area torn down. They were unsuccessful.

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existing bike paths through the city, will also extend into Hamtramck and Highland Park. City of Detroit Group Executive Brad Dick says the project will connect the city's more developed areas to neighborhoods, providing an additional means of transportation, and will draw businesses and visitors to less popular areas, such as the Midwest neighborhood.

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—RuShann Long

A stretch of the greenway will run along the Conrail railroad line, which serves as the eastern border of the Midwest neighborhood — a significant victory after a long succession of losses for Long and the rest of Midwest. "This is our opportunity to no longer be forgotten, but to be organized so when the city *does* come in, we can say, 'We want to be a part of this. We want to help design this to meet our community's needs,'" Long says.

And the city is listening. Throughout the initial planning stages, the developers have held community meetings to solicit input from residents. City officials have also put together a group called the Greenway Heritage Conservancy Board, made up of residents from every district along the greenway's path.

As an active member of her community, Long was chosen to represent her district. City leaders even took her and the other board members to Georgia to learn about the Atlanta BeltLine — one of the main references for the Joe Louis Greenway. "We really want Detroiters to feel like they own this, and they set the stage for it," says Christina Peltier, project manager of the Joe Louis Greenway.

But is a bike path really what's needed most in neighborhoods that are riddled with unemployment and blight? Could funds perhaps be better allocated? Based on what developers saw during their tour of the Atlanta BeltLine, Dick says, this may be exactly what neighborhoods need.

"We feel the greenway project will help stabilize neighborhoods, bring development," he says. "The greenway brings traffic to neighborhoods, and the traffic automatically spurs a need for services."

And besides, adds Peltier, the greenway is being funded by grants intended for specific uses only. "These are grant dollars that couldn't be spent directly on some other issues, but they could indirectly impact them in a positive way."

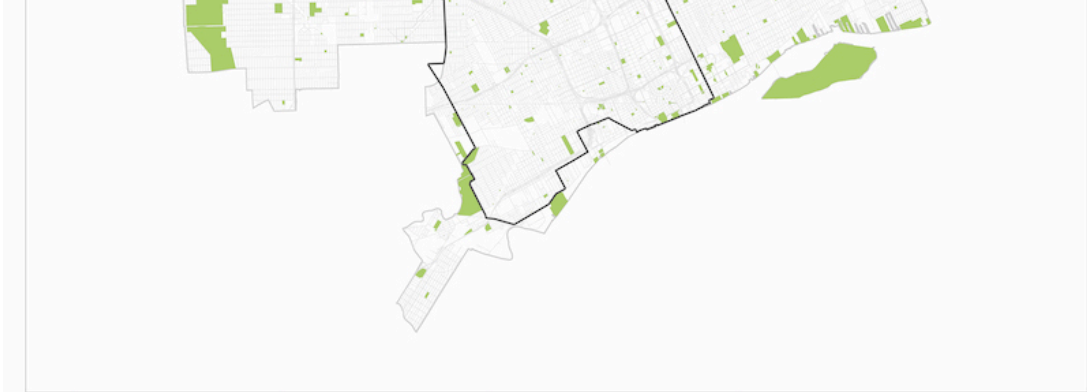
The greenway project is in the framework stages, which Peltier says involves determining the alignment, timeline, goals, and maintenance of the greenway, among other things. This stage of the process is scheduled to end next month, when developers will begin design and construction drawing.

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Making use of existing trails and refurbished stretches of defunct railroads, the Joe Louis Greenway's path (outlined above) will extend more than 30 miles. // Image courtesy of City of Detroit

Though they hope to break ground this fall, Dick and Peltier say they're unsure when residents can expect the long-term, multi-million-dollar (Dick estimates upwards of \$50 million) project to be finished. As excited as Long is for the progress she believes the new greenway will bring to her community, she says there's much more that needs to be done. That's why she became one of the founding members of the Greenway Heritage Conservancy Board, an organization dedicated to attracting attention and funding to help the Midwest neighborhood. Inspired by the community engagement they saw from the city leaders as a result of the greenway project, the residents formed the board last summer and began making pamphlets and giving tours to educate people about the plight of their community. The board has given neighborhood tours to city officials and nonprofit executives, including Vice President of Invest Detroit Mike Smith, City Councilor Raquel Castañeda-López, and Cassi Meitl, senior adviser of the jobs and economy team for the mayor's office.

The tours are designed to introduce outsiders to the community and its people. When that happens, Long believes, people will see that her neighborhood *does* deserve saving. "I think sometimes when people ride through an area, they make assumptions based on things outside of that community's control," she says. "It's good, hard-working people who live here, though it may *look* like people don't care."

Long says she wants to change those assumptions: "Give our community a chance to show you who we really are."
