Abridgment

Evaluation of the Burke-Gilman Trail's Effect on Property Values and Crime

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The objective of this study is to determine what effect, if any, an 8-yr-old urban, bicycle and pedestrian rail-trail has had on property values and crime rates on property near and adjacent to the trail. Also evaluated is public acceptance of the trail and its effect on the quality of life of adjacent neighborhoods. The study is intended to help determine if additional trails should be developed along abandoned railroad rights-of-way. The scope includes a 7-mi section of a bicycle and pedestrian trail; 152 single-family homes and 607 condominiums adjacent to the trail; and 320 single-family homes within one block of the trail. The method used in this study includes random interviews with adjacent property owners and other residents within one block, interviews with police officers who patrol the area, interviews with real estate agents who sell properties in the area, and a survey of local real estate advertisements. The conclusion of this study is that this particular rail-trail is an amenity that helps sell homes and increases property values. The study also found that the trail has had little, if any, effect on crime and vandalism experienced by adjacent property owners, and that there is a very high level of public support and acceptance of the trail.

A recurring concern expressed by citizens living near proposed bicycle and pedestrian trails along abandoned rail corridors is that they will reduce property values, increase crime, and generally reduce the quality of life for people in adjacent neighborhoods. Although there are more than 100 trails on abandoned rail corridors in the United States, no systematic, comprehensive studies have been done to address these concerns. The result has too often been a political tug-of-war between trail promoters who are convinced that trails can improve and enhance a neighborhood and trail opponents who imagine every sort of social problem being imported into their neighborhood.

The Burke-Gilman Trail provided an excellent opportunity for conducting a case study on what effect, if any, an existing trail has had on property values, crime rates, and the quality of life of adjacent neighborhoods. The trail had been in use for about 8 years and went primarily through residential neighborhoods. After 8 years, any significant effect the trail may have had on property values, crime, and the quality of life would have occurred.

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The primary objective of this study, therefore, was to determine what effect, if any, the Burke-Gilman Trail has had on property values and crime rates of residents adjacent to and near the trail. A secondary objective was to measure public acceptance of the trail and its effect on the quality of life of adjacent neighborhoods.

The Burke-Gilman Trail is 12.1 mi long (9.85 mi are in Seattle) and 8 to 10 ft wide. In Seattle there are 152 single-family homes and 607 condominiums immediately adjacent to the trail and 320 single-family homes within one block of the trail. There is an average of 20 ft of shrubs or trees between the trail and the edge of adjacent properties. The trail passes through an industrial area, the University of Washington, and links six parks. The trail has an estimated three-quarters of a million users per year with about 80 percent of the users being bicyclists. The trail is not patrolled and there is no enforcement of trail regulations. There is no special lighting provided on the trail.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected in the summer of 1986 via telephone by interviewing 379 residents near and adjacent to the trail, 75 real estate agents who buy and sell homes near the trail, and 3 police officers who patrol neighborhoods adjacent to the trail. Residents were asked questions about their decision to buy their home and what effect they thought the trail would have on selling their home; what problems, if any, they had had with break-in and vandalism by trail users; and how the trail has affected their overall quality of life. Real estate agents were asked similar questions on how the trail affects the selling price of homes along the trail, and police officers were asked questions about break-ins and vandalizing of homes adjacent to the trail. A biweekly survey of newspaper real estate advertisements and real estate magazines was also conducted to determine whether homes were being advertised as being near or on the Burke-Gilman Trail. In total, seven surveys were conducted, using six different data sources.

An attempt was also made to compare the selling prices and assessed values of homes along the trail in comparable neighborhoods. However, because of the many variables that determine the value of a home, it was impossible to isolate the trail as a determinant of value using this method.

There were a total of six questions related to crime and property values that the study attempted to answer. Conducting

seven different surveys using six different data sources allowed for comparison and cross checking of results. The assumption was made that consistent results would mean a higher level of confidence in the findings of each survey.

The first question the study attempted to answer was, what effect, if any, the trail has had on selling property adjacent to the trail. Residents who owned single-family homes and residents who owned condominiums adjacent to the trail were asked if, in their opinion, being adjacent to the Burke-Gilman Trail would make their home or condominium easier or more difficult to sell. Real estate agents were asked a similar question and real estate advertisements were surveyed to determine if properties were being advertised as being on the trail.

The results of the four surveys were consistent, with one notable exception. In all the surveys, the most frequent response was that being adjacent to the trail would have a positive effect on selling a particular property. About 70 percent of real estate agents and home owners and 88 percent of condominium owners believe that being adjacent to the trail would have a positive or neutral effect on selling a particular property. Advertisements in newspapers and real estate magazines promoted homes as being on the Burke-Gilman Trail, which indicates that being on the trail has a positive effect on selling homes. Newer owners who had recently been in the real estate market were quite positive about the trail.

Although only 9 percent of home owners and 1 percent of condominium owners believed the trail would make their property more difficult to sell, 30 percent of the real estate agents believed the trail would make properties immediately adjacent to the trail more difficult to sell, in spite of the fact that 43 percent believed that the trail would make homes easier to sell and 27 percent believed the trail would have no effect on selling homes adjacent to the trail. In reviewing the comments made by real estate agents, it appeared that there may be two separate but related reasons for this discrepancy. Agents who regularly sold homes along and near the trail were more likely to see it as an asset in selling homes. Agents who did not regularly work in areas near the trail were often less positive, indicating that they may have had one or two negative experiences with a potential client. The second factor appears to be the type of clients a particular agent had. Agents who had clients who were walkers, joggers, and bicyclists had a different perception of the trail than those who did not.

Given the consistency of the results from the four surveys, it is fair to say that the trail has a generally neutral to slightly positive effect on selling property adjacent to the trail. To potential buyers who are walkers, joggers, and bicyclists, the trail is generally an asset. Because more than two-thirds of Seattle residents participate in one or more of these activities, there is a large enough constituency to positively influence the selling of property along the trail and to explain why real estate companies promote homes and condominiums as being on the Burke-Gilman Trail. Additionally, it is predictable that new owners would view the trail favorably because the trail was there when they bought their property. People who do not like trails would not buy property on the trail.

The second question the study attempted to answer was, what effect, if any, the trail has had on the actual selling price of property adjacent to the trail Residents who own single-family homes and residents who own condominiums adjacent to the trail were asked if, in their opinion, being adjacent to the Burke-Gilman Trail would make their home or condominium sell for more, less, or have no effect on the selling price. Real estate agents were asked a similar question.

The results of the three surveys were again consistent, with one notable exception. In all the surveys the most frequent response was that being adjacent to the trail would have no effect on the selling price of property. The second most frequent response was that the trail would make the property sell for more, and the third was that the property would sell for less. New owners who had recently been in the real estate market were the most positive about the trail. About 76 percent of the home owners and 72 percent of the condominium owners who had bought their property after the trail was opened believed that the trail would have a positive or neutral effect on the selling price of their property. Conversely, only 4 percent of the home owners and 2 percent of the condominium owners believed the trail would make their property sell for less.

Although only 7.5 percent of the home owners and 2 percent of the condominium owners believed the trail would make their property sell for less, 25 percent of the real estate agents believed the trail would make the properties immediately adjacent to the trail sell for less, in spite of the fact that 32 percent thought the trail would make homes sell for more and 43 percent thought the trail would have no effect on the selling price of homes adjacent to the trail. As in the first question, there appear to be two reasons for this result. Agents who did not regularly sell homes along the trail were more likely to see the trail as decreasing the selling price of homes, indicating that they may have had one or two negative experiences with potential clients. The second reason appears to be the type of clients a particular agent happened to have. Agents who had clients who were walkers, joggers, and bicyclists had a different perception of the trail than those who did not.

The consistency of the survey results indicate that the trail has a neutral to slightly positive effect on the selling price of properties adjacent to the trail. It all depends on the prospective buyers. To some, the trail adds value; to others, it has no effect; and to others it reduces value.

The third question the study attempted to answer was, what effect, if any, the trail has had on selling property near, but not adjacent to the trail. Residents who owned single-family homes within one block of the trail were asked if, in their opinion, being near the Burke-Gilman Trail would make their home easier or more difficult to sell or have no effect on selling their home. Real estate agents were asked a similar question and real estate advertisements were surveyed to determine if properties were being advertised as being near the trail.

The results of the surveys were definitive and consistent. In the survey of property owners and real estate agents, the most frequent response was that being near the trail would have a positive effect on selling a particular property (52 percent of property owners and 75 percent of real estate agents). Additionally, advertisements in the newspapers and real estate magazines frequently promoted homes as being near the Burke-Gilman Trail. About 75 percent of the property owners and 100 percent of the real estate agents believed that the trail would have a positive or neutral effect on selling property within one block of the trail. None of the real estate agents and only 9 percent of the home owners believed the trail would have a

negative effect on selling property within one block of the trail.

It is clear from the survey results that the trail has a very positive effect on selling property near the trail. Particularly impressive was the fact that not a single real estate agent believed the trail would have a negative effect on selling properties within one block of the trail.

The fourth question the study attempted to answer was, what effect, if any, the trail has had on the selling price of properties within one to two blocks of the trail. Residents who owned single-family homes within one block of the trail were asked if, in their opinion, location would make their homes sell for more, less, or have no effect on the selling price. Real estate agents were asked a similar question.

The results of the survey were again both definitive and consistent. One hundred percent of the real estate agents and 77 percent of the home owners believed the trail would have a positive or neutral effect on the selling price of homes within one block of the trail (real estate agents believed the trail would increase values on an average of 6.2 percent). None of the real estate agents and only 7 percent of the home owners believed that the trail would have a negative effect on the selling price of homes within one block of the trail.

The consistency of the survey results indicates that the trail has had a positive effect on the selling prices of homes within one block of the trail. Once again, the significant finding was that not a single real estate agent believed the trail would have a negative effect on the selling price of homes within one block of the trail.

The fifth question the study attempted to answer was, what effect, if any, the trail has had on crime rates on property adjacent to the trail. Residents who owned single-family homes adjacent to the trail were asked if, to the best of their knowledge, a trail user had ever vandalized their property or broken into their house. Three police officers who regularly patrol the neighborhoods adjacent to the trail were asked if homes along the trail experience a higher level of vandalism and break-ins.

The results of the two surveys were very consistent. The surveys of police officers and home owners both indicated that homes along the trail do not experience a higher rate of break-ins and vandalism than homes farther away from the trail. Vandalism and break-ins to homes by trail users are almost nonexistent. Home owners indicated that there are fewer than two incidents per year involving trail users. Police called these figures "insignificant" and "isolated cases."

Given the consistency of the results, it appears that homes along the trail do not experience a higher rate of break-ins and vandalism. There is, however, one point related to the survey of home owners that is a weakness in the study. Home owners indicated that there are an average of just under two incidents per year involving trail users. Although police officers called this insignificant, it was not determined with certainty if this represented two more incidents than took place in adjacent neighborhoods, or whether it simply meant that, twice a year, homes along the trail were involved in incidents that would have happened anyway. Police officers believed that the trail was used as a matter of convenience to burglars entering a home from the street side and then fleeing to the trail from the back side of the home. They stressed, however, that the trail had simply been an escape route, not a cause of the burglary and that the problem was easily solved by planting thorny bushes between homes and the trail.

Once the survey work was completed and the results were compiled, it was noted that residents along the trail should have been asked if break-ins and vandalism increased or decreased after the trail was opened. Several residents commented that they had had more problems when the right-of-way was still used for trains than they had had since the trail opened. No one said the situation was worse once the trail opened. However, it would have been useful to survey all the residents to get more complete results on this question.

The sixth and final question that the surveys attempted to determine was what effect, if any, the trail has had on the quality of life in neighborhoods adjacent to the trail. The survey results, taken as a whole, indicate that the trail has increased the quality of life in adjacent neighborhoods. When asked, 63 percent of the home owners who lived adjacent to the trail believed that the trail had increased the quality of life in their neighborhood. Only 5 percent believed it had decreased the quality of life, and the rest believed it had no effect or had no opinion. Police officers also indicated that the trail had had a positive impact on the neighborhood and suggested that more trails should be built. Finally, the public acceptance of the trail indicated that it had significantly contributed to the quality of life in the neighborhood. When asked, 100 percent of the residents along the trail felt the trail should be kept open.

CONCLUSIONS

All conclusions in this type of study are inherently subjective and may not necessarily be applicable to other trails. Nevertheless, the findings of the seven surveys conducted for this study strongly suggest that there is a relationship between the trail, property values, and the quality of life, and that certain conclusions with regard to their relationship are appropriate. The main conclusions of this study, therefore, are as follows:

- The Burke-Gilman Trail has had no significant effect on the value of homes immediately adjacent to the trail.
- Conversely, the Burke-Gilman Trail has not had a negative effect on the value of homes immediately adjacent to the trail.
- The Burke-Gilman Trail has significantly increased the value of homes near, but not on the trail (estimated at 6.5 percent).
- Homes and condominiums near and adjacent to the Burke-Gilman Trail are easier to sell because of their proximity to the trail.
- The existence of the Burke-Gilman Trail has had no discernible effect on crime rates experienced by residents who live adjacent to the trail.
- Trespassing has not been a problem for residents living adjacent to the Burke-Gilman Trail.
- There is an unusually high level of acceptance and support for the trail as a valuable public facility by residents who live adjacent to or near the trail.
- The Burke-Gilman Trail has had an overall positive effect on the quality of life in neighborhoods adjacent to the trail.

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