

EVALUATION OF THE BURKE-GILMAN TRAIL'S EFFECT ON PROPERTY VALUES AND CRIME

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine what effect, if any, the Burke-Gilman Trail has had on property values and crime affecting property near and adjacent to the trail and to evaluate public acceptance of the trail and the trail's effect on the quality of life of adjacent neighborhoods. The need for the study became apparent when property owners in a different area of the city expressed concern over the development of a new trail project on the basis that it might reduce their property values, increase crime, and generally reduce the quality of life. These concerns are similar to concerns raised by property owners prior to the construction of the Burke-Gilman Trail.

Trail Profile

The Burke-Gilman Trail is a 12.1 mile (9.85 miles are in Seattle) eight to ten foot wide multi-purpose trail that follows an abandoned railroad right-of-way. Most of the trail passes through residential neighborhoods. 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 feet of shrubs and/or trees between the trail and the edge of adjacent properties. The trail also passes through an industrial area, several neighborhood commercial areas, the University of Washington, and links six parks. The trail was constructed in 1978 and currently has an estimated three quarters of a million users per year. As many as 4,000 to 5,000 users (80 percent bicyclists) enjoy the trail on a busy day.

Methodology

Data was collected in the summer of 1986 via telephone by interviewing residents near and adjacent to the trail, real estate agents who buy and sell homes near the trail, and police officers who patrol neighborhoods adjacent to the trail.

Residents were asked questions on their decision to buy their home; what effect they thought the trail would have on selling their home; what problems, if any, they have had with break-ins 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. In addition, police officers were asked questions about trail users breaking into and vandalizing homes. A bi-weekly 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.

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

Conclusions/Recommendations

The Burke-Gilman Trail is regarded by real estate companies as an amenity that helps to attract buyers and to sell property. Single-family homes, condominiums, and apartments are regularly advertised as being near or on the Burke-Gilman Trail.

Property near but not immediately adjacent to the Burke-Gilman Trail is significantly easier to sell and, according to real estate agents, sells for an average of six percent more as a result of its proximity to the trail. Property immediately adjacent to the trail, however, is only slightly easier to sell. The trail has no significant effect on the selling price of homes immediately adjacent to the trail. Residents who bought their homes after the trail was opened are most likely to view the trail as a positive factor that increases the value of their home. Long-time residents who bought their homes prior to the opening of the trail are generally less likely to view the trail as an economic asset. Real estate advertisements that promote properties as being on or near the trail tend to be from the companies that regularly sell homes near the trail. In other words, people who have recently been involved in the real estate market are more likely to have experienced the economic assets of the trail.

The existence of the trail has had little, if any, effect on crime and vandalism experienced by adjacent property owners. Police officers interviewed stated that there is not a greater incidence of burglaries and vandalism of homes along the trail. They attribute that fact to the absence of motor vehicles. They noted that problems in park areas are generally confined to areas of easy motor vehicle access. The police officers said that there would be no significant trail problems as long as parking lots are away from the trail and bollards prevent motor vehicle use. They also recommend the development of additional trails.

Residents adjacent to the trail are also positive about the trail, especially when compared to conditions before the trail was opened. A former opponent of the trail (her home is on the trail) stated that the "trail is much more positive than I expected. I was involved in citizens groups opposed to the trail. I now feel that the trail is very positive; [there are] fewer problems than before trail was built; [there was] more litter and beer cans and vagrants when railroad was in." Not a single resident surveyed said that present conditions were worse than prior to construction of the trail. In the eight years that the trail has been opened, there have been an average of only two incidents per year of vandalism or break-ins where a trail user may have been involved.

There is also a very high level of public acceptance and support for the trail. Not a single resident surveyed felt the trail should be closed. Less than three percent said there were any problems associated with the trail that were serious enough to cause them to consider moving (reason cited for wanting to move was always related to privacy, never crime or vandalism). Almost two-thirds of the residents felt the trail increased the quality of life in the neighborhood.

In summary, this study indicates that concerns about decreased property values, increased crime, and a lower quality of life due to the construction of multi-use trails are unfounded. In fact, the opposite is true. The study indicates that multi-use trails are an amenity that help sell homes, increase property values and improve the quality of life. Multi-use trails are tremendously popular and should continue to be built to meet the ever-growing demand for bicycle facilities in Seattle.

One point of concern regarding the trail must be mentioned. Although not included in the survey, thirteen percent of those surveyed brought up the problem of user conflicts (i.e., speeding bicyclists) on the trail. To some extent, it is a problem of success. The trail has twice as many users as originally forecasted. Solving this problem may require trail design changes, educating users, and enforcing trail regulations.