“Where Do We Go From Here?”

A Workshop on June 25th, 2015, By:
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Overview

On June 25th, 2015, CPHA’s workshop - entitled “Where Do We Go From Here?” - brought together over a hundred passionate minds actively engaged in making Baltimore City safer, healthier, and more economically viable at Coppin State University in West Baltimore. The purpose of the event was to identify, discuss, and ultimately agree on some important goals for CPHA and our partners to work on in the near future. This document summarizes the event and suggests next steps based on it. It is our hope that through events like this, we can unite Baltimore’s leaders, organizations, and creative minds behind common issues and work towards improvement projects and revitalization of our communities.

The workshop featured a panel discussion by some of the Baltimore region’s preeminent leaders, followed by breakout groups on a variety of topics related to the future of development in Baltimore. From the breakout groups CPHA hoped to ascertain top recommendations to consider when allocating future efforts. “Where Do We Go From Here?” was attended by representatives from a wide range of non-profit organizations and private sector employers involved in community development, planning, and real estate, as well as political and religious entities and elected officials representing different neighborhoods across the city.
Setting the Scene

Baltimore’s economy is in recovery from decades of blight and disinvestment. The city faces high poverty and unemployment rates when compared to the rest of the region. Further, many low-income communities lack adequate services, have limited access to nutritious food, and struggle with other community health indicators. Baltimore cannot recover without innovative and practical changes to the status quo. It is our hope that, through collaboration, we can attack these issues head on. Baltimore also has many positives going for it, and we need to capitalize on them and expand them.
Panel Discussion

For the workshop, CPHA assembled six individuals with a great understanding of Baltimore’s complex history as well as the issues facing the city today. These leaders, each a product of different backgrounds, representing different entities, spoke on their particular focus and interests in revitalizing Baltimore. Together, they brought a well-rounded perspective to these issues, taking into account every topic from buses to families.

The panel was made up of:

- Don Fry, President and CEO of the Greater Baltimore Committee
- Brandon Scott, 2nd District Baltimore City Councilman
- Antonio Hayes, 40th District State Delegate
- Anthony Scott, 2015 Mayoral Fellow and graduate student at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs
- Christopher Forrest, President of the York Road Partnership
- Holly Freishtat, Baltimore City Food Policy Director
- Jayne Miller, WBAL reporter and CPHA Board Member, moderated the panel discussion.
The first question - “What do you think is the most important issue facing Baltimore today?” - was followed by a discussion on family structure and family services. The panel noted how growing up in a stable, supporting family environment can, by itself, give a child a greater chance at success later in life. Emphasis was placed on the need for projects focusing on building the capacity of families. One example given was the Center for Urban Families, which has, since its founding in 1999, worked to address chronic issues like poverty, unemployment, father-absence and family disintegration in Baltimore. Making services accessible close to home will contribute to revitalization, ensuring that families, instead of drugs or crime, make up the backbone of a community.

Also discussed was the importance of keeping children off the streets by providing them with meaningful activities and work that are close to home. A good way to ensure that these are available is by bolstering the presence of recreation centers in our neighborhoods.

Jayne Miller posed the question of whether we need to bring people from the city to jobs in the greater Baltimore region, or bring the jobs to Baltimore City. The panel agreed that the answer was a combination of the two. We need, they suggested, to enable transit-dependent city residents to reach employment destinations in the region just as much as we need efforts to attract anchor institutions and employers to the city. Our lack of transit, however, is hindering both approaches.

The panel noted that some communities have taken an active role in working to attract investment. Stemming from this discussion, the panelists suggested that communities should build off the revitalization of other nearby communities. This type of organic development has the potential to revitalize large swaths of the city surrounded by anchor institutions. On a related note, it was mentioned that some areas in Baltimore are in such dilapidated condition that it could be wise to remove the few remaining residents from these areas for redevelopment.
Findings

This panel discussion touched on a wide range of topics affecting Baltimore and demonstrates the need for effort in a number of areas. Some key areas, however, stand out - such as the need for organized communities and greater coordination between the city government and individual neighborhoods. Panelists highlighted the need for Baltimore to contribute significant efforts to improving social services for families and, continuously, transportation was recognized as a key issue hindering development. Transit was also discussed, particularly after attendees were informed of Governor Hogan’s announcement that the Red Line had been canceled. This led to several points about the need for employment, access to employment, and transit in general.
Breakout Group Structure

At the conclusion of the panel discussion, attendees joined breakout groups. These groups focused on:

- Health and Food Access
- Job Creation and Workforce Development
- Equitable Development (including housing and transportation)
- Coordination, Gaps, and Next Steps

For each group, a facilitator and a recorder (CPHA board members and staff) were on hand and workshop attendees self-selected a group based on interest. In the groups, participants were encouraged to speak openly, offer suggestions, and identify prospective projects and
important areas of attention. Suggestions were analyzed and recorded by the moderating team and, at the end, participants voted for the five suggestions they felt were most important, most relevant, or most feasible to implement. CPHA would then collaborate to use the high-rated suggestions to develop improvement projects. The top five suggestions for each group are documented in this summary.

Health and Food Access

In the Health and Food Access breakout group, participants discussed and suggested innovative means of improving individual and overall community health in challenged Baltimore neighborhoods. Much of this discussion centered on availability of fresh and nutritious foods and healthy living programs. Participants then voted on which five suggestions they thought would have the greatest impact on key neighborhoods. The conversation was, in part, facilitated by a map illustrating the distribution of Baltimore City’s approximately 45 full-service supermarkets.
Upon tallying the votes in the Health and Food Access breakout group, the number one recommendation was for “An interchange of information between the city, the private sector, and the community.” It was agreed nearly unanimously that this lack of communication is contributing to the proliferation of food-stressed communities. A lack of organization in some of these neighborhoods, partnered with a lack of involvement on the part of city politicians, as well as profit seeking supermarket corporations, have created a health crisis of underserved people and a climate of underutilized markets. These different entities need greater communication. Through increased communication between communities, local government and private sector supermarkets, we can begin to attend to and remedy food desert situations in Baltimore.

It is important to note, however, that the impacts of increased access would be severely compromised without a concerted effort towards public education about good nutrition, which was prioritized as the second recommendation. With proper education about the importance of consuming fruits and vegetables, eating fewer processed foods, and getting more exercise, we can raise a generation of healthy Baltimore youth, an undeniable step in revitalizing Baltimore as a whole.

Another recommendation, one that is already gaining momentum in cities like Baltimore, is increasing the amount of virtual supermarkets. The virtual supermarket is a program in which Baltimore residents, especially in neighborhoods where food access is limited, can order groceries online and pick them up at set locations with no registration or delivery fees. The program is already in place at designated public housing projects, low-income senior housing developments and public libraries. The recommendation given in this group, however, suggests specifically facilitating their presence in neighborhood corner stores. Corner stores are plentiful but often do not offer fresh food. Instead of waiting to attract full-service supermarkets to sparsely populated, low-income neighborhoods, it was suggested that we give residents the option to access food close to home. A related top recommendation was working to place non-profit supermarkets in challenged neighborhoods. Non-profit supermarkets help customers stretch their money, accept SNAP benefits, and place a focus on fresh produce, meats, dairy, and seafood. Both recommendations could increase food access for those most in need.
The fifth recommendation was “Increase access to locally produced foods,” which could be accomplished a number of ways. One popular method is CSA programs (community supported agriculture), which regularly deliver participants food produced in Baltimore region farms. CSAs, however, can be prohibitively expensive. Urban farms or community gardens are also methods for increasing access to local foods. Both make use of vacant urban space to produce food either for subsistence or sale.

By adhering to and implementing these recommendations, we could see a decline in the number or severity of food-stressed neighborhoods, although the problem is twofold: providing access to food, and then making it affordable to low-income families.

**Job Creation and Workforce Development**

The Job Creation and Workforce Development breakout group discussed and suggested ways of bolstering employment opportunities and better preparing Baltimore City residents to meet the demands of today’s job market. The following paragraphs represent the top five recommendations made by the group, in no particular order.
Throughout the discussion, a great emphasis was placed on “living wage jobs.” The key to job creation and workforce development is getting the most people to positions where they can earn enough to support a family (living wage is estimated to be $22 dollars an hour, 40 hours a week, or approx. $45,760 a year). There are living wage jobs in a number of fields and, often, workers can secure a living wage job without a college degree. It is important to provide residents with the necessary skills and to connect the unemployed to job centers. With regards to preparing workers for success in the job market, the breakout group had several suggestions.

One popular recommendation was to replicate and expand Project JumpStart. Project JumpStart, a program of the Job Opportunities Task Force, is a 14-week construction training program for Baltimore residents with a high school diploma or GED, where experienced teachers help students learn plumbing, carpentry and electrical skills. Project JumpStart participants also receive essential safety training, financial coaching, a stipend and driver’s education. Moreover, the program assists participants with transportation to and from remote job sites where transportation would be a barrier to retaining a position. Studies have shown that more than 70 percent of the program’s students are placed in careers that lead to high wages and apprenticeships. The other popular recommendation regarding preparing residents for living wage jobs was promoting vocational programs in city schools.

It was agreed that there is great value in shop classes, which teach students to work with tools as well as valuable mathematical skills, although there was greater interest in teaching skills like computer coding and app making in schools. One audience member pointed out that most Baltimore City schools do not have computers that students can use to learn.
Another popular recommendation from the Job Creation and Workforce Development Group was to promote entrepreneurship by getting the word out about the Small Business Resource Center, a support office that helps residents develop small business plans. An aspiring entrepreneur brings an idea to the resource center and receives staff assistance. The resident is then enrolled in training classes and leaves the center with a formal business model. The Small Business Resource Center also connects aspiring businesspeople with SCORE, an organization of retired executives available for mentorship.

Finally, the majority of the breakout group agreed that by increasing communication and collaboration between entities, we could create more jobs in the region. Although there is work that is already occurring in the region on this topic, the benefits of these efforts often do not reach those who are most in need. Increased communication could set things moving in the right direction.
Equitable Development

The purpose of the “Equitable Development” breakout group was to discuss and identify possible areas of concern for the development and maintenance of affordable housing and mass transit, as well as to recommend specific improvements that would benefit the Baltimore region. During the panel discussion, the cancellation of the Red Line light rail project - which would have provided a crucial east-west transit corridor - was announced, which steered the discussion towards transit needs. With over a decade of work put into getting the project to the point where it was, this came as a major blow for attendees who wanted to see better transit connections in the Baltimore region. The topic of Red Line alternatives was popular in this breakout group, although it was not the only one. The following paragraphs represent the top five recommendations made by the group, in no particular order.

Popular amongst this breakout group was a proposal to fortify the Charm City Circulator system, a free bus system that serves downtown Baltimore, into a more encompassing Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system that would serve the city as a whole. It was agreed that to improve the transit climate in Baltimore, we must attempt to map assets and try to strengthen pre-existing systems. In a BRT system, buses have dedicated lanes, and thus are able to avoid getting stuck in traffic. Through expanding the Charm City Circulator system, we could begin filling gaps in Baltimore’s transit system, helping to connect neighborhoods, as well as connecting residents to work and entertainment hotspots. Other Red Line alternatives were proposed during the discussion and it was agreed that bolstering transit is a top concern and a primary step in revitalizing Baltimore.
As the topic moved from transit to housing, the issue of vacant homes, common in Baltimore City, came to the forefront. Participants acknowledged the pattern of property owners maintaining ownership of vacant houses and simply holding onto them, hoping to profit in the future when redevelopment occurs. It was also acknowledged that vacancy contributes to an abundance of social ills including crime, drug trafficking, and lower community morale. A popular recommendation was instituting a tax policy that would provide a disincentive to long-term holders of vacant properties.

Bridging the topics of housing and transportation was the widely agreed upon need for greater sources of innovative capital. Despite the abundance of fresh and creative developers, planners and activists, there is a profound shortage of capital to get potentially rewarding projects off the ground. This is hindering the kind of development that will contribute to Baltimore’s economic viability. It was proposed that better allocation of state and local funds, as well as creating new funding streams focused on creative projects, could foster revitalization.

This breakout group recognized the importance of planning for mixed-income, diverse communities in the urban revitalization process. To participants, smart growth means breaking down economic and racial segregation in our city and fostering communities that serve the need of a variety of peoples. Mixed-income communities provide a solid tax base and revenue streams to support community growth, as well as being a place to raise children that will provide them with more opportunity than if they were raised in homogenous areas.

Alongside the group’s desire to plan for mixed-income communities was a proposal to concentrate efforts on renovating properties into affordable housing, instead of developing brand new units. In doing so, we can both cut down on vacancies and contribute to healthy, thriving communities and a thriving city.

Coordination and Gaps

The purpose of the breakout group entitled “Coordination and Gaps” was to identify existing resources in the Baltimore region, and to identify areas where other tools and resources are needed. The following paragraphs represent the top recommendations, in no particular order.
The breakout group discussed the imperative to harness the power of Baltimore’s anchor institutions to benefit communities. Institutions of higher learning, medical facilities and cultural centers should all play a role in improving quality of life for the residents residing around them. Through better coordination between communities, elected officials, community leaders and anchor institutions, we can utilize all the benefits of institutions like Johns Hopkins University and medical campuses, Maryland Institute College of Art and Bon Secours Health System.

A popular recommendation was to work towards expending resources on social infrastructure planning - as opposed to physical infrastructure planning - with a focus on youth. It was agreed that too much attention on building up the city leaves behind the people who may have been failed by institutions such as the public school system. We must work to ensure that Baltimore’s children are receiving the training that they need to succeed in the current economy. Better coordination between neighborhoods, anchor institutions and the local government could facilitate this.

In terms of giving communities the power to advocate for themselves, this breakout group recognized the importance of mapping organization deserts, or neighborhoods that lack a political voice, and elevating emerging community leaders. By understanding which communities are currently on the road to revitalization, and which ones are not, we can better understand where efforts should be focused. Often, it takes a leader to get the rest of the community involved, so it is important to elevate these leaders. Coordination between communities, nonprofits and the government can help provide neighborhoods with a political voice.

Asset mapping is an important step in the community development process. In asset mapping, a community creates a physical map with all of the amenities available in a specific area. They look to highlight anything that has a positive role in the community, from shops, to restaurants, to parks and public services. Through asset mapping, a community can gain an understanding of what they already have, and how far they need to go in the revitalization process. Communities that have not mapped their neighborhoods in this way may not recognize what resources are currently available to them, and thus may not have a sense of what strengths can get them started.

Finally, the breakout group proposed incentivizing or encouraging employees who work in Baltimore City to relocate to the city, as a means of bringing human capital and revenue
streams into areas with anchor institutions, and which may be challenged by concentrated poverty.

Conclusions

Because we are standing at a crossroads for Baltimore’s future, the time is now to implement policies to elicit real change. Many stakeholders, organizations and groups have great ideas and are working towards solutions. What’s missing is coordination and communication between all of these actors. We need more communication between entities, we need more emphasis on leveraging pre-existing assets, and we need more effort towards workforce development and making sure that our children are prepared for the job
market. We need to eliminate vacant houses and consider bolstering the virtual supermarket program to make sure that all Baltimore residents have access to nutritious foods. We need more sources for innovative capital, and we need to explore alternatives to the Red Line. We need strong organizations in all of our communities. We need to connect the city to the greater Baltimore region as a whole.

This workshop shows that there are creative minds working every day to make Baltimore a safer and more economically viable city. With the information compiled at the event, CPHA will work to coordinate efforts and advocate on behalf of real and effective changes in our city and region. Next steps include more workshops like this one, more resources to address the needs articulated at the workshop, and working together to determine how to proceed in the aftermath of the Red Line decision.