CPHA Forum

Gameplan for Revitalization in Baltimore
*Linking Vacants to Value, C.O.R.E., and the Green Network Plan*
October 19, 2016, 4:00 pm to 6:00 pm
Overview

The Citizens Planning & Housing Association (CPHA) held a forum on October 19, 2016 to discuss community revitalization in Baltimore City. Specifically it was about the link between three initiatives: Baltimore City’s Vacants to Value program, the Green Network Plan, and Maryland’s Creating Opportunities for Renewal and Enterprise (Project C.O.R.E.). The event was held at the John and Frances Angelos Law Center, University of Baltimore School of Law, Baltimore, Maryland. This report summarizes the forum and includes recommendations.

This forum was part of a series of community discussions CPHA produced to develop recommendations on issues important to Baltimorians and to help guide the incoming administration on critical issues facing our city and region. Our previous reports on transit, economic development incentives, inclusionary housing, and related issues can be found on our website at: http://www.cphabaltimore.org/

While there have been many discussions about site and block-level aspects of these programs, there has not been nearly as much discussion about how they link together, especially at the City-scale. Addressing the larger scale issues with these programs was the focus of the forum.

CPHA would like to thank the University of Baltimore School of Law for the use of their facilities, and the Abell Foundation for helping to support this forum. We also thank the panel members and engaged citizens and leaders.

Approach for the Forums

Richard Hall, CPHA Executive Director opened the forum providing context and background. He also outlined how this forum was part of several that CPHA has done, with two more in the coming weeks. These forums address issues related to CPHA’s mission: transit, economic development incentives, inclusionary housing, etc. Each of these forums results in a report that includes a summary of the event and recommendations. Among others, CPHA will share this and its other forum reports with the incoming Baltimore City Mayor and City Council.
The Panel

Hall thanked the panel and audience for attending and turned the floor over to CPHA Board member and WBAL TV reporter Jayne Miller as the moderator. Panel members included:

- Jayne Miller, Board Member and WBAL Reporter
- Julia Day, Deputy Commissioner for Land Resources, Baltimore Housing
- Tom Stosur, Planning Director, Baltimore Department of Planning
- Carol Gilbert, Assistant Secretary, Maryland Dept. of Housing and Community Development
- Delegate Antonio Hayes, District 40, Maryland House of Delegates
- Dr. John Bullock, Democratic District 9 Candidate, Baltimore City Council and Assistant Professor, Political Science, Towson University

Tom Stosur started by providing a brief presentation about the Green Network Plan (GNP), its status, and future public outreach. Stosur outlined housing and development trends, a map of the latest housing typology analysis, the existing park system, land cover, vacants, and related information. He also outlined the public outreach efforts to date and future opportunities. Stosur went on to illustrate potential opportunities to connect existing green areas and to otherwise expand the green network in the City. For more information see the following link: http://www.baltimoressustainability.org/projects/green-network/

This was followed by an overview of Project C.O.R.E. by Carol Gilbert. C.O.R.E. complements Vacants to Value. It seeks to eliminate blight with demolition and stabilization; improve economic opportunity and quality of life; and encourage investment in Project C.O.R.E. communities through financing and other incentives. It is also intended to build on the 21st Century School initiative and transit. The thrust of the program is demolition and grants for revitalization. For more information on Project C.O.R.E. see: http://dhcd.maryland.gov/ProjectC.O.R.E./Pages/default.aspx

Julie Day then discussed Vacants to Value. The Vacants to Value program is a multi-pronged approach to tackling vacancies in Baltimore City. One of the main initiatives of the program is to streamline the process of getting vacant properties into the hands of investors or homeowners so they will no longer be vacant. It also targets areas for demolition where rehabilitation is not likely to occur, but where there is some market pressure for development. For more information on this program see: http://www.vacantstovalue.org/
Following this background information, there was discussion about the map of vacant properties and the people that live adjacent to them. There was also discussion about different approaches for properties that were City owned vs. owner occupied, vs. renters, and how these programs must address these differences in nuanced ways. In addition, Day stressed that they are looking for whole block solutions, with a preference for preservation. Often there is not a private redevelopment market for many of these properties. There are also historic preservation issues to address with many projects. The City is working with the Maryland Historic Trust and the City Historic Preservation Commission on these issues to save buildings and mitigate demolitions were possible. Preservationists continue to push for limiting demolition and highlighting priority buildings and features for preservation.

The conversation shifted to the changing nature of the housing market and demographics. Not only does the City have roughly one-third less people than it did in the 1950s, but the population often does not want to live in the large houses in some of these neighborhoods. An audience member mentioned that some could be converted to multifamily or uses other than single family residential homes (this has happened in many neighborhoods like those surrounding the Liberty Heights Corridor in Northwest Baltimore). It was also mentioned that the population will continue to slowly increase and new homes and parks are needed.

Delegate Hayes was asked about the Annapolis perspective. He mentioned that Baltimore gets help from the State, but that it is tough because the City’s delegation is not as large as it used to be and some in the General Assembly feel that Baltimore gets too much from the state already.

In discussing the broader region, the need to attract new housing markets was mentioned, along with the need for Baltimore to better promote itself. There was also discussion about how the State and the region are growing and therefore Baltimore does not need to engage in the level of demolition seen in other cities such as Detroit. Detroit has a much more ambitious demolition and land bank agenda as part of a planned shrinkage strategy.

While discussing the rehabilitation of existing homes, an audience member mentioned that she is a single mother and how she restored a rowhome. But she said there used to be much more assistance for individuals doing this work. Another attendee mentioned issues with affordability for existing residents and the ability for them to stay and for their children to afford their own homes in the neighborhoods. This led to some discussion about the goal of gentrification without displacement. There was also discussion about how a home is most people’s main investment, but in parts of the City some homes are worth very little and that puts people in a difficult situation.

Tom Stosur mentioned that Baltimore, unlike cities such as Boston and Washington, DC, has not yet experienced rapid gentrification. This means that Baltimore has an opportunity to ensure that existing residents do not get left behind when communities improve.

Baltimore’s Dollar Home program from decades ago was discussed. Julie Day mentioned that in certain areas it worked well. New owners of these homes needed funds to rehabilitate them and many did not have the needed funds to do this work. Bob Embry, President of the Abell Foundation and former Housing Commissioner, was in the audience. He explained that there needed to be a critical mass of homes going through renovations with market demand, that the City used to make financing available for restoring the homes, and essentially “held people’s hands” to get through the process. There seems to be interest to bring back this program in some form and it was recommended that if this does happen that areas should be carefully targeted. For this type of program to be reestablished and effective, the City and
State would have to be committed to a financing assistance strategy for potential homeowners that would not qualify through transitional financing institutions and mechanisms.

The condition of community development corporations (CDCs) was discussed. The fact that fewer exist and their capacity is limited was mentioned as a very relevant issue. The discussion moved to programs such as Inspire (Baltimore’s program to build on school investments to improve adjacent neighborhoods) and the need to build on the strength of improving blocks. However, several mentioned that these programs often leave the most challenged areas behind. They also discussed how neighborhoods and people that live in them need to be more of a focus with these programs.

In discussing precedence for success, the Oliver neighborhood was brought up. Key assets that helped make this area’s revitalization successful included the quality of the existing housing stock, proximity to Johns Hopkins Hospital, and the work of the Reinvestment Fund with their targeting, financing, and ability to work with the market with patient capital. There was also extensive engagement with the residents already living there. Julie Day predicted that in ten years there will not be any vacant homes along Broadway and below North Avenue.

There was an acknowledgement of various programs, different communities, and stakeholders, and the need to look at the big picture in a coordinated way that is visible and transparent. Willy Moore, a CPHA board member and President of Southway Builders and others mentioned the need for a targeted, strategic plan to make revitalization work for all of Baltimore.
Interactive Polling

After the panel and audience discussion the forum moved to an interactive polling exercise to give the audience an opportunity to directly respond to questions presented on a screen at the forum. This was done using Poll Everywhere software. After an initial warm up question the audience responded to the following questions:

What should land from demolitions be used for?
Which of the following statements do you most agree with in regards to demolition priorities?
What should be the top considerations for addressing vacant properties?

Demos should be focused on:

- Small Scale Projects Across Neighborhoods: 33%
- Large Scale Projects: 8%
- Both of These: 58%
What are your priorities for demolition and revitalization?
(This was an open-ended question. The responses are presented as a word cloud, with the most popular words used by respondents showing up as the largest).

Summarize your recommendations for the incoming City elected officials.
This was an open ended question. The following lists the responses, so of which were combined to eliminate duplicates.

- Community engagement, communication, transparency, and accountability.
- Address low income and affordable housing--helping disadvantaged communities get to the next rung in their social ladder. Housing vouchers for all people in poverty.
- Jobs, Jobs, Jobs.
- Equity.
- Keep a focus on people, honor Baltimore and its people and listen to them.
- Address segregation.
- Education.
- Fresh food, address food deserts.
- Sustainable funding for parks and open space maintained.
- Using the Community Development Network to help with community engagement.
- Discourage big development, Land bank for major redevelopment, and target rehab for affordable homeownership in historic neighborhoods. Equitable use of tax incentives. Increase density. Avoid displacement of people of color.
- Focus on quality of life for those already here & population growth will follow.
- Help to improve police relations.
Hold community events.
Intermodal Transportation and TOD.
Focus, Targeting, Develop and use a strategy with public input. Align the initiatives for synergy. Create a single vision and get everyone on THAT page, and then stick with it. Develop underused areas.
Lower the fees for city and state loans and grants... granted to developers - non and for profit.
Fund neighborhood based whole health.
Fund community associations and community development corporations.

Findings & Recommendations

Being a city that has lost roughly a third of its population since the 1950s, there are many challenges to revitalizing communities in Baltimore. The city has a large vacant housing stock, many challenged neighborhoods, and limited resources to address these issues. At the same time there is a legitimate fear among some residents that investment in their communities could result in them being displaced by demolition or gentrification. There are also opportunities in Baltimore. The overall population loss has ended and shown a slight increase in the last few years. The region is growing, parts of the City are economically vibrant, while other areas are revitalizing. The City and region sit geographically in a growing state and part of the country surrounded by the east coast and mid-Atlantic cities that have witnessed substantial population growth in the last decade. Thus, the strategy can’t follow a typical growth or shrinkage model and rather should address shrinkage at a neighborhood scale while being committed to a City growth strategy.

Going forward, the City should build on its existing programs, seek additional funding, provide more assistance to Baltimoreans in need, and develop a coordinated strategy to take these efforts to the next level.

The following are more specific recommendations.

1. The Vacants to Value program should be expanded to serve more people in additional communities, including those in more challenged neighborhoods. This will require additional funding and different approaches to financing. Lower income buyers should receive additional financial and other assistance to help them acquire and maintain their new homes.

2. The impacts of gentrification should be planned for and mitigated where needed. Land trusts should be considered where they would help specific neighborhoods with their revitalization projects. Longtime homeowners in gentrifying neighborhoods should be considered for property tax increase abatements and educated on the long term financial and community benefits to staying in the neighborhood. Rent increases must be monitored carefully.

3. Participatory and equitable community development should be the priority for revitalization (including demolitions). Right-sizing and right-timing these projects is important for success. The Oliver neighborhood’s revitalization work has often been suggested as one of the City’s most successful models.
4. Vacants to Value and related activities should be driven by a strategy that results from significant community engagement. This strategy should be linked to related programs, plans, and relevant information for targeting purposes. In addition to market and housing condition information, this strategy should outline plans and priorities rehabilitating buildings and for land conversions—-from demolition to various types of redevelopment, recreation, environmental, or other purposes. The nascent Green Network Plan should help with this. Other single subject plans should help as well as the City’s Comprehensive Master Plan.

5. A revitalization strategy won’t work in isolation. To succeed in any strategy our City and State officials and bureaucrats must make the linkages to other agendas, past plans, and community ideas and leaders. The community input at these forums reminds us that transportation networks are critical to job access and housing development. Food deserts add to the difficulty of living in challenged communities, and crime affects vacancy. These linkages go on and must all be incorporated into an overarching strategy for Baltimore. Individual programs should not operate in a vacuum and no plan should operate without sound data and tracking mechanisms.

Other Links and Resources

- Blog piece by architect and community activist Klaus Philipsen: http://communityarchitectdaily.blogspot.com/2016/10/gameplan-for-revitalization.html?
- Vacants to Values website: www.vacantstovalues.org