

Community Development Strategies for Baltimore

Dept of Planning Director's perspective on visions for improving Community Development efforts

LAI Baltimore Chapter – September, 2019 meeting

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On September 18th, Chris Ryer, Director of the Baltimore City Dept of Planning, visited with the Baltimore LAI Chapter to provide an overview of Baltimore's new Community Development strategy.

Chris advised that he was part of former Mayor Pugh's transition team after her election "3 or 4 years ago" and in his role chairing Pugh's Neighborhood Development Committee, he happened to meet the former Mayor of Pittsburgh. That meeting was extremely impactful. Chris advised that the former Mayor was quite blunt in his unfavorable assessment of Baltimore's community development efforts. The former Mayor conveyed that during his 8-year term, with 1/3 the population and 1/3 the budget of Baltimore, Pittsburgh was able to "stand up 5 or 6 major redevelopment projects". He asked "what has Baltimore done? You've got EBDI – what else have you accomplished?"

The blunt comparison embarrassed Chris and the other Baltimoreans in attendance. Stung by this critic, the City took two major steps to improve its approach to community development, specifically:

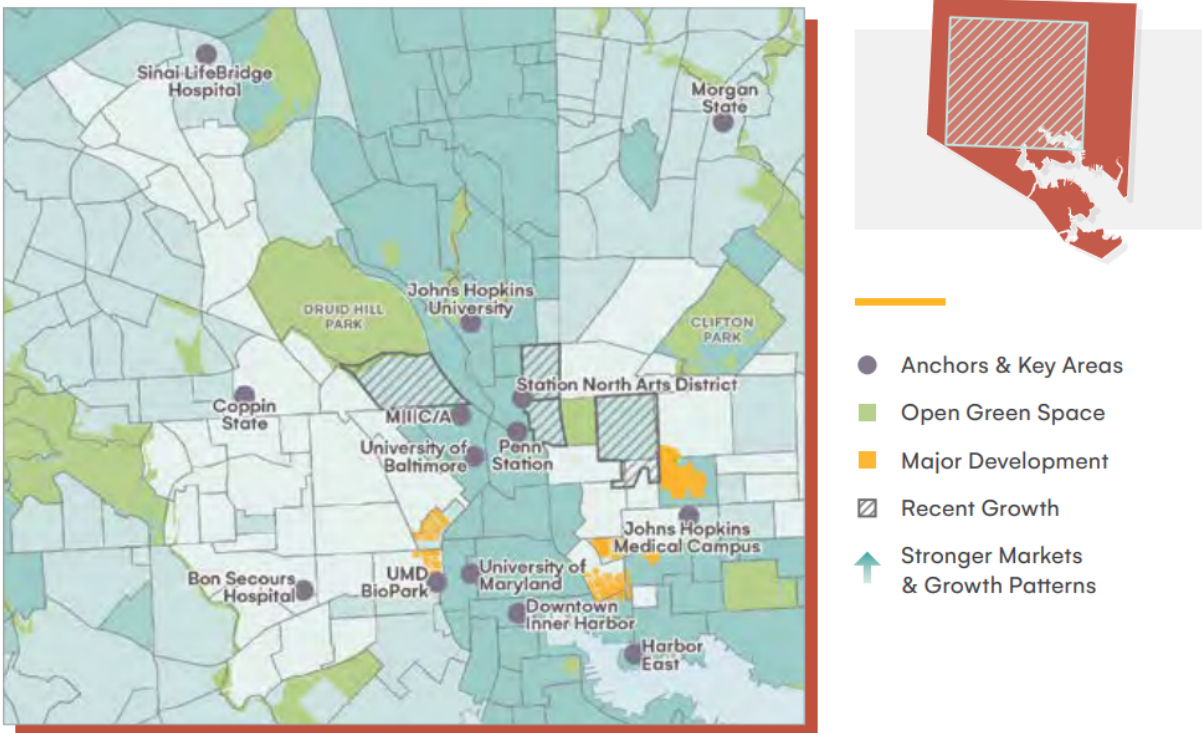
- 1) Implement the Mayor's commitment to separate Baltimore Housing into two departments:
 - a. The Housing Authority of Baltimore City (HABC), and
 - b. The new Department of Housing & Community Development (DHCD)
- 2) Model Pittsburgh's approach to community development, which includes bringing in new resources.

These new resources include \$52M from the sale of City owned parking garages, which has been used to create a Neighborhood Impact Investment Fund, as well as a \$5M Community Catalyst Grant fund to support community-based efforts at self-improvement and development. In addition, an Affordable Housing Fund has been seeded with a portion of transfer taxes collected by the City, expected to become a \$20M per year resource to help provide housing for low-income Baltimoreans. With these new resources, coupled with "a young, energetic and enthusiastic staff", the City has embarked on creating "A Framework for Community Development" document, linked here:

<https://dhcd.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/DHCD%20Framework%20September%20Interim%20Update%20Reduced%20File.pdf>

Chris called the Framework for Community Development document a "work in progress" that is "trying to articulate a plan". The main thrust of DHCD's plan is "to target a cluster of the most distressed neighborhoods for a long-term commitment of capital and land". Chris calls these distressed, targeted areas "Impact Investment Areas", or IIA's. Chris provided the following map for context:

Redevelopment in the Downtown Core and Near Anchor Institutions



The City has seen major redevelopments and neighborhood-level investments in areas in and around the downtown core and near strong anchor institutions.

The lightest colored areas on the map are the most distressed areas. On the West side these neighborhoods are:

- Park Heights – a large area anchored by the Pimlico racetrack
- Pennsylvania Avenue Corridor
- Southwest Cluster – comprised of the 7 neighborhoods west of MLK Blvd & south of Rt 40

DHCD is marshalling its resources to focus on redevelopment in these targeted IIA's. All of these IIA's are "adjacent to strong markets", which is largely why they were chosen. The IIV's on the East side are the ring of neighborhoods (not contiguous) surrounding the areas of strength, which are comprised of the EBDI investment area and the Oliver Community.

Part of the strategy to improve these IIA's is to demolish any vacant housing therein. The City, with matching funds from the State, is 4 years into the process of identifying and demolishing vacants. And although the "Governor is not happy with the progress", demolition has been picking up and Chris is hopeful that the City will soon see a decline in the overall number of vacants for the first time. The City's goal is 1,000 demolished vacants this year. To provide some perspective on why clearing an area for redevelopment has been slow, Chris explained that the City pursues, to the greatest extent possible, a "whole block demolition strategy" to minimize demolition costs and maximize the redevelopment

potential of a block. Therefore, while “it only takes 3 months to demolish a house, it takes about 3 years to relocate a family to assemble a whole block of vacant buildings”.

Chris advised that the IIA’s that have made the most progress are the Pennsylvania Avenue corridor (west side) and the Gay Street corridor (east side). He also advised that the City is “90% done with acquiring and clearing 60 acres in the Park Heights area”, a major site that will soon be ripe for redevelopment.

A second major component of DHCD’s community development strategy is to help stabilize what Chris calls “Middle Neighborhoods”. These are mostly stable neighborhoods which still face challenges and are vulnerable to decline, such as a neighborhood where many residents are aging and may be unable to maintain their homes. Chris opined that “50% of Baltimoreans live in Middle Neighborhoods”, and that “77% of these residents are black”. Nationally, black household wealth is generally about 10% of white household wealth. Maintaining or improving the value of homes within Middle Neighborhoods can have a significant impact on the wealth of these residents. So “our job is to make property values go up” in Middle Neighborhoods. The City’s strategy in Middle Neighborhoods is “not a huge public investment strategy”, but rather a community organizing and real estate strategy. By assisting community-based organizations and leaders, the City hopes to engender organic improvement in desirability and value within Middle Neighborhoods.

DHCD’s efforts to funnel significant capital into the City’s most distressed neighborhoods coupled with its Middle Neighborhood efforts, are, in essence, it’s answer to the erstwhile Mayor of Pittsburgh’s question, “what else have you accomplished?” Its taken some years of planning and preparation, but Chris and the City appear to be poised to offer a more robust response to that question than has ever been offered in the past. The members of LAI’s Baltimore Chapter wish Chris much future success and thank him for his kindness in updating us on his and the City’s efforts to improve community development.