

Urbanite #23 May 06

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In the early 1970s, Baltimore initiated a cutting-edge homesteading program. The city turned over properties that were in municipal ownership to citizens committed to living in the dwelling for three years. The homesteader was given a lease for a nominal rent (usually \$1 a year) and a twenty-year, federally financed rehab loan at 3% interest.

In principle, this modern-day initiative was not unlike the Homestead Act of 1862 wherein the government gave willing pioneers public land to develop the great open spaces of the West on the condition that the homesteader remain on the land and cultivate it for five years. Labor in exchange for a place to live and a source of livelihood was a well-accepted bartering system at the time, promoting both the settlement of the frontier and the concept of the self-sufficient entrepreneur.

Baltimore's program not only illustrated a fundamentally wise approach to the productive reuse of vacant and abandoned properties that ultimately feeds the regeneration of troubled neighborhoods, it also illustrated the City's ability to be ahead of the curve in finding solutions to nettlesome urban problems. The burning question today is: Is Baltimore ready to be so innovative again?

On the ground, the answer appears to be yes. The genuine regeneration process is clearly underway in the downtown area, reflecting trends occurring across the country. With 7,000 residents within a one-mile radius of Pratt and Light Streets, downtown Baltimore is now one of the top ten most-populated downtowns in the country. Appropriate new development is interspersed with creative conversions of department stores, office buildings, and historic structures into apartments; there is the upgrading of theaters and the emergence of small, local retail-based projects. This sizable downtown district, with 150 historic buildings and the notable involvement of Bank of America, has the kind of mix that reflects layers of history and offers endless potential for innovative reuse and new growth. The same revitalization process is visible in many of Baltimore's distinctive, remarkably intact neighborhoods. Historic housing is being bought and upgraded in many neighborhoods.

The momentum exists for many good things to continue. With a new Comprehensive Master Plan released this past February by the Baltimore City Planning Commission, Baltimore is poised to be innovative again.

Maybe.

Will the City's new plan nurture this process appropriately or, instead, stimulate too many of the conventional big projects that do little for the true

regeneration of an urban place? Such big projects sometimes do a lot for the tourism, sports, or convention business that cities have come to rely on, but they are never enough to do what they promise to do for the city as a whole. It never fails that big projects rarely meet their expectations; small projects always exceed theirs.

The regeneration of a city is quite simply a process, not a project or an assortment of big projects attracting visitors. A collection of big visitor projects a city does not make. If you do it for the local, the visitor will come. Local people give a place character and appeal. If you do it for the visitor, you lose the local and, eventually, you lose the visitor.

So what is the plan and how will it impact you?

The goal of any master plan should be to look at the holistic needs of the city and to strategize for its future growth and success. Baltimore hasn't had a new master plan in more than thirty years and this one is slightly unconventional. It was written like a business plan for the city for the next ten years, looking at four distinct areas: live, earn, play, and learn. Its goals will affect where resources and planning energies go through 2012. The plan is not a dictate, but simply a compendium of ideas and goals based on the city's history, character, and current trends. At this stage, the plan is a draft document. Feedback from a series of community meetings held this spring is being incorporated into a final draft, which will be released to the public on May 15. The public will have one last opportunity to respond to the plan during an open hearing of the Planning Commission on June 15.

A vigilant and involved citizenry is necessary to make the positive elements of the plan the priority, even more than the several hundred citizens involved in the public meetings held in nine districts throughout the city over the last three months. Baltimore has a great history of involved citizens. They stopped a highway from obliterating Fells Point and Federal Hill in the 1960s. The experts declared those neighborhoods of no value and certainly of less value than the proposed new highway. They were wrong. Experts often are.

Instinctively, local residents usually know better. The citizens did know better than to cut out the heart of their city with a highway. It was a difficult fight and today Baltimore is richer for it. Those historic neighborhoods are not only jewels for the city but are catalysts for the renewed appreciation and subsequent regeneration of Baltimore's rich assortment of historic neighborhoods. A collection of three hundred distinct neighborhoods, of which seventy are designated historic districts, is one of the city's most important and unique assets on which to rebuild.

This current draft plan both celebrates Baltimore's strengths and trumpets some good news: a declining crime rate, strong urban fabric, access to water, proximity to Washington, D.C., net gain of residents from D.C. and New England, an overall slowing of population loss with the expectation of that trend continuing, housing affordability due to extensive underutilized housing stock, and historic dwellings that fit today's market demand for quality and scale of urban living.

Many of the stated goals are laudatory and reflect some of the best new urban thinking:

- Encouraging sustainable development that includes green building standards and improved transit service and easing traffic congestion;
- Smoother integration of the transit system and encouragement of increased density adjacent to transit hubs;
- Improvement of neighborhood schools (probably the most important goal);
- Acknowledgment that improved public schools are key to keeping and attracting families;
- Development of crime prevention methods through environmental design;
- Implementation of a Bicycle Master Plan to create a complete bikeway system;
- Preservation of existing historic buildings and conversion to residential of empty commercial buildings;
- Expansion of a tax credit for rehab of historic properties and rehab loans for low-income property owners in historic districts;
- Revision of the current zoning code to encourage mixed-use development;
- Recognition of the value of start-ups and homegrown new businesses by encouraging them with financial incentives;
- Promotion of design excellence for public buildings;
- Small but significant upgrades in neighborhood livability;
- Recognition that the appeal of urban living includes diversity, density, and accessibility.

Clearly, many innovative ideas are expressed here and much attention has been paid to details, like planting more trees and “creating new standards for tree maintenance” and recognizing that “streets, alleys and sidewalks ... are valued parts of the City.”

Goals, of course, are goals and no more.

The plan could go either by a conventional route, resorting to new, big projects, or in the more productive, innovative one. At some point, even the best ideas and goals outlined in this document could be used to rationalize the worst project proposals or zoning changes. The key will be how this document translates into specific programs and actions. What projects are

included in the capital budget and what developer projects comply with the plan will be a litmus test of the plan's seriousness. Interpreting the plan in relation to development proposals can be tricky.

Some items cited could be misinterpreted, misunderstood, and misused. For example, young professionals apparently are the largest group of people moving into Baltimore. This has been true in gritty neighborhoods of renewing cities across the country. The mistaken assumption nationally has been that this is the way it will continue. But young professionals have a funny habit of getting married and having children. Once they have made the commitment to urban living, they are not automatically rushing off to the suburbs anymore. That was the post-war expectation that has diminished in recent decades. Some young families do leave, of course, but many want to stay.

This is one of the reasons that improving neighborhood schools is so vital to Baltimore's future. While the city school system has a separate master plan, there are ways in which general planning can and should support the school's efforts. If the city had a topnotch school system and a seamless public transit system, everything else would take care of itself. The number of families with children has declined here, as in most major cities, but that is slowly changing. Families once destined for the suburbs now opt for the urban tradeoffs.

The chance of this trend continuing is strengthened by the increase in applications to urban colleges across the country. The number of college students in Baltimore is 48,736. Not bad in a city of 651,154 (as of the year 2000). Many of the students who chose urban higher education may similarly choose to live in a city after college as well.

The presence of so many students, especially the presence of some of the most important universities in the country, can, however, lead to abuse. The plan calls for establishing a University District. What will that mean? Will standard rules be waived for a university when a development project conflicts with the livability of local residents? Universities—and other institutions, like hospitals—are gaining out-of-proportion strength in many cities. Expansion plans are increasingly developer-driven—wealthy donors ready to contribute to a building with their name on it—rather than based on programmatic needs. Too often the tail is wagging the dog.

Caution is necessary for other stated goals as well. The plan, for example, refers to “an abundance of development-ready land and land that is convertible to newer and more productive uses.” What does that cover and where?

The plan also refers to “underutilized land.” What does that refer to? Vacant commercial buildings that could be upgraded for new uses? Vacant or abandoned housing that could be recycled but might be demolished instead? Does vacant, development-ready land mean the City would accept construction of an inappropriate, car-oriented retail mall, if it included offices and apartments above? The potential for the wrong kind of development lurks under the surface. Increasingly, cities are creating the kind of suburban development that undermines neighborhood shopping streets and

local businesses and discourages establishment of the kind of homegrown new business the plan indicates as desirable.

The housing area seems to contain some of the trickier potential pitfalls. For example, referring to suburban residents working in suburban areas who might desire to live in the city: "A relatively small stock of single family detached homes, approximately 13% of total stock, may serve as an obstacle to attracting this group of customers, since these customers are often more price-oriented than urban living-oriented." Does this mean the City would approve the kind of low-density, suburban detached developments undermining the urbanism of city neighborhoods in many cities? This contradicts the plan's pronounced goal of encouraging more density rather than less.

It is a slippery slope when a city tries to lure suburban dwellers. Suburbanizing any city neighborhood undermines the potential for local retail, public transit use, local school attendance, and the livability that comes with non-auto dependant pedestrians. Today, more than ever, people have a choice to live in a city or a suburb. They must remain distinct lifestyles. A city cannot—and should not even try—to compete with the suburbs on suburban terms.

Many American—and European—cities confront the dilemma of a diminished population, diminished since the urban heyday of World War II and booming urban economies. The risk now is to plan for the smaller city, instead of encouraging and anticipating the rebirth. In New York City in the 1970s, abandoned buildings seemed more plentiful than occupied ones, for example, in the South Bronx. "Planned shrinkage" was the expert planning prescription of the day leading to low-density, suburbanized developments. Now New York City has little land or capacity to address its affordable housing crisis. Suburban housing sits on land that should accommodate urban density instead. Baltimore should be careful not to let this happen.

As noted in the plan, Baltimore has a great assortment of housing alternatives. If suburbanites want to move to the city, they should choose one of them. The strong urban fabric so characteristic of Baltimore that the plan celebrates should not be undermined one nibble at a time. The plan cites 16,000 vacant or abandoned structures and offers the goal to "return these properties to a productive use." Creative strategies to do this are the key.

Obstacles exist, to be sure. All cities are struggling with high poverty rates, an undereducated workforce, and continuing job and business losses to globalization. Yet, plenty of cause for optimism exists and much of it is presented in the plan. To keep its competitive edge with the suburbs, Baltimore must not only celebrate its uniqueness but enhance it, build on its assets and proceed with a positive attitude.

The plan does not end when it is passed by the City Council. It will only be as good as a watchful citizenry makes it.

Baltimore's Master Plan

What is it?

Baltimore City hasn't had a new master plan since 1971. The City of Baltimore Comprehensive Master Plan outlines the goals for the city and this document, if approved, will serve as a map to guide the planning process through 2012.

Why should you care?

If it's not in the plan, it may not get funding. This plan impacts the capital expenditure for the city for the next ten years. One participant at an open community meeting in March pointed out that the draft document failed to mention anything about the public library system—an accidental omission that the Planning Commission says it will address in the final draft, which is scheduled to be released to the public on May 15.

What can you do?

Speak out. This is your last chance to offer feedback before the plan is adopted. "This is just a draft," says Doug McCoach, a citizen representative and the vice-chairman of the City Planning Commission. "We are anxious to hear from people." You can give the Planning Commission your thoughts during a public hearing on June 15 at 6:30 p.m. at the War Memorial Building. To learn more, call 410-396-PLAN (7526) or go to www.liveearnplaylearn.com.

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