

NCSHA 2011 Awards

Category: Homeownership
Sub-Category: Encouraging New Production
Entry Name: The Oliver Development Project

Transforming a Community Torn By Tragedy

Carnell and Angela Dawson and their five small children lived in a hardcore section of east Baltimore marked by extreme poverty, unemployment and crime; where empty lots and abandoned buildings pockmarked the neighborhoods and hardened criminals dealt illegal drugs openly and marked their territory with violence. Encouraged by a city campaign to combat the culture of silence that allowed the drug trade to flourish - and determined that her children grow up in a safe environment - Angela Dawson began reporting drug dealing activity to police. The drug dealers responded with a campaign of intimidation that climaxed late one evening in October 2000 when a drug dealer firebombed the Dawson home, killing Mr. and Mrs. Dawson and their five children.

The sheer brazenness of the crime and the magnitude of the tragedy galvanized efforts to revitalize that community and reclaim it from violence and crime.

The Oliver Development Project is a large scale, long range effort to reclaim that community by literally putting housing to work. Working with a broad coalition of community organizations, private sector developers and local government, the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) helped finance an ambitious effort to produce quality, affordable housing that would attract the kind of hardworking families that are the backbone of any thriving neighborhood. The project represents one of the agency's largest, multi-faceted investments in memory and has produced tangible results - from the demolition of abandoned properties to the creation of new, energy efficient townhomes bringing families that are invested in the schools, the churches and small local businesses that provide jobs. The state's total investment will surpass \$10 million.

A Landmark Commitment

Moved by the entire state's determination that the drug dealers not be allowed to prevail, DHCD made an unprecedented commitment to helping transform the Oliver community. First, DHCD infused \$750,000 in capital to help seed a \$10 million equity fund raised by The Reinvestment Fund. This investment came from DHCD's own general funds (General Bond Reserve Fund) and was made in lieu of DHCD's traditional types of investment of these critical reserve funds. This marked the first time the agency invested its own general funds into an equity fund. This was done in order to encourage new homeownership production and was essential to getting the project jump-started financially. These equity funds were needed to start the demolition of vacant properties and construction of new homes. Second, DHCD committed \$10 million from the Maryland Mortgage Program to help first-time homebuyers obtain a mortgage. Finally, the agency committed \$720,000 from its Downpayment and Settlement Expense Loan Program to help families with downpayment and closing costs.

Buoyed by these resources, The Oliver Project was able to start the development of 72 units over a two year period. Sixty-two of the units will be newly constructed single family homes; the remaining ten units will be existing units that are rehabilitated.

Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development
The Oliver Development Project

DHCD's landmark funding commitments made possible the new production of homes for low and moderate income families that might not otherwise have been possible in that community.

Building Strong Partnerships

The Oliver Development Project is the culmination of strong partnerships between DHCD, the private sector, Baltimore City, and community organizations. It began shortly after the tragedy with local churches passing the collection plate every Sunday. Those coins – literally widow's mite – began to accumulate to the point that a church-based organization known as Baltimoreans United In Leadership Development, or BUILD, eventually had enough money to begin buying derelict properties. BUILD brought in TRF Development Partners, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit developer, specializing in revitalizing urban communities, to begin articulating a vision for the community. Those organizations approached the City of Baltimore and DHCD for help launching what became known as the Reinvestment Fund. The Reinvestment Fund was able to leverage significant private investment. Today, vacant lots that once served as open air drug markets are humming with new construction.

Increasing Opportunities for Homeownership

The homes will be developed and sold in three stages, with prices of \$135,000 in the first stage, \$155,000 in the second stage, and \$175,000 in the final stage. The ten lower priced rehab units will carry an average mortgage of \$113,000. Research shows that the staggered pricing will ensure both strong project affordability as well as support sustainable upward movement in the real estate market. The first phase of this new development, known as Preston Place, is now for sale and consists of newly constructed three-story three-bedroom homes. To date, 17 families have purchased homes, as a result of more than \$2.1 million through the Maryland Mortgage Program and \$191,000 from the Downpayment and Settlement Expense Loan Program. The average household income of the borrowers is \$43,478.

Through the Maryland Mortgage Program, homebuyers receive a wide variety of mortgage options to choose from, all with the lowest interest rates and most favorable fixed rate terms in Maryland. The downpayment assistance is in the form of a no-interest deferred loan, repayable at the time of sale or transfer of the property. The combination of these two funding sources makes homeownership affordable for low and moderate income homebuyers.

The Oliver Development Project illustrates how the production of quality, affordable housing is an essential ingredient to creating the kind of sustainable community that families want to be part of. Though spurred by a tragedy, the project is truly transformational, ensuring that a troubled east Baltimore neighborhood will become a model that revitalizing communities across the country can emulate.

While east Baltimore has high rates of poverty, unemployment, and crime, it is poised for a successful transformation. The community's strongest asset is its location near fast-developing downtown Baltimore and its close proximity to transportation corridors linking it to Washington, DC. The Oliver community is just four blocks north of the Johns Hopkins Medical Institution and just a mile north of the popular and prosperous Fells Point neighborhood. It has essential access to employment and recreation activities, and the elementary school education in the community is considered one of the finest in the city. In addition, there are strong redevelopment initiatives taking place in the area, including the **East Baltimore Biotech Park**, which will provide mixed use development and up to 8,000 new jobs for workers with a diverse range of skill sets; and **Broadway Overlook**, a successful new HOPE VI development located nearby that includes 166 new mixed-income housing units.

Raising Oliver

Can a neighborhood undone by generations of violence and neglect put itself back together?

by Greg Hanscom



Raising Oliver
Click to View 14 slides



photo by Ellis Marsalis

Renewal notice: A rain-soaked bulletin board collects newspaper clippings about the big changes coming to East Baltimore.

[click to enlarge](#)

On a Sunday morning in early March, parishioners file into Memorial Baptist church on East Preston Street. The women wear their finest hats; the girls have ribbons in their hair. The choir, backed by an old Hammond B-3 organ and a drum set, is getting the place warmed up before the service.

Outside the church walls is Oliver. This is the East Baltimore neighborhood that earned enduring citywide infamy in the early hours of October 16, 2002, when 21-year-old Darrell Brooks kicked in the door of a rowhouse on the corner of Preston and Eden streets, sloshed a jar full of gasoline on the stairs, and set the house ablaze. The fire killed Angela Dawson, her husband, and five of her children. Dawson had clashed with the drug dealers who lorded over the street outside her house, and this was their final word.

On this late winter day, clusters of young men—a demographic that is noticeably lacking in the Memorial Baptist pews—sit on stoops and congregate on corners. Many residents say that little has changed since the Dawson tragedy. Last year there were six murders in the community, which lies between Greenmount Cemetery and the northernmost stretch

of Broadway. In July, the body of a 52-year-old man was found stuffed in a garbage can in the alley behind Bond Street.

But in the sanctuary of Memorial Baptist, the bloodshed seems far away. The choir sways from side to side; women in the pews cool themselves with cardboard fans printed with an ad for March Funeral Home. The church secretary makes the weekly announcements and men in black suits carry silver offering plates up the aisles.

It is not a large gathering. Even at the height of the service, there are perhaps a hundred and fifty people attending, with room for another hundred. But people give what they can, offering up singles and fives, and then join a procession around the church to drop another offering into a collection plate held by a young girl with wise eyes at the front of the room. Reverend Calvin Keene reminds his congregation that God loves a joyful giver.

"Joyful" doesn't capture the mood here. "Determined" might be closer to it. Over the past decade, this congregation and four others nearby have quietly amassed well over \$1 million, part of a grassroots effort to accomplish what years of official programs and promises have not: reclaim this community and offer hope to the people who live here.

Baltimoreans have become fond of the mantra, "You can't police your way out of a crime problem." In Oliver, they're trying to bulldoze and hammer their way out. Keene and his fellow pastors are leading an effort to rehabilitate or rebuild hundreds of abandoned and crumbling houses. It is redevelopment on a scale rarely seen in such a blighted neighborhood, but the effort has created a storm in this community, and Rev. Keene stands right at the center of it.

Keene steps to the pulpit and begins his sermon. He starts slowly, quietly, telling the story of the Last Supper. As the tale unfolds, the energy and volume build, and by the time Keene gets to Christ's betrayal, his booming voice — and the congregation's Thank you Lords and Hallelujahs—fill every corner of the church.

Those who grew up in Oliver in the 1950s and '60s have gilded memories of the place. Mary Ballard, a great-grandmother who was among the first

blacks to move to the historically white neighborhood in the 1940s, remembers teachers, firefighters, steelworkers, and longshoremen sharing walls with doctors, shopkeepers, and musicians. There was a lively business district on Harford Road. Ballard's husband ran the local cab company.

Lifelong resident Lawrence Pully, 70, remembers flocking with the other neighborhood kids to the television display room at the Sears store on North Avenue on Saturday mornings. "As long as you didn't disturb anybody or make any noise, they would let you sit there and watch the Westerns and the comics," he says. The kids would gather soda bottles and return them to the grocery store, collecting the 25-cent admission to the Apollo Theatre on Harford Road, where they could watch the movie play as many times as they liked.

All this changed forty years ago, on April 4, 1968. Pully was 30 years old and working for the Baltimore City Fire Department when riots broke out following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He remembers working a fire at a bar on the corner of Lafayette Avenue and Harford Road that night, and watching flames roll out of a furniture and jewelry store up the street. "I could hear Engine 43 responding from York Road," he says. "They were getting closer and closer, but they had to come a good distance. Meanwhile, the fire was walking from the store to the house next door, to the house next door."

After the riots, Oliver's business district was in ruins. Today, the neighborhood can claim only a handful of businesses; most of the occupied storefronts are either churches or funeral homes.

"They claimed they did it because somebody killed Martin Luther King," says Lillian Brown, 70, who has lived in Oliver since 1960. "Well, ain't no one in Baltimore killed Martin Luther King."

The other forces working against the neighborhood were themselves born of the movement King led: When race-based real estate covenants were loosened, black residents were free to join the flight to the suburbs. "Oliver was a great place for African American families to take advantage of civil rights gains," says Rev. Keene, 52, who grew up in the neighborhood. "It provided kids a chance to see a plethora of opportunities." Keene was one of many who jumped at those opportunities, attending Baltimore Polytechnic Institute and the University of Maryland, then going on to a career in computers before joining the ministry.

As those who could leave left, Oliver followed the trajectory of much of Baltimore. The houses fell into hands of speculators and slumlords; derelict houses became havens for the crack cocaine epidemic that swept through the neighborhood in the 1980s. By the time Keene returned to Baltimore in 1993 to pastor at the Oliver church he attended as a boy, the neighborhood had changed, he says, "from a place where people wanted to live into a place where they settled on living." Childhood asthma, exacerbated by roach and rodent infestations, and lead poisoning were rampant. A door-to-door survey done by residents in 2000 found that 44 percent of the property in Oliver was vacant.

Brown lives in a rowhouse on a shady stretch of Caroline Street, one of the neighborhood's better sections. Still, she points to half a dozen vacant houses on her block, including the one next door, where there was a fire a few years back. A window awning fell into her backyard, but she hasn't been able to get anyone to clean it up. She says her godson has tried to buy the house, but the owner won't sell. "In another neighborhood, my house would be worth a lot. I have five bedrooms, central air," she says. "But who wants to live next to an abandoned house?"

Residents like Brown have been isolated, terrified by the drug trade and the accompanying violence that run unchecked outside their doors. Calvin B. Scruggs Jr., who runs the funeral home named for his late father on Preston Street, describes the open-air drug market that flourished on the street between the funeral home and the Dawsons' house as "crazy." "There was just constant traffic," he says.

In 2002, the year of the Dawson firebombing, there were more than eighty-seven juvenile arrests for drug-related offenses for every one thousand youth in Oliver and the surrounding area—almost double the citywide rate. That same year, there were roughly thirty-one violent criminal offenses per one thousand people, compared to twenty-two citywide. The Dawson family murders brought the neighborhood total for the year to at least eleven.

A few weeks after the Dawson tragedy, the mayor's office sent out a lengthy press release detailing the city's efforts to clean up Oliver. "To insure that the Dawson family didn't give their lives in vain, Mayor O'Malley dispatched City agencies and resources into the Oliver community, forcefully engaging the forces of urban terrorism at work there," the release said. But beyond a fresh layer of blacktop on Preston Street and more regular trash pickups, residents say the new efforts made no dramatic difference.

Even before the Dawson fire, however, Oliver's ministers had been quietly laying the groundwork for what they hoped would be more lasting change. In 1995, Rev. Keene began collecting money for revitalization efforts from his parishioners—many of whom come from neighborhoods better off than Oliver—recounting the Old Testament story of Nehemiah, who gathered representatives from all the tribes of Israel and returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the holy city. In 2000, Keene joined the ministers of four other Oliver churches in a partnership with Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development, or BUILD, a community organizing group known for its bare-knuckled, Bible-thumping crusade to save the city's poorest neighborhoods and underserved young people.

By 2004, the Oliver ministers had amassed \$1.2 million, which they used to buy some 250 houses and vacant lots. With BUILD's help, they muscled their way into the mayor's office, where they helped convince O'Malley and then City Council President Sheila Dixon to create a \$59.8 million "affordable housing" fund to help neighborhoods clear the way for redevelopment. In the first round of allocations from the fund, Oliver brought home \$1.2 million. With the property bought and some of the worst houses demolished, the group laid plans for dozens of rehabilitations and new homes, to be sold to low-income buyers for between \$99,000 and \$139,000.

The New Oliver project, as some call it, grows out of experiences in the 1990s, when BUILD was involved in a similarly ambitious project in Sandtown-Winchester on the west side. With the enthusiastic support of Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke and more than \$60 million in public and private dollars, the Enterprise Foundation, Habitat for Humanity, and BUILD constructed close to a thousand new homes. But, beyond the individual blocks that were repositories of this mountain of outside money, little has changed. On the 1100 block of Calhoun Street, where every rowhouse was gutted and rehabbed, there were only three drug-related police calls in 2003, according to BUILD. Three blocks south, on the still-blighted 800 block, there were 254 calls.

The lesson of Sandtown is, "If you build from weakness, you end up with an island of strength in a sea of despair," says BUILD's co-chair, Bishop Douglas Miles of Koinonia Baptist Church. Describing the group's new approach, he borrows a line from champions of neighborhoods such as the ones surrounding Patterson Park, which have rallied dramatically in recent years, thanks in part to their proximity to the park and to gentrified Canton: "You have to build from your strength."

Where is Oliver's strength? A few blocks southeast of Memorial Baptist, bulldozers rumble across a huge swath of orange dirt, leveling the land where 550 houses once stood above the Johns Hopkins hospital and medical school. Rising from the barren ground between Oliver and Hopkins is the Science + Technology Park, a facility at the heart of an eighty-eight-acre, \$1.8 billion redevelopment project that will change the face of East Baltimore.

The East Baltimore Redevelopment Project will include five lab buildings and other businesses that could eventually attract eight thousand new jobs. There will also be 2,250 new houses and apartments, as well as parks and a new school. Plans are being laid for a new MARC train station that will connect residents to jobs in Washington, D.C., or Aberdeen. There could be significant economic "spillover" into Oliver, says Jack Shannon, president of East

Baltimore Development Inc., or EBDI, a nonprofit created by Hopkins, the city, the state, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation to oversee the project.

BUILD is banking on it. This winter, its development partner broke ground on the first of 122 new and rehabbed affordable housing units to be clustered in a six-square-block area at the southeastern corner of the neighborhood, adjacent to the biotech park's Phase II. The strategy grew out of a 2003 meeting where Keene presented BUILD's plans in Oliver to the Annie E. Casey Foundation. "[Foundation President] Doug Nelson came to us in the aftermath of the Dawson firebombing," says BUILD lead organizer Rob English. EBDI was holding community meetings around East Baltimore, and everyone was talking about the biotech park. "Doug told us, 'This is our moment. This is our opportunity to make this development work for all of East Baltimore.'"

The Casey Foundation gave BUILD a grant to hire the nonprofit Reinvestment Fund, or TRF, which uses a computer model to predict where real estate markets are most likely to catch fire with the right investment spark. "You start where the market is most ready. You build a market and then attach it to the next market," says Sean Closkey, president of TRF Development Partners Baltimore LLC, the partnership between TRF and BUILD that is doing the redevelopment work.

This model succeeded in Patterson Park, and Closkey is confident that the same principles can apply to Oliver. He points to Philadelphia, where TRF and its partners have used the University of Pennsylvania as a nucleus for a major urban revitalization effort. TRF has invested close to \$100 million in West Philadelphia, funding everything from new and rehabbed homes to stores, restaurants, and charter schools. The result, says Closkey, is a dramatically improved quality of life for the residents there.

Bishop Miles says his two sons, ages 33 and 39, are already lining up to live in New Oliver, and there are many more. From Oliver, BUILD plans to move south to Patterson Park and northwest to Charles Village, working one real estate market at a time. "This is just the start of a complete, citywide strategy for rebuilding neighborhoods," he says.

This December, BUILD threw its 30th anniversary party at Memorial Baptist, using the occasion to announce that it had raised nearly \$10 million from the Rouse Company Foundation and others for rebuilding efforts across East Baltimore. With help from TRF, the group estimates it can leverage another \$143 million. BUILD has also pulled in more than \$720,000 in state money to help low-income homebuyers, and won Oliver a more-than-\$500,000 share of the federal funds allocated for the biotech park development. At Memorial Baptist, Mayor Dixon announced the city would sell BUILD 155 of Oliver's vacant houses, giving the ministers domain over more than four hundred houses in the neighborhood.

"For the last thirty years, we've tilled the soil," Rob English told the Sun. "Now we're going to plant the seeds."

Not everyone has embraced build and the "strength" from which it portends to build. Historically, Hopkins has been viewed with suspicion by many in East Baltimore: Some longtime residents call the hospital "the slaughterhouse" and tell tales of medical experimentation on neighborhood residents. The distrust has only deepened as EBDI has set to work clearing the way for the biotech park. Some nine hundred residents have been relocated during Phase I. More will be moved for Phase II. EBDI has given residents relatively generous buyout packages, and several dozen have moved back into recently completed workforce and senior housing, but to those in Oliver, most of these people seem to have disappeared.

BUILD's Rob English says that the New Oliver development is designed to fit into the existing community: "This is about strengthening the neighborhood for the residents that are there." But the change will be dramatic. The BUILD-TRF development partnership now controls two hundred of the four hundred houses and lots in the six square blocks in southeastern Oliver. It will rehab forty-seven of its houses and tear down the rest to make way for seventy-five new ones. "The land has been poisoned by vacant homes," says English. "We need to preserve the homes that can be saved, then clear the clutter. We've got to prepare the land."

Some residents insist that BUILD, allied with Hopkins, is ushering out low-income residents to make way for well-to-do newcomers. In Oliver, "BUILD is a dirty word," says Pully, the career firefighter who is now president of the decades-old Oliver Community Association. "They're from the outside." Some residents have come to distrust even the local ministers. In the words of one, "They say they doin' it in the name of God. They doin' it in the name of that almighty dollar."

Community Association Executive Director Nina Harper insists that her organization and BUILD are partners in "one effort." But she acknowledges that her membership would like to see resources go to the northeastern corner of the neighborhood—farther from the biotech park—where the majority of the remaining residents live. In 2002, the Oliver Economic Development Corporation, which Harper also directs, renovated six houses on North Caroline Street. The Community Association is now working on its own redevelopment plan for the neighborhood—a plan that is much slower moving than BUILD's and seems more closely tied to the dreams of the community's older residents.

"There is a heart in Oliver, and that heart is pumping," says Mary Cooper, an active member of the community association who lives in the neighborhood with her daughter—not far from her own mother, longtime resident Mary Ballard. "We know how it was, and how it could be again. We would like to bring this community back to its glory."

Rev. Keene understands that by joining BUILD, he broke ranks with the community association—his mother helped found the association and was its president for two decades. The community association is tied to the East Baltimore political establishment, he says, while BUILD has roots on the west side, and takes a citywide approach that makes some residents uncomfortable. "There are people who are married to the community association, and that's fine. There are so many things that they do well," says Keene. "But they receive their funding from the city, and so they kind of have to work within the city's plan of action. Whereas at BUILD, we make our own plan."

Recent research lends credibility to locals' concerns about the New Oliver development, however. History has shown that clearing out large chunks of a neighborhood can shake the community and send shockwaves through surrounding neighborhoods, says Mindy Fullilove, a professor of clinical psychiatry at Columbia University who wrote the 2005 book *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It*. "If you have good design and you rebuild quickly, you can head off the damage," she says. But more often than not, new development contrasts with the old, she says, creating a fault line that makes the old residents feel unwelcome, and ultimately destabilizes the community.

"You have to work at multiple levels of scale," says Fullilove. "On the block level, you have to do infill and help people work together. On the neighborhood level, you have to reconnect neighborhoods across borders. At the level of the city, you have to stabilize the underlying causes—in Baltimore, the city has to be working on the problem of jobs."

BUILD tries to do that, with tireless community organizing and after-school and summer-job programs for city youth. The Oliver Community Association also works on multiple fronts, fighting crime and putting parolees to work picking up trash. And in generous moments, BUILD's critics acknowledge that there's room for many approaches in Oliver. "We all want to see Oliver revitalized; we just disagree on how you go about doing it," says Pully. But within that disagreement is a paradox: In Oliver, one group is trying to recreate a glorified past. The other is trying to build on a future that has not yet arrived.

On a windy winter afternoon on East Preston Street, Hopkins seems a long way off through the fog. But on the corner of Patterson and Eden streets, the old Dawson rowhouse rings with the voices of children.

After the fire, Rev. Dr. Iris Tucker, then at Knox Presbyterian, held an after-school program to help Oliver kids cope with the horror of living in a neighborhood where a family could be burned to death for speaking out against the drug trade. A Friday afternoon pizza party turned into a weekly gathering sponsored by the churches, the elementary school, and the police, she says. The city set up spotlights in the street in front of the Dawson house, lighting up the late-autumn evenings so that children felt safe playing hopscotch. The kids drew pictures and wrote the Dawson children's names on the sidewalk. "They did a lot of things to keep those children's memories alive," says Tucker. "I believe it was very therapeutic."

Tucker began talking with Mayor O'Malley and other city and state officials about turning the house into a sanctuary for neighborhood kids. They understood just how deep the problems in Oliver ran: News stories referred to arsonist Darrell Brooks simply as "a drug dealer," but he was also a neighborhood kid; he lived across Eden Street from the Dawsons.

The rowhouse was renovated with city and state funding, and the Dawson Family Safe Haven Center opened last March. Each weekday afternoon, knots of kids walk from nearby elementary schools to the center to practice computer skills and do homework. On Tuesdays, there are Spanish classes; on Thursdays, photography lessons. Today is Wednesday, game day, but before letting them loose in the computer lab, Raschid Smith, one of the center's program coordinators, asks each to do a report for Black History Month. Asked about her report, an 11-year-old girl eagerly reads aloud from a webpage about ophthalmologist Patricia Bath. The boy sitting next to her researches the famous Hopkins pediatric neurosurgeon Benjamin Carson. Across the room, a boy who has finished his report plays a game called "Pimp My Ride," pasting flaming orange quarter panels on a Corvette.

The walls of the Dawson Center are decorated with portraits of upstanding citizens with ties to Baltimore—Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, UMBC basketball star Keith Booth, Congressman Elijah Cummings—alongside biographies written by the children. Center Director Pam Carter wants to give these kids the sense that they have options—that sense that Mary Ballard, Lawrence Pully, and Rev. Keene remember from the 1950s and '60s. She wants to create a "Dawson Annex" in the nearby Oliver Multipurpose Building, where teenagers can learn construction skills and culinary arts.

In the center's stairway, another portrait hangs on the wall, this one of Angela Dawson. She looks like a formidable woman. Dawson had another daughter, Kisha, who was 16 at the time of the fire and not living at home. Carter says Kisha came by on opening day. Her two young children finger-painted while she walked the house, recalling whose bedroom was where.

Have things in Oliver improved since the fire? "It's better," Carter says, measuring her words, "but we still need some help." She gestures out the front window to the blue light that flashes over a police camera on the far side of Preston Street. "They sold more drugs under that camera than they did before the police put it up," she says. "They smart. They know nobody's watching that camera."

Still, she says the drug dealers treat the Dawson Center with respect. They even usher the kids safely across the street when they arrive after school.

It's four o'clock on a Friday afternoon, and around the city, people are hitting the roads, hoping to get out of town ahead of the rush hour traffic. Like a great heart, the city is pumping its people out.

Watching the traffic on Preston Street are three men sitting on a dirty marble stoop. The ragtag trio peppers the air with laughter, then one of them stands and limps across the street, bending when he gets to the far curb to tie his shoelace. Having accomplished the task, he tries to stand, but is either too inebriated or too weak to right himself. He turns back to his shoe, pretending to work on the lace.

Suddenly, a child's voice rises above the rush of passing cars. A boy who couldn't yet be 5 years old marches down the sidewalk, belting out the old civil rights anthem, "We Shall Overcome." He's singing into a cell phone, and he knows every word. His mother, beaming, pushes a baby in a stroller next to him. The young family walks by, headed west. They cross Central Avenue, then Harford, then pass out of sight.

Back on the curb, the man finally manages to rise. He turns and hobbles back across the street, dodging cars, and drops onto the stoop with his friends. The three of them collapse against the steps and have a good laugh.

—Greg Hanscom is Urbanite's senior editor.

What do you think Oliver has in store for the future? Share your thoughts at www.urbanitebaltimore.com/forum.

Like 1

« Man of Conviction |

A Woman's Place »

Related Stories

From grim to green

In Oliver, green is the color of hope
by Heather Dewar

Email

Share

Add to favorites

Add to Custom List



Reclaiming a Neighborhood

The Revitalization of Baltimore's East Side



- [Home](#)
- [Articles](#)
- [Photos](#)
- [Maps](#)

A Sprawling Renewal Plan

East Baltimore Development, Inc. was created by Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley in 2003 to redevelop the 88-acre area just north of Johns Hopkins Medical Campus. The nonprofit public-private partnership manages and directs the \$1.8 billion community revitalization. Planners envisioned a biotechnology park as the economic engine to drive the project, but it also promises hundreds of new homes, parks, a school, restaurants, stores and parking.

The Urban Affairs Reporting class at the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism spent the fall 2009 semester reporting on the project and its effects on the surrounding area.

New buildings are rising, but can a redevelopment project become a community?

By Jennifer Hlad

The Monday before Thanksgiving was damp and chilly in East Baltimore. But the East Baltimore Development Inc. Community Resource Center was warm and bright.

Smiling women dished out generous helpings of turkey, green beans and sweet potatoes as little boys circled the crowded room with trays of lemon cake and pumpkin pie. Hundreds of people – some dressed in their Sunday best, others in their work clothes – squeezed to fit at the dozens of tables covered with yellow plastic tablecloths. Neighbors greeted each other with hugs. Old friends shouted above the live jazz music to catch up on grandchildren.

Projects Completed:

- John G. Rangos Building (seven-story biotech building)
- Ashland Commons (78-unit low-income rentals)
- Park View at Ashland Terrace (74-unit rentals for low-income residents 62 and older)
- Chapel Green (63-unit mixed-income rentals)
- Five for-sale condos (Townes at Eager)
- "Green rehab" townhome, used as model
- School opened in temporary facility

Projects

Planned:

- Four more biotech buildings
- Hopkins Bioethics institute building
- Retail/commercial space (80,000 square feet)
- Hopkins graduate student housing (550+ beds)
- New school
- Parking
- Townhouses

Outside, many homes are crumbling, lots stand empty and feral cats scrounge for food in the light from nearby [Johns Hopkins Hospital](#). But inside, with the din of a hundred conversations and the aromas of Thanksgiving dinner, there was an unmistakable feeling of community.

“Community” is the objective for the East Baltimore Development project, a \$1.8 billion renewal plan that has razed a neighborhood and is now working to rebuild it.

The master plan shows hundreds of homes, a biotech park for the Johns Hopkins Medical Campus, shops and a school. But to create a real community, organizers and experts say, the “new East Side” must be more than just a cluster of new buildings.

“A community is relationships between people, not relationships between buildings,” said Sidney Brower, a professor of urban studies and planning at the University of Maryland.

“The buildings provide a common address, and living next to each other generates common interests. People get together around common interests, so there needs to be a mechanism to help people recognize their common interests and get together.”

“Kind of stuck”

EBDI was created by then-Baltimore Mayor Martin O’Malley in 2003 to revitalize and redevelop the 88-acre area just north of Johns Hopkins Medical Campus. The idea was to “transform over 80 acres of blighted, under-utilized land into a thriving mixed-income, mixed-used community,” creating up to 6,000 new jobs, according to a state bond bill fact sheet from the project’s origins.

Six years in, the project is still in its first phase. A seven-story biotech building opened in 2008 – the only one of five planned biotech buildings to open so far. Three rental properties have opened, offering about 200 rental units, mainly for low-income residents.

And while bond documents said the first phase would include 850 new or rehabilitated housing units, the first for-sale townhomes just went on the market.

“It’s succeeding in many respects, and in other respects, it’s kind of stuck,” Shea said.

Commercial and residential development has stalled because of the economy. But rehabilitation and repair projects are slated to begin soon on nine homes, and EBDI officials expect to break ground this summer on a graduate student housing tower with more than 550 beds.

Designed to be different

Many had given up on the neighborhood long before.

By 2003, 70 percent of the homes in the neighborhood were vacant. Previous redevelopment projects had failed, officials said.



New condos have been built at the corner of McDonogh and Eager. Just a few yards away, vacant rowhouses await attention from EBDI. Photo by Graham Moomaw.

In 2000, the Historic East Baltimore Community Action Committee had been working for more than five years in the area – which used to be known as Middle East – in an effort to save the neighborhood. But houses were being abandoned faster than they could be rehabilitated. The number of vacant houses had nearly doubled in five years, and the organization had rehabilitated only a small fraction of what had been promised.

The East Baltimore Development project was designed to be different.

O’Malley envisioned a life sciences and technology park as an economic engine, but the development also promised parking, restaurants, stores, housing, parks and a new school.

To pay for the \$1.8-billion project, O’Malley worked to forge public-private partnerships with the federal, state and city government, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Johns Hopkins Institutions, the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation.

But first EBDI had to acquire about 2,000 properties – and relocate more than 600 households.

Radical surgery

“If you want to redevelop a neighborhood, you can’t rely on willing buyers and willing sellers,” said [Chris Shea](#), CEO of EBDI. “Because ... if I’m only able to acquire 30 percent of the block, I can’t save that block. I need to control 100 percent of that block – either by supporting an owner to renovate and reoccupy properly, or by ... taking the property and renovating and reoccupying (it).”

The median sales price of a house in the Baltimore area at the time was \$220,000, Shea said, but even the best-maintained rowhouses in the EBDI neighborhood were only valued at \$30,000.

"Because of the disinvestment in the neighborhood, because of the conditions in the neighborhood, East Baltimore homeowners saw the equity wealth embodied in their homes dissipate to almost nothing," he said.

Still, not everyone was eager to move. Many of the residents who remained were reluctant to leave behind the homes in which they had spent so much of their lives.

"It's been raucous. It's been difficult," Shea said.

But, he said, hundreds of people simply had to move out.

"I'm one of those who'd argue that it is probably impossible to do something like (this), given the circumstances of East Baltimore, without some radical surgery. And when you engage in radical surgery... you take advantage of that fundamental power imbalance that has come to exist here and you wield it. And you've got to not be guilty about that," he said.

Not tension free

Residents and EBDI representatives had meeting after meeting as they worked out the relocation packages for residents who were losing their homes.

"It's very, very hard on a lot of people," Shea said, but "you can do that hard work and be firm about it, and at the same time, recognize the hell that you're putting them through."

Under the requirements of the federal Uniform Relocation Act, some of the residents relocated in the first phase were given \$155,000 to buy a new home, he said.

Eminent domain laws allow the government to take private property for the public good and pay the owners. In this case, Baltimore acquired houses in the area, then turned them over to EBDI. Many were demolished, while the few that were in good enough shape were slated for rehabilitation.

"The irony of eminent domain in East Baltimore is it kicked people back up into the middle class and overnight gave them a five-fold increase in equity wealth and re-established them in a strong neighborhood," Shea said.

EBDI also gave residents a \$5,000 supplemental benefit, funded by the Casey Foundation and Johns Hopkins University Medical Center, for types of moving expenses that are essential to a successful move but not covered by the federal act, Shea said.

EBDI pays the difference between the real property taxes the homeowner was paying before and what they pay on their new home for three years. And it works to get them enrolled in a state program that caps property taxes based on income.

Profound disinvestment

The project was not the first redevelopment effort in Baltimore, but it may be the most ambitious. While other, smaller, projects failed, EBDI officials jumped into what project officials say is the largest redevelopment project in Baltimore's history, with goals of transforming a neglected slum into a thriving mixed-income neighborhood.

"There are very few projects... that are starting off with this sort of profound disinvestment that this neighborhood is experiencing," Shea said. "I get many professionals from across the country who go through here and their jaw kind of drops and they say, 'I've never seen anything like this.' And that's not anything to be proud of."

But from the beginning, he said, the project was designed to allow the original residents to reap the benefits of the redevelopment.



The 1000 block of N. Castle St. stands eerily vacant. Residents from the neighborhood have been moved out by East Baltimore Development, Inc. Photo by Graham Moomaw.

"If everything else happens the way that we have planned but we don't have a community, we haven't succeeded at all," said Sheila Young, vice president for development and communications for EBDI. "Even as disinvested as this neighborhood was and with all the challenges it had, there were a great number of people who felt a sense of belonging to each other in this neighborhood. And we want to make sure we have that in the revitalized neighborhood that we're trying to create."

"A really long project"

Rosa Hart Burenstine grew up in a house on Jefferson Street, four blocks west of Hopkins. She said the neighborhood was beautiful and green when her family moved to the area in 1937.

"Everybody loved each other," she said of the neighborhood. "It was wonderful."

Middle-class families started to move out, and the area began a slow descent. Burenstine moved away, and when she returned, she was shocked at what had happened.

The problem was that anyone who could afford to leave did, said Sally MacConnell, vice president for facilities for Johns Hopkins Hospital and Health System and an original member of the EBDI board of directors.

"So what was left were elderly people on a fixed income who didn't feel like they could possibly afford to leave, or quite frankly, people who were involved in drugs, addicted to drugs," MacConnell said. "There were a lot of vacant houses, and there was a lot of drug activity, there was a lot of crime."

Reversing the trend was not easy, or quick.

"We knew, even from the beginning, that it was going to be really long project," MacConnell said.

The first demolitions came in 2003. One of the first people to move was Sharon Tyler, then 55, who had lived in a rowhouse on East Madison Street for 21 years, according to a November, 2003, article in The Baltimore Sun.

"It went smooth for me," Tyler told the Sun. "I feel like I was treated fairly. (EBDI officials) held my hand the whole way."

The next year, Aldena Gladden told the Sun she was not pleased that she would have to move from the Rutland Avenue home she had lived in since 1957.

"I don't feel too good about moving at this point in my life," she told The Sun in February 2004. "I know it's a good thing for the city. But I've lived here for so many years, and I don't know how I'll adjust to a new situation. In some ways, I feel like it's not fair."

Missing the old neighborhood

Sherry Ward lived in her home on Rutland Avenue for 14 years, and when she heard about the redevelopment project, she said she didn't want to believe that she might have to move out of the home where she raised her six children. The 42-year-old mother moved out of her house in January, 2006, with a plan to move back as soon as possible.

Though she has no complaints about the process, Ward is not happy in her new home, and she misses her old neighborhood.

So, would she move back?

"Hell yeah," she said, laughing.

Ward doesn't blame EBDI for her problems, and said the neighborhood has changed for the better. She attended the community Thanksgiving dinner this year, just like she did before she moved away.

"By the grace of God, I'm getting back here," she said. "I loved it here."

Brower, the urban studies professor, said people tend to want to stay in neighborhoods they are familiar with, even if there are problems.

"People learn to adapt to some extent, and once they've managed to adapt, they're much more comfortable there," he said. "A lot has to do with social connections. If you live in an area where your friends are, then you like living there, you like the area. If your social network is disrupted, you'll miss it."

Timeline pushed back

Though one biotechnology building has opened, the economic downturn pushed back the timeline for further biotech construction, MacConnell said.

Ashland Commons, 78-unit low-income rental property, opened in December 2007. A year later, 55 percent of the units were rented to returning East Baltimore residents, according to EBDI's annual progress report.

Park View at Ashland Terrace, a 74-unit property for low-income adults 62 and older, opened in October 2007. The [East Baltimore Community School](#) opened this year with three grades, and will expand each of the next two years to include pre-kindergarten through eighth grade.

Quinetta Cooper is one of the new residents in Chapel Green, a 63-unit mixed-income rental community in the neighborhood. She said she loves her new home, which includes an unfinished basement and separate rooms for her two sons.

"I feel safe, I feel protected," Cooper said.

She moved from Aisquith Street, where her home was infested with mice and her 2-year-old son was sick all the time.

"I had to fight people to get them off my steps," she said.

At Chapel Green, there is security all day and all night, she said.

"I love it," she said.

Rodney Dubose has lived in the neighborhood for three years, and has seen definite improvement.

"Drugs and crime have just about settled down," he said.

A community garden

Burenstine, a member of the governor's commission on environmental justice and sustainable communities, said she has started a community garden behind her house on Henneman Avenue. She hopes to keep it all organic, and looks forward to teaching neighborhood children about gardening.

The idea is one of many that may help as EBDI continues to work to build a community – because the challenge, Brower said, is bringing people together. EBDI faces an additional obstacle as it works to bring people of different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds to live in one neighborhood, he said.

"I think the idea of having mixed income is something that many of the (other redevelopment) projects have not done before," he said. "It's important they see it as a community-building program rather than just a housing program."

Need 'strong amenities'

Shea said the community aspect is a key part of making the project successful – and unique.

"I do think we have to fundamentally differentiate ourselves from other neighborhoods like this. So we have to be very safe, we have to have a very distinctive housing product – it can't be just another East Baltimore rowhouse.

"We have to have very strong amenities in place," Shea said, "public spaces, shopping, day care, schools, those sorts of things.

"If you add all those up, that's pretty expensive. That's a lot of stuff. But that's the only way we'll be successful."

The governor is glad the project that has been in the planning stages so long has finally begun to take shape, he said through an aide.

Shea said the project is important not just for the residents, but for the city.

"It's really important to demonstrate to the city, as a whole, how to do these things. Because the city's got a number of heroic efforts going on right now, in Park Heights, in Poppleton, in Uplands... This project's out in front of all that, so this project's really working hard to set the tone and establish what the right values are, and hopefully pioneer a way for the city to do other projects."

• EBDI Map



View [EBDI](#) in a larger map

• Articles



[Child adjusts to new life, new school, new home](#)



[A school as the barometer of neighborhood success](#)



[Experts: life is tough for kids in East Baltimore](#)



• [An activist moves away](#)



• [A chilly relationship between Hopkins and its neighbors begins to thaw](#)



• [Another East Baltimore neighborhood trying to rebuild](#)



• [Chief executive brings a dose of realism to East Baltimore development](#)



• [At 90, happier in a new neighborhood](#)



• [Family ties bind minister to neighborhood](#)



• [From private school to renewal project](#)



• [A family moves back](#)



• [Old neighborhood's residents embrace the new](#)

Contributors

Yanne Givens
Jennifer Hlad
Tahira Lindsay
Graham Moomaw
Hafiz Rashid
Carrie Wells

About this Project

The Baltimore Urban Affairs Reporting class of the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism spent the semester reporting on renewal efforts in East Baltimore. The course is supported by the Abell Foundation. The Baltimore Sun provided class space and research materials.

Web design by [Graham Moomaw](#).

© 2009 Copyright Philip Merrill College of Journalism



Single Family

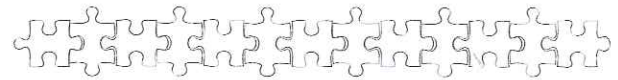
DHCD provided mortgage Place homebuyers like the Mortgage Program (MMP) assistance program, with interest, fixed-rate mortgage

For its part, DHCD invested more than \$10 million in Preston Place. In addition to \$750,000 for demolition and development, the department also provided mortgage loans and downpayment and closing cost assistance to prospective Preston Place homebuyers such as Mr. Davis through the Maryland Mortgage Program (MMP).

"The State of Maryland has really understood what it takes to make affordable housing work and bring back vitality to Baltimore's neighborhoods," says Sean Closkey, president of TRF Development Partners.

Preston Place offered staggered price points, making affordable housing available to families with incomes ranging from 48 percent to 80 percent of Baltimore's Area Median Income. The homes also are energy-efficient, supporting Governor O'Malley's Smart, Green and Growing philosophy of promoting clean, safe, and green development.

"Informed and empowered homeowners who are involved as stakeholders in their neighborhoods form the foundation of healthy communities," says DHCD Secretary Raymond A. Skinner. "Through these investments, we hope to position Preston Place as an affordable housing option for Baltimore City residents and attract those homeowners."



Community Development Administration (CDA) Single Family Housing Program FY 2009 Highlights

- Single Family Housing's Maryland Mortgage Program (MMP) provided 1,664 mortgage loans to homebuyers totaling more than \$310 million and provided \$4.25 million in downpayment and closing cost assistance through 937 loans under the Downpayment and Settlement Expense Loan Program (DSELP) and partner match programs including House Keys 4 Employees, the Builder/Developer Incentive Program, and the Community Partners Incentive Program.
- The number of new employer partners participating in the House Keys 4 Employees Program (HK4E), Builder Developer Incentive Program (BDIP), and Community Partner Incentive Program (CPIP) increased by 34 partners this year, for a total of 198 partners.
- The Homeownership for Individuals with Disabilities Program provided 29 loans totaling approximately \$2 million in bond funds and more than \$3 million in state funds.





News & Events

Five new homes dedicated in Oliver

First dwellings built there in half-century

By Stephen Kiehl

Baltimore Sun, July 29, 2008

The first new homes to be built in a half-century in East Baltimore's Oliver neighborhood were dedicated yesterday, a sign of progress, officials said, in a blighted swath of the city once notorious for drug dealing.

As a result of a unique public-private partnership, vacant houses were demolished and land was assembled to build 75 homes for low- to moderate-income homebuyers. Another 47 homes will be rehabilitated, all within a six-square-block area just north of Johns Hopkins Hospital.

The first five of the new homes, on Caroline Street, were completed this month. Gov. Martin O'Malley, Mayor Sheila Dixon and U.S. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski joined the homeowners for a ribbon-cutting ceremony yesterday.

The handsome three-story homes with red-brick fronts stand in sharp contrast to the blocks filled with boarded-up homes nearby. One survey put Oliver's vacancy rate at 44 percent.

But the community was galvanized after seven members of the Dawson family were killed in a 2002 fire set by drug dealers they had been battling. Churches in Oliver, organized by the social action group Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development, raised \$1.2 million to rebuild their community. Residents turned out in force yesterday, crowding the street for the ribbon-cutting and then swarming into the new homes.

"The Oliver community is so spunky, so feisty," Mikulski said. "They have pushed out the drug dealers. They have fought blight and they have fought despair."

The new homes will be priced around \$139,000 for families making 80 percent or less of the area median income (to \$54,000 for a family of four). Families making more money can buy the homes but would have to pay market rate because they would not qualify for a state subsidy.

The rehabilitated homes will sell for \$99,000 with the subsidy.

In the next three years, all 122 homes should be

completed. "I can see the Oliver community transforming into a neighborhood that we can be proud of, that we can respect," Dixon said.

To make the project happen, the city kicked in \$3 million and the state \$10 million. The Jewish Fund for Justice matched the \$1.2 million raised by the Oliver churches. And Anthony W. Deering, former chairman of the Rouse Co., led the effort to raise \$10 million from investors for rebuilding blighted neighborhoods across East Baltimore. The Oliver homes are the first to be improved through that fund.

Some of the new homeowners got into their houses for the first time yesterday. They delighted in the size of the structures, and they said they were dedicated to rebuilding the community.

"I've seen it through good and bad," said Felicia McKoy, 34, a case manager with Baltimore's Healthy Start program and a new homeowner. She said Oliver is entering a period of renewal, just as she is. "This is the opening of a new season in my life," said McKoy, who is pregnant, standing in a room that she says will be the nursery in her home.