

ULI Baltimore Greenmount Avenue TAP

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An Urban Land Institute
Technical Assistance Panel
July 29 - 30, 2015



The Greenmount Avenue Corridor:

Reclaiming Greenmount Avenue for the Neighborhoods



ULI Baltimore

On behalf of the Baltimore Development Corporation

in partnership with the Strong City Baltimore (formerly Greater Homewood Community Corporation)

Reclaiming Greenmount Avenue

Acknowledgments

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The Baltimore City Department of Transportation

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These are neighborhoods with great people and great potential.

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About ULI Baltimore

ULI Baltimore is the local Baltimore metropolitan regional District Council for the Urban Land Institute and serves Central Maryland and other parts of the state through its outreach efforts; the organization is a 501(c)3. As a trusted source for timely and unbiased land use information, ULI Baltimore provides a critical link to the improvement of state and local land use policy and development practices.

ULI is a nonprofit research and education organization supported by its members. As

the preeminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum, ULI facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information and experience among local, national and international industry leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better places.

Founded in 1936, the institute now has more than 30,000 members worldwide, representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines in private enterprise and public service. The mission of the Urban Land Institute is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land to create and sustain thriving communities worldwide.

About ULI Baltimore's TAP Program

The objective of ULI Baltimore's Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) program is to provide expert, multidisciplinary advice on land use and real estate issues facing public agencies and nonprofit organizations in the Greater Baltimore Metropolitan Region. Like ULI District Councils throughout the country, ULI Baltimore utilizes its broad membership base to administer one- or two-day panels, and offer objective and responsible advice to local stakeholders and decision makers on a diverse set of land use issues. These issues can range from site-specific projects to public policy strategies. The flexibility of the TAP program enables ULI Baltimore to present a customized approach for each TAP, one that allows panelists to study and address specific contextual issues.

The Baltimore Development Corporation and a consortium of stakeholders engaged ULI Baltimore to convene a Technical Assistance Panel with the overall goal of examining revitalization strategies for a portion of Greenmount Avenue. The study area—from 29th Street to Eager Street is approximately 1.5 miles long and includes about three city blocks on either side of the Avenue.

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The two-day TAP convened on July 29, 2015 at the City Arts Building. The Panel spent the morning touring the study area; the afternoon was devoted to interviewing stakeholders and inviting public comment. Baltimore's Mayor, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, also addressed the assembled stakeholders and announced a new initiative to revitalize major city corridors: LINCS (Leveraging Investment in Neighborhood Corridors). Greenmount Avenue will be the first

of five corridors to be the focus of the LINCS program. On the second day the Panel re-convened to share what they had learned and formulate their recommendations. Stakeholders were invited to hear the Panel's presentation at the end of the day.

TAP Panelists

TAP Chairperson:

Brad Rogers, Advanced Placemaking

Panel Members:

- Joe Cronyn, Valbridge Property Advisors
- Dominick Dunnigan, Southway Builders, Inc.
- Liz Gordon, Kittelson & Associates, Inc.
- Karin Holland, Haley Aldrich, Inc.
- Davin Hong, Living Design Lab
- Steven Lafferty, Maryland State Delegate
- Troy Marrocco, ULI Young Leader, BCT Architects
- Tony Rodgers, Anston Capital Partners
- Ken Schmid, Traffic Concepts
- Brittany Sink, ULI Young Leader, MRA
- Michele Whelley, M.L. Whelley Consulting

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The Corridor can make meaningful progress over time if the City and the adjacent neighborhoods work together.

Introduction

The neighborhoods in the Greenmount Avenue study area – Harwood, Better Waverly, Barclay, East Baltimore Midway, Greenmount West, and Johnston Square – are filled with dedicated, hardworking residents who are striving to improve their communities. And in many cases they are succeeding, even against incredible odds. These are neighborhoods with great people and great potential.

But driving down Greenmount Avenue, you would never know it.

Visitors to Greenmount could be forgiven for thinking that they are traveling through a vast sea of decay and abandonment. This is because the conditions directly on the avenue are far worse than conditions in the adjacent neighborhoods.

The drop-off in stability is extreme and precipitous. Throughout the corridor, huge numbers of otherwise stable blocks now terminate in abandoned buildings that no one will inhabit because they are simply too close to Greenmount Avenue. When homes next to Greenmount are occupied, it is almost always because they are turned to face the more quiet neighborhood streets.

In its current state, *Greenmount functions as a “Disinvestment Engine,” steadily undoing the meaningful progress that residents and city agencies are working so hard to accomplish.* Nearly five decades after the trauma of the 1968 riots, a functional real estate market is struggling to reassert itself. One sees this on Whitridge Avenue, at North Barclay Green, at North Calvert Green, at City Arts II, at Open Works, and in a dozen different ways across many of the neighborhoods. But today’s Greenmount Avenue undermines this heroic effort.

Put another way, *if we want to support the hard work being done in the neighborhoods, we must change the status quo on Greenmount.*

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The conditions directly on the avenue are far worse than conditions in the adjacent neighborhoods.

nodes or a clear articulation of functions. There are no quiet residential zones or bustling “Main Street” blocks in our study area. Busy intersections that demand vital displays of neighborhood strength (such as North Avenue or 25th Street) are significantly underdeveloped relative to the traffic volume. Instead of an organized pattern, most of Greenmount is a haphazard collection of poorly maintained or abandoned buildings that have somehow survived generations of disinvestment, white flight, and pounding traffic.

- **Confused Land Use.**

Many buildings along Greenmount are trapped, not sure what they need to be. Historically, Greenmount was a residential street with pockets of neighborhood retail. But heavy traffic and

Current Conditions

The current conditions on Greenmount are as follows:

- **Speeding Traffic.**

Through active policy and passive neglect, Greenmount Avenue has been taken away from local residents and given over to commuters. (The fact that many commuters are afraid to drive through such intense abandonment only emboldens the rest to drive faster.) The posted 25 mile per hour speed limit may imply that Greenmount is a community street, but this is a legal fiction. Street design, rush hour parking restrictions, and the lack of traffic enforcement all speak the obvious truth: from curb to curb, Greenmount is managed for the benefit of commuters and their cars. Not for the neighborhoods.

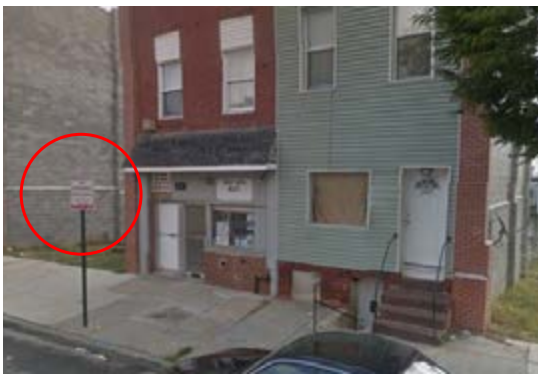
- **No Definition.**

Like many other dysfunctional Baltimore arterials, Greenmount has become an undifferentiated corridor without strong

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decreasing quality of life steadily drove the ad hoc conversion of homes to retail. Now we have a scattering of cobbled-together buildings, poorly suited for either residential (because few people want to live amid a decaying traffic gutter) or retail (because most contemporary retailers need a larger footprint). It is therefore no surprise that so many buildings are abandoned.



- **One Big Alley.**

Greenmount Avenue has the potential to be the front door to the neighborhoods that lie alongside it. But in practice, it functions more as a back alley – useful for the purposes of access, but unattractive, littered, unclaimed, and sometimes scary. As a result, Greenmount Avenue divides the neighborhoods to its east and west, rather than pulling them together.

Generating Change

The situation is difficult, but not hopeless. The Corridor can make meaningful progress over time if the City and the adjacent neighborhoods work together to steadily pursue the following five strategies:

1. Calm Traffic

Slowing traffic is a necessary precondition for attracting investment to Greenmount. On its own, traffic calming is not sufficient to inspire the change residents are hungry for, but it is required if we are going to actually achieve it. If the speed limit is really 25 mph, then we should actually manage it as such. This means:

- **End Parking Restrictions.**

The City should immediately eliminate rush hour parking restrictions, which encourage speed while discouraging both residential and commercial uses. In locations where left-hand turns introduce major backups, focus on providing passing capacity for the right lane at those intersections, not the entire Corridor.

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Slowing traffic is a necessary precondition for attracting investment to Greenmount.

- **Invent, Test, and Improve.**

While it will take some time to fund major streetscaping efforts, it is still possible to use low-cost tactical strategies to calm traffic in the short term. These might involve striping, planters, and other relatively inexpensive solutions that can be done immediately. We must plan today for major capital projects, but in the interim we must also take productive action. The situation cannot continue to worsen while the City searches for capital dollars.

- **Improve Crosswalks.**

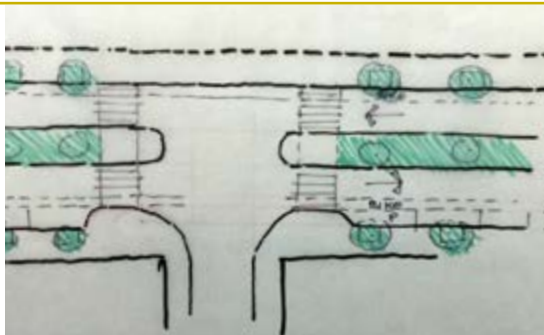
Crosswalks must be upgraded, or even simply added to places where they are currently missing. This is particularly critical at key locations where children are likely to play (such as the connection between the MUND Park and the Community Center) and at intersections with major bus transfers (such as North Avenue, where a streetscape plan has already been proposed). These new crosswalks should include texture and material changes, signage, and bump

outs. In the case of MUND park, even a user-activated stoplight may even be required. It is inherently dangerous to provide recreational facilities for children on either sides of a fast-moving street and provide no safe pedestrian linkage between them.

- **Slow Traffic Through Signal Timing.**

In the short term, the timing of signals should be reviewed and adjusted, but in the long term, contemporary computer-controlled signal controls should be installed to allow for different timing patterns at different hours of the day. In addition, new signals should be installed at points that would slow down traffic.

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- **Make the Avenue a Boulevard.**

The southern portions of the corridor are inordinately wide – particularly the 52' road section adjacent to Greenmount Cemetery. These present fantastic opportunities to narrow the street with wide sidewalks, street trees in well-designed pits, landscaped medians, on-street parking, and crosswalk bumpouts. This section could actually become a beautiful cause for celebration, a leafy pedestrian route connecting Greenmount West and Johnston Square with the historic Cemetery. Today, it principally functions as a two-lane highway, speeding drivers between the lights at North to Preston.

- **Slow East/West Traffic.**

While traffic along Greenmount is too fast, it is not alone in facing this problem. In some cases, neighborhood streets are also used as highways. Chief among these are Preston and Biddle in Johnston Square, which are built to accommodate far more traffic than they typically carry. As a result, the traffic speeds through this residential neighborhood are extremely high, reducing quality of life and discouraging investment.

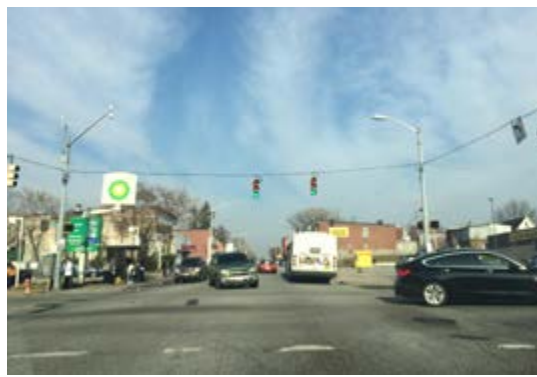
- **Improve the Bus Strategy.**

The community is deeply concerned that the Governor's proposed CityLink plan removes all bus traffic from Greenmount, and we agree that this would be a major problem. Assuming that a bus line remained on Greenmount, it should have a more rational distribution of bus stops, as opposed to having stops one block apart in some places, and five blocks apart in others. Also, a stop is needed somewhere near Oliver Street. Finally, in addition to the typical challenges of inadequate bus shelters, the road geometry on Greenmount makes it hard for busses to pull over without blocking traffic. The City should study the geometry of each bus stop to identify ways to minimize this problem.

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2. Define Nodes

A node is a concentrated center of activity that generates strength and opportunity. Each node has its own character, function, and sense of arrival. Right now, the Corridor lacks these defining characteristics, and it very much needs them.

We have identified six locations that can be built up into successful nodes. From North to South, they are:

- **29th Street Retail Node.**

The Waverly Tower shopping center can be improved, and the intersection of Greenmount and 29th can be strengthened by adding a pad site to the northwest corner of the existing parking lot. The Panel believes that

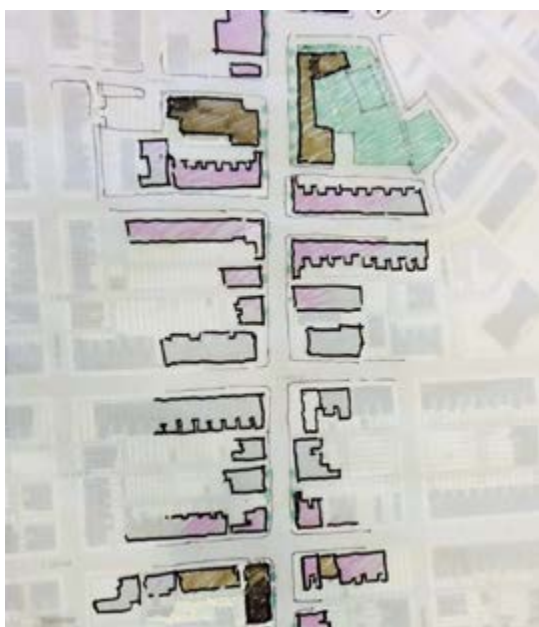
given the traffic volume and the availability of parking, the location would be attractive for a family-friendly neighborhood restaurant (a theory supported by the McDonalds and KFC restaurants occupying two adjacent corners). A locally-owned diner or café, or a national fast casual restaurant with indoor seating, pushed up against the corner with enhanced architecture, would help anchor this intersection. Particularly if it also included outdoor seating.

- **Harwood (25th Street) Node.**

The intersection of Greenmount and 25th is very weak given its traffic volume. As a small gesture, the gas station on the northeast corner should be encouraged to expand to include a small market.

But more ambitiously, the City should attract a bank (a high-priority need voiced repeatedly by community stakeholders) to the northeast corner, which is an ideal location for such a use. And over time, the string of automobile repair businesses on the southeast corner should be relocated to the commercial/industrial section of 25th Street just around the corner. This would free up valuable land for a mid-rise apartment building, similar to the Lillian Jones Apartments.

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The corner of this apartment building would then present a solid opportunity for additional ground floor retail (perhaps involving something like a Subway).

- **Community and Recreation (24th Street) Node.**

The Panel heard a tremendous hunger in the community for stronger programs for children, and we strongly agree that they are needed. Luckily, the proximity of the Greenmount Recreation Center to MUND Park creates incredible opportunities for community and youth programming (although not if there is a dangerous chasm of speeding cars between them).

While the community expressed concerns about the Panel's initial proposal to move the recreation center across the road into the park itself, much can still be done to integrate the two, providing a safer way for children to cross back and forth between two dramatically improved facilities.

- **Barclay-Midway (North Avenue) Node.**

The heavy traffic volume and high visibility of the North Avenue intersection make this the most important node of the entire corridor. But the toxic combination of numerous bus lines and a liquor store is destabilizing to the community. It is very good that "Eric's 500" signed a MOU with the community, which is an excellent start. However, the Panel strongly encourages the City and community to remain vigilant in overseeing the terms of this MOU, as well as general code enforcement against Eric's 500 (as, indeed, is certainly needed for many stores along the corridor). If need be, the City and nonprofit organizations should even consider simply buying out the store's liquor license. Alcohol plus a large transient commuter population on the street is simply a poor combination for neighborhood stability.

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Each node has its own character, function, and sense of arrival.

But, thinking more broadly, the northwest corner of this intersection (which includes vacant city-owned land and rowhouses) could be a prime development site. Retailers like Target and Wal-Mart are now experimenting with small-footprint urban grocery stores, and so this high-traffic and high-transit intersection could present a perfect opportunity to bring fresh groceries to the community. Such a store could anchor the ground floor of a multi-story mixed-income apartment building, accessed from the Heaver Street side. The easy access to both a grocery and public transportation

would make the node an attractive place to live, and would provide a bold assertion of neighborhood strength and vision.

Meanwhile, the southwest corner of the intersection provides its own opportunities. The HABC-owned maintenance shed just south of the Rite Aid building is actually an interesting building that presents an opportunity for a creative use, such as a restaurant or performance space. While there may be contamination issues or other challenges, the City should not be in a hurry to demolish this building. Rather, in the short term, it should place the building out for RFP, and see what creative uses it can be put to. And in the long term, the building (or lot) could be incorporated into a larger development parcel along with the Rite Aid lot, if the owner was willing to partner on such a venture.

- **Oliver Street Arts Node.**

While most planners talk of the importance of attractive neighborhood gateways, few communities are lucky enough to have an actual historic gateway. The entrance to Green Mount Cemetery is quite an asset.

The intersection of Oliver and Greenmount provides an interesting opportunity to strengthen the entrance to the cemetery, and link it to the City Arts and Open Works buildings across the street. A well-conceived space could pull the exciting arts- and design-related activities of Greenmount West out of the neighborhood and onto Greenmount, Avenue—and at the same time, serve to calm traffic.

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As we develop strong nodes, it will gradually become possible to improve the spaces between them.

Combined with the leafy boulevard and median proposed above for this stretch of Greenmount, strong place-making at this intersection would connect the adjacent neighborhoods with the cemetery, which is a wildly underutilized open space amenity.

- **Johnston Square (Biddle Street) Production and Incubation Node.**

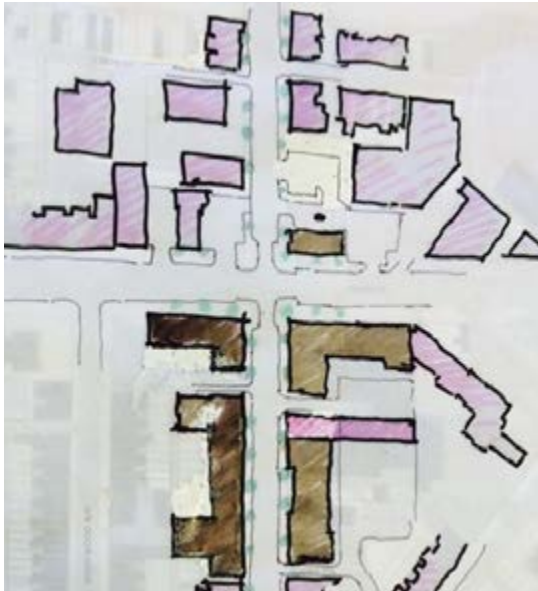
The availability of large industrial buildings in the Biddle and Preston Street areas creates two interrelated opportunities.

The first is to build off the transformative power of Open Works, the new state-of-the-art fabrication facility for artisans, hobbyists, and entrepreneurs currently under construction. If these industrial

buildings were converted into galleries and studios, much like The Torpedo Factory in Alexandria, Virginia, then successful fabricators “graduating” from Open Works could actually remain in the neighborhood, building their successful businesses nearby.

Second, this strategy would help to bridge the rather sizable gap between Johnston Square and Mt. Vernon, providing a link that is both a business opportunity for Johnston Square residents and an artistic venue supporting Mt. Vernon’s role as a cultural district.

The attractiveness of this area could then be enhanced by supporting the various green space initiatives that the neighborhood is eager to pursue, as well as improvements to the recreational facilities adjacent to the school. Meanwhile, the City should extend traffic calming efforts on Greenmount to the east/west corridors of Preston and Biddle, which are dramatically overbuilt given their current traffic volumes. Reducing traffic speeds here would meaningfully improve quality of life in the neighborhood.



3. Connect Nodes With Four-Story Structures

As we develop strong nodes, it will gradually become possible to improve the spaces between them.

While we do *not* advocate a wholesale condemnation-and-demolition effort for the whole corridor, there are clearly sections with high abandonment, filled with buildings that (for reasons described above) no longer work as either residential or retail. These sections need a new strategy.

We therefore encourage the City to consolidate parcels to create block-long linear development opportunities along the corridor. These should ideally be adjacent to nodes, in places where the community is not adverse to demolition and where no critical historical resource will be destroyed.

On these parcels, we recommend developing three- or four-story mixed-income multifamily buildings, with ground floors dedicated to flexible non-residential uses. These ground level uses would elevate residences above the street, providing a buffer that would make it more feasible to live on Greenmount Avenue. The apartments could also be made more attractive by placing their entrances on the side streets, which would have the benefit of giving the apartments non-Greenmount mailing addresses.

While it is hard at the present time to imagine precisely what the commercial ground level uses would be, the final answer will be market-driven. They could include neighborhood retail (e.g. Laundromat, daycare, or restaurant), community uses, and the commercial component of live/work units (e.g. a small accounting business). It is possible that these spaces would have to be subsidized loss leaders until market conditions improved; however, if the nodes became successful, it is possible that a wider range of retail options may emerge. And over time, as conditions improve at the street level, the ground floor units might even be converted to residential use.

These mixed-use buildings could be designed with any kind of façade, allowing them look either like apartments or like traditional brick rowhouses. The Telesis-designed units near 20th provide an excellent template for this kind of product.

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4. Identify Strategic Retail Opportunities

While the market is not prepared to embrace every possible business on the Corridor, we believe there are key opportunities which could succeed, serve the community, attract outside patrons, and shock the market into reconsidering its assumptions. Specifically, we believe that the following two businesses should be high priorities:

- **A Breakfast Restaurant.**

Residents fondly recall the Yellow Bowl restaurant, which was a fixture of East Baltimore life and attracted customers from across the city. Baltimore is a radically under-breakfasted city, and we believe that there is a large and underserved market for breakfast across the city. Done correctly, there is a high

likelihood that such a business could succeed in a high-quality space on Greenmount. In fact, in a perfect world, this business would actually be called the Yellow Bowl, establishing a connection to a proud community history and announcing the rebirth of the corridor.

- **A Seafood Market.**

As working class neighborhoods like Remington and Waverly have shown, small seafood markets offering steamed crabs by the bushel can succeed where other food businesses cannot. Crabs are a tradition with Baltimore families, and Baltimoreans will travel across town to get them.

5. Create a Structure to Coordinate City and Community Efforts

We believe that the problems of Greenmount Avenue can be solved, but only if the City builds a longstanding partnership with the neighborhoods up and down the corridor. Similarly, the individual neighborhoods themselves will have to find enduring ways to work together on areas of common interest.

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Such a partnership will require new ways of interacting, and new administrative structures to coordinate diverse viewpoints. We have been impressed with Strong City Baltimore's dedication to bringing all parties to the table, and encourage the City to formally designate them as a coordinating liaison with the community. While they cannot replace community input, they should be formally empowered to lead the grassroots components of this effort.

Meanwhile, ULI Baltimore requests that the Panel be allowed to present its findings directly to the next Mayor, relevant agency heads, and senior staff in a formal presentation. This would be useful for fine-tuning the LINCS initiative, and identifying action items for City agencies.

Tracking, managing, and providing accountability for these action items will be key, because change can only come to Greenmount Avenue through sustained effort over time.

Conclusion

Like many commercial corridors in Baltimore, Greenmount Avenue is trapped without a clear identity and purpose. It is an edge between neighborhoods, rather than a bridge between them. The lot dimensions and building types are not well suited for commercial use, but the traffic speeds and poor conditions make residential life unappealing. It is stuck, and as a result it drives an ongoing cycle of disinvestment that hurts the dedicated and hard-working neighborhoods on either side.

Despite these serious and longstanding problems, the Panel feels certain that the community and City can break this cycle, trading it for steady and meaningful progress that works to the benefit of existing residents. Doing so, however, will require sustained effort.

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In particular, the community and the City must work together to:

1. Calm Traffic.

This alone is not sufficient, but it is necessary for attracting investment to parcels facing Greenmount. And doing so does not mean waiting for years until every possible capital dollar is available. It means steadily improving conditions in the short term with available funds, while steadily planning for more expensive interventions in the future.

2. Create Strong Nodes at Key Intersections.

Greenmount cannot be changed all at once. The work must be broken into coherent

parts. Each node must have its own function and identity, and respond to the available land and traffic conditions. For example:

- Some nodes (such as the North Avenue intersection) demand dramatic action in the form of medium-density mixed-income development.
- Some nodes (such as 29th Street) simply require the foresight to attract a needed neighborhood business, such as a sit-down restaurant.
- And others (such as 25th Street) present escalating opportunities for both modest short-term improvement (by attracting a bank) and significant medium-term improvement (by developing medium-density mixed-income apartments with ground level retail).

3. Build From Strength.

As the nodes become stronger, the City should assemble block-long development parcels for 3-story infill development. These should elevate mixed-income residences off the street, and provide flexible retail/office/community uses on the ground floor (which might even someday convert to residences). We do not advocate the widespread condemnation of all land up and down the corridor, but do support the City and neighborhoods working to identify troubled blocks whose conversion to new construction would not undermine the historic fabric of the community.

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Despite serious and longstanding problems, the Panel feels certain that the community and City can break this cycle.

4. Shock The Market With Strategic Retail.

Everyone eats breakfast, and there are not enough breakfast restaurants in Baltimore. Establishing such a restaurant on Greenmount (and, if possible, calling it the Yellow Bowl) could simultaneously serve the community and attract customers from outside the neighborhood. Over time, this would have a dramatic effect on what the market considers “realistic” or “possible” on Greenmount. Similarly, a seafood market would be another business that could attract patrons from outside the neighborhood without in any way excluding local residents.

5. Build the Organizational Structures Necessary To Sustain Effort.

The neighborhoods in the study area are filled with dedicated leaders and caring residents. But given the scope of the challenges they face, sustained progress at a meaningful scale cannot be achieved if the neighborhoods each work in insolation from one another. There must be an overarching structure that allows the neighborhoods to partner on topics of shared interest, like Greenmount Avenue, while also giving them the space to work individually on their own pressing problems. Moreover, there must be a single point of contact for the City, which can serve as its partner (to enact change) and as its watchdog (to ensure that it does not get distracted by other urgent problems). We cannot help but note that Strong City Baltimore has been doing an excellent job in this regard, and if the neighborhoods agree, we urge the City to appoint them a designated point of contact for this coordinating effort.