

BALTIMORE CITY DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING
URBAN DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE ADVISORY PANEL
MEETING MINUTES

Date: March 10, 2022

Meeting #59

Project: Reimagine Middle Branch

Phase: Master Plan

Location: Middle Branch / South Baltimore

CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:

Brad Rogers of the Southwest Partnership introduced the project; the team views this project as an environmental justice project with capital components and not the inverse. Sarah Astheimer of Field Operations continued the project with a broad overview of the project, team, and expansive goals, which are focused on justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Reimagine Middle Branch will be an iterative project composed of physical improvements, recreational programming, workforce development and many other components.

The Middle Branch is the “blue-green” natural harbor. The project sees this as the next harbor of Baltimore, but softer and more closely tied to nature. The area has an opportunity to heal the natural habitat and improve the quality of life for residents of these neighborhoods, which have been historically disinvested for many decades, and are cut off from amenities. The project encompasses 11 miles of shoreline altogether along the harbor of South Baltimore. The neighborhoods operate as islands. They are not well connected to each other or to the nearby assets, but Reimagine Middle Branch aims to remedy this with a three-pronged approach:

- *Protect and Connect the Shoreline* by creating a thick, resilient shoreline to protect from flooding;
- *Transform Barriers into Connections* with Complete streets, new mixed-use development, celebration of African American heritage;
- *Support Communities with Parks and Programs* – create parks in collaboration with equitable development to increase the quality of life.

Megan Born, also of Field Operations, continued the presentation with more detail about the various phases and geographies of the project. The Little Hanover and Potee Bridges are included in the scope of the project; the team is exploring ways to reengineer these bridges to operate as multi-modal transpiration arteries while continuing to serve the vehicular needs connecting the Medstar Harbor Hospital with geographies to the north and south.

The team continued the presentation by outlining some of the challenges including pedestrian circulation, topography, former industrial land uses, and flooding concerns. Areas of focus in the presentation include Medstar Harbor Hospital, Middle Branch Park, Cherry Hill, Westport, Ridgely's Cove, and Port Covington. Within the many geographies, the team is looking at connection and access, multi-modal transportation, interfacing with private development plans, integration of the shoreline, and ways to create a balance between open space and development.

DISCUSSION:

The Panel thanked the project team for their presentation and for posing questions to the Panel. This project is the process of years of planning and the opportunity for the Panel to review the project at this stage will be beneficial for the Master Plan, and also for portions of the project that will come back for review during the many future phases. The Panel began with clarifying questions and then moved into an open discussion format.

Clarifying Questions

- *The process is very exciting, and it will be important to retain the elements that makes the process so inclusive and equity driven. How are the guiding principles maintained over the lifetime of the project – over such a long timeline and the broad geography?* Clarity is key; the multi-disciplinary project team is working to develop a framework for the City to work from for many years. The framework will help to maintain the community's vision and carry it forward. There is a lot of hope for creating a group of stewards who can continue to be engaged with the project, while shepherding the process. Governance is important, but there is a subtle aspect of locally driven engagement that will help to keep it viable.
- *Any thoughts about partnerships upstream? The goal to improve water quality requires buy-in from stakeholders beyond this project's boundaries.* There are many vested communities (including Blue Water Baltimore and others) all working toward reducing trash, runoff, and encapsulating sediments on the shoreline. The City also has identified improving water quality as a policy goal. The team sees this project as a triple bottom line: improved environment, improved economy, and improved quality of life.
- *The project is attempting to enhance connectivity to the surrounding neighborhoods, and they have been included in the design process, but how will they be included in the process going forward?* The team is focusing on economic development and wealth creation within the surrounding neighborhoods; there is a focus on building stewardship through the engagement process (through events, education or fellowship programs) and offering tangible benefits while collecting feedback. Along with the environmental justice, the team is focused on integrating economic development – these goals are integral to a truly sustainable Middle Branch. The economic development includes workforce development

and a native plant nursery, business incubators, etc. The team is following the lead of the community on what to include; the aim is to plan the shoreline with the community wishes in mind. To be responsive and not prescriptive.

- *How does the shoreline remain a project for the people of South Baltimore rather than becoming a tourist destination?* The South Baltimore Gateway Partnership is focused on funding programs that fund programs and facilities for local organizations – these are things that are already utilized by local groups or will be used by local groups in the near future. The team doesn't see this project as binary – as *either* for the local residents *or* for tourists (eco-tourism) – the team is very focused on making this a world-class project for everyone... it will operate as an inclusive space that functions for residents and visitors alike.
- *There are certain industrial elements that would need to be removed for the goals to be realized. What elements pose challenges to the recreational, restoration aspect of this plan?* The team is working through how to take advantage of the things that are in place – for instance, the Masonville Cove Environmental Education Center – and connect assets while also embracing the existing industrial uses. For the solid waste uses, which are not necessarily compatible, the team would like to work with City agencies to think about where more appropriate locations might be. Additionally, the bus station may be better situated somewhere else, perhaps downtown, where it is more connected to additional transportation and more accessible for a larger number of people.

Comments

- To be successful, this project cannot be binary; it is an opportunity to sever the idea of “one versus the other” – environmental equity vs economic development. The process of restoring environmental qualities and strengthen the social framework will also strengthen the resiliency of the neighborhood and economic development.
- It is important to include an economic development vision from the very beginning. This vision needs to be established with the framework the team discussed. Consider what communities need at the waterfront to reduce the risk of displacement. Do they need more density, different economic opportunities? Consider these elements as part of the greater plan – there are already discussions about economic development but continue to refine and clarify the ideas.
- As opposed to the Inner Harbor, which is very focused on commercial and office use, there is a large residential component to this project. The economic development piece is still critical, but it will take a different approach.
- What happens on the messier (urban / inner) side of the project is the most unknown compared to the high degree of planning and control at the water's edge. The portion of the project that meets existing or future development is the biggest threat to the plan; laying groundwork and very clearly outlining the rules in the same manner as the rules for the ecological side of the site will be key to ensuring success.
- The framework may take some things for granted – now is the time to challenge what is there. For instance, Kloman Street in Westport continues to work as a divider between old

and new and needs to be addressed; even if the color isn't green, meaning it is not part of the ecological plan, there is an opportunity to think critically about the existing community and how it functions as part of the plan.

- There is an opportunity to address inherited edges and reimagine them as unifiers or connectors. Even if these edges get “dressed up” with improved sidewalks and trees or landscaping, they will still act as dividers. Hard edges will still act as barriers unless they are made more pervious, physically and programmatically – the team should take this opportunity to ask, “What is the best way to get from point A from point B?”
- Opportunities to think critically about layers coming in later phases – developers will want the highest yield and preparing for a more collaborative process now will help to ensure the framework operates as planned. Anticipating the erosion or dilution of ideas later (competing agendas for this space are certainly a given). Addressing the differing needs earlier will be better for all sides. Build coalitions and partnerships now to help avoid the ‘us vs. them’ combative relationships later.
- Documentation will need to be honest and frank, including what succeeded, what did not and why. Keeping track will be integral to learning from this project.
- The project is very aspirational and ambitious, but it's necessary. Identifying robust elements that will withstand the test of time is important. Study the proposed improvements with a layer of skepticism. For instance, TOD is a good idea but could be viewed as an imposition on the existing community. There are many unoccupied buildings in the existing neighborhood; now is the time to think about activating unused spaces for the community.
- Start with the vision and work your way backward. Opportunity to pull the plan back a little and think about giving it room to breathe and evolve. Allow the framework to unfold – will the edges become more permeable and porous? Assume there are pockets of space that will reveal their purposes later, as the plan develops.
- Sustainability and preservation – the team seems well equipped to handle these challenges. Be careful to avoid ‘trendy’ approaches; imposing highly programmed parks might not be the best approach. Consider introducing wild, natural spaces back into the shoreline.
- Additionally, there is an opportunity to experience the important points of history. This project is an incredible opportunity to embrace history in an authentic way and showcase it.

Next Steps:

Continue project addressing the comments above. The Panel looks forward to seeing individual aspects of the project in the future.

Attending:

Brad Rogers – South Baltimore Gateway Partnership

Megan Born, Sarah Astheimer – James Corner Field Operations

Nan Rohrer – Waterfront Partnership

Jayson Latady, Brooks Davis, Kevin Lynch, Colline Emmanuelle, Aaron Stone, Neb Sertsu, Klaus Philipsen – Attendees

Ed Guntz, Melody Simmons – Local Press

Mr. Anthony, Mses. Ilieva, Bradley – UDAAP Panel

Adam Boarman – BCRP

Kevin Gallaher – HABC

Tamara Woods, Caitlin Audette, Ren Southard, Jazmin Kimble, Kyle Leggs – Planning