

October 2007 ■ Conference Paper 16

Smart Growth According to an Older Suburb

*Public Process and Scale Issues in Baltimore
County, Maryland*

Amy E. Menzer



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Abstract

This paper assesses Baltimore County, Maryland's efforts over the last decade to help spur revitalization of an older suburb, Essex-Middle River, and their accordance with smart growth goals. These efforts illustrate the challenges of implementation in a more suburban context. Older apartments built for war workers were demolished to make way for market rate and mixed-income housing and parkland. Public processes were found to be important in the public's willingness to accept revitalization proposals and their excitement about them. Public control of land and large public investments made the most difference in producing results. While counterintuitive for smart growth, de-densification was a key strategy that also enabled diversification of incomes. Multiple scales of analysis are necessary in defining success, and smart growth policies need to tackle public process and proactive planning for affordable housing if older suburbs are to be revived and repopulated.

About the Author

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Residents of older suburbs want to see revitalization, yet what revitalization should look like in a suburban, as opposed to an urban context remains unclear in the literature on Smart Growth.¹ Density levels and other characteristics of communities we would present as models of smart growth differ by context: whether the place is an existing urban or suburban center, or whether it is an entirely new, greenfield development; whether there is now, or we believe there could be, high-speed transit; how it compares with other nearby communities in its design, walkability, presence of a variety of housing types, a mix of uses, and a mix of incomes. Yet if it is true that our models of smart growth may differ by context, then figuring out whether smart growth has succeeded requires simultaneously understanding these contexts as well as understanding how they fit within a larger picture. Baltimore County Government's efforts over the last decade to help spur revitalization of its many older communities have been largely consistent with Maryland's Smart Growth goals but also illustrate the challenges of implementation. This case study of the Essex-Middle River area looks at the County's housing redevelopment and commercial revitalization strategies, and the public processes through which these changes were initiated between 2000 and 2007. This older suburb's experience highlights gaps in Maryland's Smart Growth laws, raises questions about how success is defined, and suggests areas for future policy development.

Essex-Middle River Experienced Sprawl Coming and Going

The Essex-Middle River area is a waterfront community in the southeast portion of Baltimore County east of Baltimore City and Dundalk. It comprises about 10,000 acres on two peninsulas connected by a major commercial corridor, and has a current population of 63,000 people.²

Job and Housing Sprawl Created Essex-Middle River

Real estate speculation, the location of new factories, and the distortions of wartime created the basis for its growth, but were also the recipe for its undoing. In the early 1900s Essex-Middle River served primarily as a destination for hunting and fishing. Some of the area's oldest homes were built by farmers and vacationing Baltimore City residents. Larger-scale settlement began in 1909 with the subdivision of the Paradise Farm by the Taylor Land Company. Lots measuring 50' by 145' were sold for \$150 to buyers in a ten block area the company designated and marketed as Essex. An ironworks operated nearby as early as 1745, and the establishment of Sparrows Point Steel Works in 1887 on an adjacent peninsula (later purchased by Bethlehem Steel Company) provided employment options. A steel rolling mill was established at the head of Back River (at the western edge of Essex) in 1919 and employed nearly 1,000 people by the late 1930s. These industries were joined in 1929 by the construction of the Glenn L. Martin aircraft factory east of Essex on Middle River. The jobs at Sparrows Point, Back River, and Middle River preceding WWII reflected a range of factors regarding location decisions of industry nationwide, and were at least as important as residential development in precipitating early suburban sprawl. County tax breaks on the equipment installed at the Glenn Martin plant also eased the way. In 1931 more than 22,800 people lived in Essex-Middle River.³

Wartime Created Overnight Boom

The demands of wartime, however, dwarfed all previous development patterns: between 1939 and 1942, employment at Glenn Martin's surged from 3,000 to 52,000 workers, 35 percent of whom emigrated to the area from outside Maryland. Government contracts for aircraft generated a need for government intervention in the area's housing and infrastructure to support the workforce making the planes. The need for housing was desperate, as scores of trailers were utilized and people slept in the same beds in shifts. Glenn Martin had envisioned building innovative garden-city style towns, but he abandoned these ideas in exchange for hastily-constructed apartments and homes to meet the immediate need for shelter. Between 1939 and 1945 more than 5,000 houses and apartments were built, some by a subsidiary of Glenn Martin, but most by the Federal government. The new war worker housing was compact, affordable, and some of it deliberately temporary, using unconventional materials that enabled 10-12 homes to be built per day. The waterfront in Essex-Middle River continued to be used for recreational activities, but the area had taken on a decidedly industrial, working class image within the Baltimore region.⁴

While Essex-Middle River had some transit access, its most dramatic growth was auto-oriented. A streetcar line connected downtown Essex with Baltimore City from 1895 until 1933 when a storm washed out the tracks on the main bridge leading to Essex. Since then, a bus line has served the area as part of the longest, most heavily-traveled line in Baltimore's bus system. A Maryland commuter train line now stops near the Glenn Martin plant, which has recently become a focus of planning for revitalization efforts. But no commuter trains or streetcars went near Glenn Martin in its heyday, and workers arriving by car (despite Glenn Martin's encouraging them to carpool) faced tremendous traffic jams. Access was expanded, although local businesses were displaced, by the construction of a new, four-lane divided roadway known as Eastern Boulevard in 1942. It extended all the way from the Martin aircraft factory to Greektown in Baltimore City, and has served as the main commercial corridor and spine of the community ever since. Auto dealerships and repair shops sprang up along the corridor, reflecting the major mode of transportation and a means through which workers with factory experience could branch out with their own businesses to build wealth and exercise greater control over their own destiny. Martin Boulevard, a higher-speed road with one of the first cloverleaf interchanges, intersects Eastern Boulevard and was also constructed to alleviate some of the congestion in reaching the Glenn Martin plant.⁵

Postwar Job Losses and Further Sprawl Led to Decline

As the jobs gradually disappeared in the two decades after the war, and the County struggled to accommodate further growth, the older communities in Essex and Middle River began to struggle with economic and demographic shifts. The Glenn Martin factory (which would become part of the Martin Marietta Company) transitioned from making airplanes to making guided missiles and rockets and remained the County's second-largest industrial employer. But from a high of 52,000 workers nine years earlier, by 1951 the plant was employing 19,500. In 1963 employment at Martin-Marietta had

dropped to 10,154 and by 1973, there were just 3,200 jobs. At the same time, a boom in the County's population, which was settling mainly in new subdivisions elsewhere in the County, stretched demand for services and drew government attention to the rapidly developing outlying areas. From 1950 to 1958, 190,000 new people resided in the County, representing a sixty six percent increase.⁶

Homogeneous Housing Exacerbated Vulnerability to Decline

Waves of subsequent development in Essex-Middle River included a disproportionate number of apartment units relative to the rest of the County's development patterns. While the apartments were undoubtedly needed to accommodate the region's postwar population boom and the demand for housing baby boomers as they came of age in the 1960s and 70s, this demographic bubble left the area vulnerable in future decades because of the homogeneity of housing types. As the postwar jobs dwindled and the housing stock aged, those who could sought larger homes with up to date amenities in the outer suburbs, facilitated by the construction of the Baltimore Beltway system in the early 1960s. The prominence of its auto-oriented but aging commercial corridor waned in the face of regional shopping malls and extensive new highway systems, and a major fire in 1957 didn't help either.⁷

Today, Essex-Middle River has a very disproportionate share of the County's rental housing, including both multifamily units and housing that may have originally been owner-occupied but has become rental over time. In the County as a whole, there were 299,877 housing units in the 2000 census, of which 32.4 percent were renter-occupied, and 67.6 percent were owner-occupied. In comparing census data on the age of housing units, Essex-Middle River has a higher proportion of renter-occupied units than the rest of Baltimore County in every decade of construction. For example, of the 61,203 existing housing units built in the 1950s County wide, 12,256, or 20 percent, are now renter-occupied. In Essex-Middle River, of the 5,573 existing housing units built in the 1950s, 1,581, or 28 percent, are renter-occupied. Exacerbating the disparity, even as development began to escalate in the rest of the County after WWII, and the proportion of rental housing to owner-occupied housing constructed shifted over time, Essex-Middle River still attracted a higher share of apartment construction than the rest of the County. There are more renter-occupied units built in the 1970s Countywide than there are owner-occupied units, reflecting trends in the kinds of housing built during that period. Of 47,688 units constructed in the 1970s, 25,048, or 53 percent, are renter-occupied Countywide—a dramatic shift in proportion from the 20 percent renter-occupied 1950s-era housing for the County as a whole. Yet Essex-Middle River still bears a disproportionate share of the rental units built during the 1970s: of the 3,484 existing units built in the 1970s, 2,364, or 68 percent, are renter-occupied.⁸

By the 1990 census, Essex-Middle River had developed a concentration of poverty, which was in turn concentrated in its many apartments. In 1990, Essex-Middle River's population was 63,959, or 9.44 percent of the total County population. Yet the number of people below the poverty line in 1990 in Essex-Middle River was 7,701, compared to 37,154 Countywide; 20.7 percent of the County's poor residents lived in Essex-Middle River. The area housed more than twice its share (219 percent) of the poor relative to the

County as a whole. Poverty rates in the census tracts the County would later target for redevelopment were particularly high: in tract 4507, where the Riverdale apartments were located, 657 people, or 28.6 percent, were below the poverty level, out of 2,297 total residents. In tract 4508, where the Villages of Tall Trees and the Kingsley Park apartments were located, a total of 1,949 people or 36 percent of the population was below the poverty line. By the 2000 Census, Essex-Middle River's population had declined to 61,423, comprising 8.32 percent of the County's total residents. The concentration of poverty in Essex-Middle River also decreased, with 14.24 percent of the County's poor residing in Essex-Middle River. But in 2000, the area still housed nearly twice its share (171 percent) of the poor relative to the County as a whole. Census tract 4507, where the Riverdale apartments had recently been demolished, had just 527 residents and 30 people below poverty. Census tract 4508, where the Villages of Tall Trees and Kingsley Park still stood in 2000, had seen a slight decrease in population from 5,431 to 5,175, and had a poverty rate of 30.26 percent— still 469 percent of the County-wide poverty rate. Renter-occupied units were highly concentrated in this same census tract, due to the number of apartments in large complexes within this tract, all built during WWII, with 76.5 percent of the units renter-occupied. Yet these units comprised only 15 percent of the area's total rental units.⁹

It is important to note that while Essex-Middle River's concentration of poverty may not be as severe as that experienced in Baltimore City, its trends are very similar to the city and both are in stark contrast to Baltimore County as a whole and to the Baltimore region. For Baltimore City as a whole, median family income in 2000 was \$35,438, compared to \$28,217 in 1990. When compared in constant 1999 dollars, median family income in the City declined by 3.7 percent between 1990 and 2000. In Essex, median family income in 2000 was higher than in the City, at \$42,829, compared to \$33,709 in 1990. When compared in constant 1999 dollars, median family income declined 2.6 percent between 1990 and 2000. In contrast, for Baltimore County as a whole, median family income in 2000 was \$59,998, compared to \$44,502 in 1990. When compared in constant 1999 dollars, median family income in the County increased by 3.4 percent between 1990 and 2000. The County's median family income in 2000 was nearly \$25,000 higher than in the City, and \$17,169 higher than in Essex. For the Baltimore Region as a whole, median family income in 2000 was \$59,316, compared to \$42,192 in 1990. When compared in constant 1999 dollars, median family income in the Region increased by 7.8 percent between 1990 and 2000. The gap between median family incomes in the region and those in the City and in Essex is widening as the region gains while the City and older suburbs such as Essex and Middle River decline even further.¹⁰

Planning and Budgeting for Both the Land Conservation and Community Revitalization Dimensions of Smart Growth is Essential

Baltimore County is often recognized in the literature on planning and growth management for its innovative land conservation planning as a local government. In 1967 the County adopted an Urban Rural Demarcation Line (URDL), intended to delineate where development should go and where farmlands and forests should be preserved. The URDL has been used to guide zoning and development decisions and

land conservation planning ever since, resulting in approximately 85 percent of the County's current residents living within the URDL, on just 30 percent of the County's land area.¹¹

It is crucial to the long term success of land conservation policies and the preservation of the County's tax base that strategies also be pursued to maintain and improve the quality of life in the County's existing communities within the Urban Rural Demarcation Line. Because the County has limited the extent of growth in outer areas, its ongoing tax base is largely already established—the risk is that its tax base will shrink as more of its residents move to other counties in the region where newer, larger, homes are being constructed. While every county will eventually face such dilemmas, the URDL line (which is the same as the County's Designated Growth Area under Maryland's smart growth law) and the age of much of Baltimore County's suburbanization compresses the time frame within which the County must act to revitalize older neighborhoods and make them more attractive for current and potential residents. Of course, along with a limited land area for future growth of its tax base, the County faces increased costs in its older neighborhoods in order to repair aging infrastructure, combat increases in crime, address underperforming schools, and deliver more social services to lower income people clustered in these older neighborhoods.

Establishing the complex system of incentives, easements, and land trusts in the County to prevent development and designating locations for future growth have proved much more politically palatable than the challenges of fostering redevelopment. Patterns of disinvestment in its older neighborhoods have been a concern of County officials since at least 1959. During the 1960s, the County sought to create urban renewal areas and access federal funds to assist in alleviating blight, but those efforts were ultimately rebuffed by residents who feared that the plans would bring public housing and possibly lead to the expansion of black communities in these older suburbs. In the mid-1970s, the reform-minded administration of County Executive Venetoulis again attempted to take advantage of Federal community development funds, insisting that the funds would be spent not on public housing but on flood control, park creation and street lighting. But Venetoulis was rebuffed by the County's state delegation, which refused to put forward the necessary legislation creating an urban renewal authority. As a result, the County lost \$27 million in funds over six years alone that could have been used to increase the livability of existing communities. Of course it will never be known how and where these funds would have been allocated by the County if an urban renewal authority had been established. Given the trends showing that Essex-Middle River was seeing a disproportionate share of apartment development within the County, it is possible the additional Federal funds may have exacerbated the situation if they had been used for housing.¹²

The current County Office of Community Conservation was initiated through the County's Master Planning process and formally established in 1995. There was a recognition amongst County officials of the need to address the County's declining neighborhoods, and analyses were developed including statistics on income levels, population losses, aging, crime, school test scores and turnover rates, age of housing

stock, and the availability of recreational facilities, among other factors. Essex-Middle River became the focus of many of the Office's earliest initiatives, including a "Community Conservation Plan" in 1996. That plan, involving more than 75 community leaders, laid out a wide range of social planning and physical planning strategies, but had a heavy emphasis on improving the community's social services infrastructure. The Essex-Middle River Chamber of Commerce and numerous community organizations supported or actively worked to reduce student mobility rates in area schools, provide youth recreation opportunities, establish resident liaisons at all multifamily housing complexes, increase employment opportunities, improve County coordination of services and the dissemination of information, and maintain ongoing community involvement, among other objectives. While these issues were not abandoned as time went on, greater emphasis was placed on making the capital investments necessary to change the mix of housing and residents in the area. I describe the evolution of the County's revitalization approaches in what follows.¹³

Good Public Process Should Be Incentivized As Part of Smart Growth

Maryland's Smart Growth legislation does not speak to it, yet the challenges of retrofitting an older suburb, with a host of existing business owners and residents, demand attention to public process. Why is process important? First, because providing the public with an opportunity to be involved in shaping the plans and projects that will affect their community is the right thing to do as a matter of principle. Second, while involving the public might add to the complexity of the revitalization process, it may also generate more imaginative, place-specific approaches and lead to public support for higher density levels consistent with Smart Growth goals if people have confidence in the quality of the design and materials proposed for a project. Third, good public process is important because the alternative is riskier: bad process can stymie progress, wasting the valuable time of government agencies and developers, and potentially fostering anti-planning sentiment and attacks on smart growth that may have repercussions beyond the proposals at hand. Of course it must also be noted that even the best public process with the most inclusive planning opportunities won't help revitalization goals if the plans are not implementable: ensuring the plan produces concrete, measurable results is key to maintaining credibility with the community. Three recent revitalization approaches employed by Baltimore County in Essex-Middle River are instructive with regard to the challenges of implementing smart growth in the older suburbs. To Baltimore County's credit, they have been very persistent in pursuing revitalization.

Proposed Use of Eminent Domain

Unfortunately in 2000, Baltimore County chose to pursue its boldest revitalization initiatives for Essex-Middle River through a lousy public process, and it backfired. In January, 2000 the Ruppertsberger administration sought expanded condemnation authority to assemble parcels for private redevelopment, as is done in larger cities, through a State bill, S.B. 509, targeting Essex-Middle River and two other older County suburbs, Dundalk and Randallstown. The bill granted authority to condemn a list, spelled out in the bill, of over 200 Essex-Middle River properties that were in a County-designated redevelopment area also outlined in the bill. Because condemnation authority

typically rests on the idea of an urban renewal area and plan, the County had created a designated geographic zone and submitted, in support of the legislation, a consultant-drafted plan. The challenge was that the legislation was introduced around the same time that most residents and property owners began hearing of the plan. The local Chamber of Commerce, though supportive of the initiative, was briefed on the bill after it was introduced. The bill passed the State legislature due to its backing by the local Senator and delegates and the deference of other legislators in what is referred to as “local privilege.” But it spurred extensive opposition from property owners and renters who stood to be displaced. After testifying in Annapolis failed to sway elected officials, the opposition launched a petition drive that brought the bill to a County-wide referendum in fall, 2000. Voters struck down the bill, along with any hopes County Executive Ruppertsberger had had of running for Governor. (He later successfully ran for Congress) The controversy also led an S.B. 509 opposition leader to run for delegate and become one of the more conservative legislators in Maryland’s General Assembly, and it has strengthened an ongoing, County-wide network of community leaders who are highly skeptical of density and smart growth.¹⁴

The use of eminent domain by the County was not the marker of bad public process; rather, the problem was the clumsy and rushed way its use was proposed and the fact that the plan it was meant to implement, however good it was, had not been developed with any formal public input. The plan was focused on ways to highlight waterfront parcels on Middle River adjacent to Eastern Boulevard, the major commercial corridor. It sought to maximize these parcels’ use from an economic development perspective by demolishing small rental vacation homes, one owner-occupied home, and a long-time community gathering place and bar, the Commodore Inn, to build high-end waterfront condominiums and town homes, and to consolidate and upgrade the three existing marinas. It also proposed demolishing an existing auto repair business and two homes on the water to open up the view from Eastern Boulevard, enhance the value of property across the road and create more public waterfront access. This was inspired, County officials noted, by Baltimore’s Inner Harbor area, a project that has come to be highly regarded but was initially opposed. Finally, the plan called for the acquisition of a number of adjacent small businesses on Eastern Boulevard to encourage the development of new businesses that, in vague terms, would better serve the new residents the county envisioned would be attracted to the area. Given the concentration of poverty in Essex-Middle River, this plan certainly addressed the need to diversify incomes in the community. The plan used the community’s biggest asset—the postindustrial waterfront, to reinvent the community’s image as a grungy, working-class area. The County was clearly seeking to learn from and employ strategies that had worked in Baltimore City. They were looking for a big, visible impact.¹⁵

However, existing business owners and residents were more than a little bit offended by the notion that, after investing in the area when others would not, they were now to be removed and replaced by rich outsiders. Some opponents of the plan would argue that things were just fine as they were, or pointed out that they didn’t want an “Inner Harbor” in their community and they didn’t want it to become a big tourist attraction for outsiders. Others acknowledged that revitalization was needed, but that condemnation was an abuse

of government power. Business owners on Eastern Boulevard targeted in the plan included an adult bookstore, a bar with a “high number of calls for service” from the police, a hair salon, and auto repair shops. These owners, whose lots were narrow due to the road widening during WWII, insisted they were being targeted in retaliation for their opposition to various aspects of the then-recently completed Eastern Boulevard Streetscape plan. The Streetscape created sidewalks and curbs where there was previously just a road shoulder, enhancing walkability but eliminating precious customer parking spaces and display space for used cars for sale. The County’s condemnation plan did beg the question: where in a revitalized, new urbanist, smart growth landscape did one go to get their car repaired? The County had not prepared any answer.¹⁶

Using an urban-style acquisition process immediately set off alarm bells in a more politically conservative suburban context and a County whose residents have a long history of being skeptical of government. Adding to the problem was the fact that condemnation authority is typically supported legally by a characterization of the area to be condemned as “blighted”. This characterization may be one that city residents are more used to hearing and employing to draw attention to long-neglected neighborhoods, but to County residents, it was an unusual tactic and was viewed as unfair and inaccurate. The term “blighted” seemed to be inherently problematic to community residents and business owners, in part because they were accustomed to that term being applied to cities, but not to suburbs. The County was in a bit of a no-win situation with this language, because they were trying to intervene before things got worse, but because things weren’t worse, it undermined their argument about the need for condemnation. The term “blighted” also tended to be used as a precursor to displacement in many city neighborhoods, and so it may have exacerbated fears about displacement by property owners in Essex-Middle River, whether or not their specific addresses were listed as part of the legislation. The language rankled their class sensibilities as well: there was a widespread view among those affected by the condemnation legislation that was this just those government leaders from Towson coming down to this working-class area, which had seen better days and put up with decades of pollution, now telling them it was time for them to get out of the way because well-heeled people were now ready to venture down here to live now that the jobs (and pollution) were gone. Ultimately, the language of “blight” had enough inaccuracies and inconsistencies to appear somewhat ridiculous: the properties condemned included dilapidated apartment buildings and “shore shacks”—rental homes originally constructed without plumbing as summer beach cottages, in varying states of repair. But the property list also included a number of viable, if less than aesthetically pleasing, businesses and Anna Vleck’s home on Punte Lane, a beautifully-kept 60’s style stone ranch home with a water view adjacent to the marinas. Her home became the poster child of community opposition leaders for why S.B. 509 was a flagrant miscarriage of justice. This view was further exacerbated by the fact that while many small property owners in the area were affected by the bill, there were other adjacent parcels left out of the legislation, including a large apartment complex owned by a Texas-based company next to the marinas, a national chain convenience store also obstructing the view of the water from Eastern Boulevard, and most glaringly, the historic waterfront home and rental “shore shacks” owned by Daniel Hubers, whose wife Nancy Hubers was a State Delegate and sponsor of the House of Delegates version of

S.B. 509. The Hubers' home was the proposed site for a new waterfront restaurant, so it was assumed that their property value would only increase as the adjacent parcels were condemned and redeveloped. Why the Hubers' run-down rental houses were left out of the bill, but rental cottages in better condition owned by Anna Vleck were to be condemned smacked of preferential treatment and class bias.¹⁷

Planning Charrettes: The Urban Design Assistance Team Model

In the wake of the political debacle that was S.B.509, the County pursued the use of week-long planning charrettes as a means to rebuild trust and create revitalization plans with community support and a sense of community ownership. The new approach, suggested by County Office of Community Conservation staff member and architect Jane Willeboordse, was the use of "Urban Design Assistance Teams" or UDATs: a longstanding program of the American Institute of Architects run by her former mentor, Peter Batchelor. The UDAT program created an opportunity for architects and other design professionals to volunteer their time to work on a large-scale community improvement effort and escape from their normal work environments. The idea behind it was to bring in outside experts (who as volunteers, were also using their vacation time to participate) unhindered by local conventions. They would spend a week touring the community and identifying its assets, listening to a wide range of stakeholders, and designing proposals for revitalization that highlighted opportunities and incorporated stakeholder concerns. The community would be invited to address the design team in a formal community forum prior to the charrette process, during which they were asked to identify which aspects of their community they wished to preserve, change, or create. The community would also be invited to inspect the designs during the UDAT process, ask questions, and then review the final product. The County hosted its first UDAT in 2001 in the Dundalk area, where the County had also sought to condemn several properties through S.B. 509, but where there had been less vocal opposition to the legislation. The County's second UDAT was in the Liberty Road corridor and Randallstown area, which had also been a small focus of S.B. 509. Finally, the political climate seemed right for Essex-Middle River to host its UDAT in 2004. The tenor of the discussion during the Essex-Middle River UDAT, which over 100 people attended, was dramatically different than what had transpired during the S.B. 509 controversy, showing how much difference process can make in crafting visions for revitalization.¹⁸

The biggest advantage of the UDAT process, given what had happened with S.B. 509, was that it brought in a third party that was neither the County government nor the community to "mediate" what revitalization should mean. Each UDAT process involved months of preparation by the County and by the community, during which the focus area for planning was established, data was gathered on current physical and demographic conditions, funds were raised to cover the costs of transportation, meals, and supplies, and the actual week-long design charrette was planned. This preparation process required the establishment of a local steering committee including key leaders from the community, local businesses, and major area institutions such as hospitals, the community college, etc. The sheer amount of labor involved in putting the UDAT together, and the role of local leaders as the steering committee for the process, helped re-establish a rapport between the community and the County government, and helped

ensure that the community would be invested in the planning process and in its outcomes. In addition, the idea that the third party included design experts gave their suggestions credibility that they would not have had coming from County employees. The downside of this outside expertise was that it sometimes discredited or “de-skilled” local viewpoints and expertise of both community members and County employees. At various points in the UDAT process, some community leaders grumbled about why the community needed “outsiders” to solve its problems. The County’s community planners and other staff were often reduced to being refreshments coordinators, about which they undoubtedly grumbled as well.

Proposals included in the final report from the Essex-Middle River UDAT, dubbed “Gateway to the Water”, focused mainly on enhancing streetscapes, pathways for walking and biking, and intensifying activity in two shopping areas. While there was no mention of condemnation or of high-end condos replacing “shore shacks” as with S.B. 509, the basic emphasis on highlighting the waterfront and expanding public access to the water remained. In addition, the UDAT focused on shopping areas as potential sites for new community focal points, given that the community developed along a largely auto-oriented corridor and lacked a sense of a “center”. Old Essex, the portion of Eastern Boulevard that visitors first encounter as they head east into the area, has been the focus of several previous revitalization efforts. It is characterized by mostly single-story shops fronted by angled parking, and street trees that business owners have long complained block the view of the store signs, particularly for drivers speeding past on the divided, 4-lane road. The UDAT recommended adding another story above the commercial buildings for residences or offices to bring greater activity to the sidewalks, the addition of structured parking behind the shops, the burial of utility lines that run along the street, and the bumping out of curbs at intersections to slow traffic and make the area more pedestrian-friendly. To modify the more typically suburban Country Ridge Shopping Center, characterized by a huge sea of parking spaces in the center and shops along the edges, the UDAT team proposed redevelopment including a requested community swimming pool, consolidated commercial space, a town square lined with fewer parking spaces, and a major community attraction such as a movie theater. Other enhancements proposed included a pedestrian bridge over Middle River that would modify the existing bridge structure and connect with bike and walking paths along the water. Two larger-scale developments that were proposed before the UDAT began included a plan for hotels with boat piers and offices on a portion of the old Glenn Martin (now Lockheed Martin) plant, and the adaptive reuse of the gigantic and historic former General Services Administration depot next to a Maryland commuter train (MARC) stop on the eastern edge of the community.¹⁹

The overall impact of the UDAT process in Essex-Middle River was very positive, although it has been mainly psychological and social, rather than physical or aesthetic. Individual neighborhoods such as Hawthorne, a community of 1,400 rowhomes adjacent to the water, organized to produce their own plans for enhancing their neighborhood as part of the UDAT, including the establishment of a walking/fitness path around the perimeter of their community connecting their three waterfront parks, and improved landscaping of the main road through their community. They also, however, wanted a

bus line removed from this road due to its noise, pollution, and foundation-disturbing vibrations. This thinking, while not all desirable from a smart growth perspective, represented a dramatic shift from four years earlier. The UDAT Steering Committee incorporated amongst its members several new community leaders, as well as long-standing ones and S.B.509 opponents, enabling the community to heal and move beyond the past to a significant extent by working together. Fear about re-igniting controversy was always present during the process, however, and constrained the designers in what they proposed for parts of the UDAT focus areas, which included many of the same areas targeted by S.B. 509. This fear reached its peak in a controversy that erupted about one of the UDAT drawings, which showed a waterfront park area similar to what was proposed in S.B. 509, with several structures including an auto repair shop replaced by grass, trees, and pathways. The owner of the auto repair shop, Richard Impallaria, who had been one of the key leaders of the opposition to S.B. 509 and was later elected a State Delegate, had sought to have the UDAT drawings changed to reflect the continued presence of his business. A Steering Committee co-chair tried to appease him but other members of the Committee were incensed at the idea of changing the drawings from the UDAT process after the fact. At a public meeting where the draft results were presented, Impallaria disrupted the proceedings to raise the issue, in an attempt to rouse opposition—but he drew weary frowns from other audience members instead. People were clearly ready to move on and look forward.²⁰

The lack of any public control over most of the properties discussed in the UDAT plans (or any politically feasible means of obtaining control), and the lack of detailed financial analysis undermines the possibility that the UDAT's proposals will be implemented. Community leaders are struggling with how to gain influence and what to do now that the planning process has ended. The UDAT helped the community re-imagine its future and take ownership over that vision. Its proposals lacked the specifics needed to convince a developer or property owner to pursue them. Most of the proposals depend upon the will of numerous property owners, each of whom may never have the means to accomplish individually what a condemnation and land assembly process might be able to accomplish. It will be very difficult, for example, for the owner of one building in the old Essex commercial area on Eastern Boulevard to add additional levels for offices or housing unless other property owners take a similar approach. Current market conditions would not likely support the expense involved with adding another level, though if this were widespread, it could be a catalyst for changing market conditions. Less challenging are the proposals for burying the utility lines along this corridor and building structured parking, as both of these ideas could be accomplished with enough public funding and political will. But they would still have very uncertain results. Fortunately for Essex-Middle River, the UDAT proposals are only a small part of the community's ongoing transformation by government, private developers, community-based organizations, and individual homebuyers.

Planning Charrettes: The Renaissance Redevelopment Pilot Process

The Renaissance Redevelopment Pilot Program was enacted in 2004 out of County Executive Jim Smith's and the County Planning Department's desire to incentivize higher-quality development on infill and redevelopment sites in older neighborhoods

such as Essex-Middle River. The program guidelines were developed by a county-wide advisory group of 38 people from various sectors including developers, architects, land use attorneys, community leaders, planning board members, and planning staff. Under the program, renaissance “opportunity districts” would be designated by County Council members, in consultation with their constituents, to draw attention to key parcels or areas where the community wanted to see redevelopment. Within these districts, regular zoning restrictions and approval timelines would be waived for a developer if the developer in exchange agreed to conduct a multi-day charrette process through which the community helped shape the proposed development. The developer would then be bound to abide by the results of the charrette in developing their project, with minimal revisions. Members of the advisory group suggested that the program would not be likely to attract developers without financial incentives, because of the high degree of uncertainty involved with a charrette process. However, to date, the County has not enacted any specific financial incentives tied to the Renaissance Opportunity Areas, although various incentives such as payments in lieu of taxes, tax increment financing, grants, and deferred loans are utilized by the County. County Executive Smith hoped the Renaissance Redevelopment program would help incentivize revitalization by the private sector and hence take some of the burden off the public sector in funding projects. It became clear, however, that the County needed a test case to demonstrate the appeal of the program to the private sector: the redevelopment of the Kingsley Park apartments in Essex-Middle River became that test.²¹

The Kingsley Park apartments, a 312-unit complex originally built for war workers, had been serving as project-based Section 8 subsidized rental housing, but after battling the owner for years over housing code violations and crime problems, the County succeeded in acquiring it, relocating residents, and demolishing the buildings. Kingsley Park had been on the list of properties the County sought to condemn in S.B. 509, and since that legislation had been voted down by referendum, the County pursued various strategies to get the owner to make necessary upgrades or be pressured into selling the property. Residents themselves contacted U.S. Senator Mikulski about the poor conditions of the units, which apparently included raw sewage in the basement, inadequate insulation, combustibles stored near the boiler, rat and roach infestations, and peeling paint. Crime had been a major challenge at the property due in part, according to the County, to the owner’s inadequate tenant screening. Following the uncovering of these poor conditions, the County negotiated a deal with the owner and with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which held a mortgage on the property, to purchase Kingsley Park. The deal involved the County paying \$3.46 million to the former owner, and then in exchange for allowing the housing to be demolished, HUD required the County to build new housing on the site with specific affordability restrictions. These restrictions included an allowance for 26 percent of the new units constructed to be market rate; 23% of the units to be reserved for households earning between 80 and 115% of the Baltimore region’s median income; and 51% of the units reserved for households earning 80% or less than the Baltimore region’s median income.²²

Essex-Middle River residents have a bad reputation in the Baltimore region as being somewhat backward and intolerant when it comes to affordable housing: the famed federal Moving To Opportunity (or MTO) program was ended in the 1990s due in part to residents' erroneous fears that it would bring more poor, black residents from Baltimore City to the area, which already had too much affordable housing to be part of the program. Given this history, and residents' legitimate claim that Essex-Middle River has a disproportionate share of Baltimore County's and the region's affordable housing, the response of the community to the development of new affordable housing where Kingsley Park had stood reflected quite a shift. By the time the Kingsley Park charrette was held in May, 2005, other market-rate development in the Essex-Middle River area had lead some residents to voice concerns about being priced out, and about the lack of moderate-income housing choices. The charrette process created the perfect setting to work through the requirements dictated by HUD, address the desire of participants for housing affordable to people with a range of income levels, and assure them that the resulting product would be built with high-quality materials that enhanced the surrounding area.²³

The level of enthusiastic, engaged participation from the more than 200 community stakeholders in attendance was even greater than during the UDAT process. This level of enthusiasm was undoubtedly related to the fact that the County owned the property and participants could have greater confidence that the results of the charrette would be implemented. In addition, the scale of the planning process was also small enough—focused on one parcel instead of thousands of acres—to enable participants to be more deeply engaged in thinking about its site plan, the appearance of individual structures, and how the development would relate to adjacent parcels including a new park, a historically black enclave, a church, and a major street. The charrette process was open to all, and began with a visual preference survey to help generate the aesthetic guidelines for the project and also educate participants about new urbanist-style design concepts including the distance of the houses to the street and from each other and how these impact the pedestrian experience. Participants were then encouraged to work in groups with maps of the parcel to design their own site plan reflecting the results of the visual preference survey and incorporating the affordability requirements. Engaging participants with this level of detail made them even more invested in the outcome, while also educating them about the complexities of incorporating the various constraints. The pattern book resulting from the charrette proposed a total of 194 units, a higher number than County officials anticipated, which they attribute to the level of design detail specified by the plan that created excitement and confidence among participants. To comply with the HUD income restrictions, the housing envisioned included 78-84 affordable rental units for seniors in a 3-story multifamily building sited near the busiest street adjacent to the parcel; 43 townhouses with at least 2 or 3 bedrooms, most with 2-car garages accessed from rear alleys; and 73 single family detached homes with 2-4 bedrooms, most with 2-car garages accessed from rear alleys. Further specifications included a variety of different street types, front and wrap porches, bay windows, fences, a storm water management pond with pedestrian bridge, and several small public green spaces creating visual relief, buffers from major roads, and providing traffic calming.

Materials were also specified, including stone veneers, wood windows, architectural roof shingles or cedar shakes or slate, etc.²⁴

While the Renaissance Redevelopment process calls for the developer to initiate and conduct the charrette process, in the case of Kingsley Park, the County paid for the charrette process to create a pattern book. The pattern book then became part of a County-issued request for proposals to identify a developer to implement to plan. It is rare that residents get to have such a role in planning the way a project in their community is to be built, and it is unclear whether the opportunity will be repeated. The County had a difficult time attracting bids on the project as specified in the pattern book, due in large part to the number of constraints imposed, including the simultaneous price restrictions to maintain affordability and the very specific site plan, housing types, and material requirements to ensure quality. Ultimately, there was only one bidder able to meet the requirements of the project, a partnership of Enterprise Homes and the Mark Building company. They argued that the impact of the project constraints on the construction costs compared to the projected revenue potential of the endeavor required further County subsidies, including donation of the land, additional County infrastructure work, and \$4.1 million in homebuyer subsidies. These subsidies would be on top of the \$3.46 million the County invested in acquisition, the more than \$1 million in State and Federal loans to the previous owner that were forgiven, and the \$2.1 million spent on resident relocation, demolition, and site preparation. Overall, the project is anticipated to involve nearly \$21 million in public funds for the 18 acre project, amounting to a subsidy of over \$100,000 per each proposed unit. County Council members were not pleased by the level of spending required to make the project happen, and the County Executive acknowledges that the costs mean that the Renaissance Redevelopment Pilot Program likely needs some revisions before it can be replicated elsewhere. To date, no other developers have stepped forward to use the program on other County-designated renaissance opportunity sites. But residents and County officials remain very excited about what will be built at Kingsley Park.²⁵

Publicly-Controlled Land Can Be a Huge Catalyst for Revitalization

The most important factor in promoting revitalization in Essex-Middle River has been the County's ability to spur change through its direct acquisition and assembly of property for private redevelopment. There is nothing magical or surprising or necessarily innovative about this: it involved the political will to spend the funds necessary to acquire sites, relocate residents, and demolish buildings and prepare the sites for redevelopment. It usually involved collaboration with other levels of government to forgive loans or provide additional subsidies. Also useful to the effectiveness of this approach was a widespread community consensus that the specific properties the County was to acquire were nuisances to the surrounding community. Eminent domain was used in one of these cases and it was threatened in another as a means to get property owners to the negotiating table. All three sites I discuss below are located in adjacent census tracts that reflected the County's target area for revitalization in Essex-Middle River. All three were apartment complexes originally built during World War II, which the County

acquired in order to demolish them and make way for new housing types and community amenities.

Demolition of Apartments to Make Way for Mixed-Income Housing

The redevelopment of the Kingsley Park apartments discussed above is one example where the County obtained control of the land and spent the funds and created the conditions necessary to make new, high-quality, mixed-income housing on the site possible. The new housing development, which has yet to break ground, has required considerable political will. With each new County investment in similar projects however, while the potential growth of the County's tax base expands, the upfront costs are also expanding skepticism among the seven County Council members, who recognize the need for revitalization of older communities, but who face pressures from their own districts' constituents. Kingsley Park has required more than \$1 million in subsidy per acre, or more than \$100,000 per new housing unit slated to be constructed. It has also involved an exceptional level of public involvement that was worth the expense, both for what the project will bring to the community, as well as what the project took away.²⁶

Demolition of Apartments to Make Way for Single Family Homes

Among the housing originally built for war workers, the Riverdale apartments were situated in the most prominent location to impact revitalization efforts, and were also in the worst condition, so their acquisition by the County was a priority. Their redevelopment has also been the most successful of the County's endeavors in the area to date. The County battled with the landlord for several years until they were finally able to acquire the property and demolish the buildings. The 1,140-unit brick complex of buildings, was accompanied by a deteriorating shopping center anchored by local supermarket chain Mars. It had been left to deteriorate by its owner, a Florida-based investor who failed to abide by the terms of his \$5.6 million mortgage with HUD, skimmed profits from the complex instead of addressing plumbing failures, asbestos abatement, and other challenges, and owed more than \$600,000 in utility bills and \$300,000 in fines for County building code violations by the time the project was finally shut down and the remaining tenants relocated in June, 1997. HUD had foreclosed on 540 of the units to which its mortgage applied, demolished them, and conveyed the land to the County, and the County condemned the remaining 600 units. In the midst of the controversy that was beginning to brew about Senate Bill 509 in Spring, 2000, the County's control of the Riverdale property enabled them to proceed with clearing the land and issuing a request for proposals to redevelop the parcel.²⁷

In November, just a week after S.B. 509 was struck down by voters in a Countywide referendum, three area developers including Streuver Brothers, a winner of former Maryland Governor Glendening's smart growth award, presented their proposals for the Riverdale site to County officials and community residents. The proposals included a range of between 175 to 202 market-rate homes and a new shopping center anchored by a supermarket. One proposal also included an 85-unit senior independent living facility.

The property is prominently located on Eastern Boulevard near three marinas and a bridge over Middle River. The County's concept for the land was to develop high-end market-rate housing that connected visually with the water across Eastern Boulevard, and simultaneously created very visible change in the community and demonstrated people's willingness to reinvest in the area. The water views were dependent in part on the success of the ill-fated condemnation authority in Senate Bill 509, as two private homes and a business stood in the way of the views from Eastern Boulevard and the proposed new housing.²⁸

Even without the waterfront views, the new subdivision named "WaterView" was an immediate hit. The winning developer, a partnership of the Mark Building Company and Enterprise Homes, was awarded the project in February, 2001 and invested approximately \$40 million on top of \$943,000 in County funds and \$1.3 million in State funds used to acquire and clear the site. The public funds invested amount to a subsidy of about \$12,000 per new house constructed. There was pressure from the area's County Councilman, Vincent Gardina, to reduce the density of the development to ensure a high-quality product that would not become another liability for the County. Gardina sought larger lot sizes and bigger setbacks from the street, in part to signal the difference between this development and the area's older housing. The 85-unit senior facility that had been part of the winning developer's proposal was dropped from the project as a result. As the neo-traditional single family detached homes began to rise just off of Eastern Boulevard, their impact on community morale was enormous. The developer had initially projected that houses would be sold for around \$150,000. By the time houses in Phase I were ready to be marketed in 2003, however, their sale prices ranged from \$190,000-\$286,000 and they sold out in two weeks. By Phase II, homes were selling for base prices of \$220,000-\$252,000, and many sold for much more than that. New urbanist elements of the project mostly survived, including a range of housing types and elevation options to produce a less cookie-cutter appearance, siting of houses close to the street and to each other, the presence of stone and brick fronts, porches, garages that load from alleys behind the houses, and streets that are narrower than in many new subdivisions. But some residents have complained that the garages are too small to be practical, and that there is not enough room for on-street parking for visitors. Also to the disappointment of some residents, the 96,000 square foot shopping center was created in a more typical suburban format, with an L-shaped row of stores fronted by a giant parking lot, on the edge of the community, with minimal pedestrian access for WaterView residents. Despite these shortcomings, anyone driving through Essex-Middle River can see the dramatic change WaterView represents, and the 175 homes attracted a combination of excited longtime East side residents and new homebuyers who would not have previously considered the Essex-Middle River area. The development has certainly met County officials' goals for the parcel, as evidenced by the continued appreciation of the homes: a house purchased as part of Phase I in 2004 for \$277,000 sold for \$429,500 in 2006.²⁹

Demolition of Apartments to Make Way for Recreation

In many ways, the history of the County's evolution in its approach to community revitalization can be traced through the variety of strategies they employed to address

decline at the Villages of Tall Trees. The Villages of Tall Trees was another apartment complex built in 1943 during the wartime surge in jobs. Originally called Mars Estates, the 840 garden apartments were grouped as 8 units in each of 105 separate brick neocolonial buildings, arranged on curvilinear streets over 50 acres just south of Eastern Boulevard. The apartments were marketed as being within walking distance of the Glenn Martin plant. By the 1990s, there were 43 separate owners of the 105 buildings that the County had to coordinate with in launching various physical improvement programs, anti-crime and social services outreach initiatives. These were among the first activities undertaken by the Office of Community Conservation when it was created in 1995, at the same time a defensible space plan for Tall Trees was created through the coordination of the County's Planning Department and Police and new wrought iron fencing was installed around the entire property to establish greater security and combat drug dealing. Three problems seemed to be reinforcing each other in bringing down the complex: first, the more than 16,000 multifamily rental units in the Essex-Middle River Area created a weak rental market, driving down rents and creating problems with vacancies and with cash flow for owners. Second, the cash flow problems in turn meant that many of the units were not properly maintained, so tenants who could afford better housing often moved. Third, the need to find tenants to increase cash flow lead many owners to accept tenants with criminal backgrounds, which made whole complexes even less desirable and a huge source of aggravation for the County. Often cited by the County when making the case for acquiring and demolishing the buildings were crime statistics, which for a total population of 2,000-2500 residents at Tall Trees, could include as many as 4,000 calls to the police per year, or 11 per day. But before demolishing the complex, hopes were raised around other strategies, such as the conversion of the units into condominiums, which an investor attempted but abandoned. Prominent Baltimore Developer Struever Brothers, Eccles, and Rouse Co. apparently saw the potential in accentuating the history of the buildings and their proximity to waterfront when they obtained signed, written offers to purchase 80 of the buildings to renovate them and revive the community, but unfortunately that deal fell through.³⁰

In 1999, the County had secured \$2 million in State matching funds to assist in the acquisition and demolition of Tall Trees, and by 2004 work finally began on creating the park and community center that would replace it. A need for more recreation and play space had been identified in the 1996 Community Conservation Plan for the area, and since that time various parcels had been discussed by the County to help meet that need. If Tall Trees had not been such a high-crime area, it is unclear whether the County would have chosen this site to put a new park, but the stated objective behind it was to add to the community amenities that would attract new residents to the area to reinvest. During the S.B. 509 condemnation controversy in 2000, some of the Tall Trees owners were active in the opposition, though Tall Trees was not included in S.B. 509 because of the intention of the County to condemn the buildings for parkland, a use for which they already had condemnation authority. Later, the owners grew weary with how long it was taking the County to negotiate with them over the properties. The controversy generated by S.B. 509 also attracted the attention of some preservationists who expressed a concern about losing the buildings and the wartime heritage they represented. Relocation of the residents also took considerable County resources, both in direct tenant assistance and in

staff time. In all, \$26 million in public funds, including \$4 million from the State and \$22 million from the County, was spent to eliminate a complex and replace it with a park and community center, now known as The Fields at Renaissance Park, a name chosen by area residents. The public funds required for the project amounted to a cost of \$520,000 per acre of parkland. The unveiling of the final report from the Urban Design Assistance Team process took place at the new community center in the park in 2005.³¹

Streetscaping to Improve Aesthetics and Increase Walkability

In addition to efforts to address the declining housing stock and desire for parkland, the County also exercised its control over land in pursuing streetscape improvements on Eastern Boulevard. The improvements included sidewalks and curbs where before there had just been road shoulders, decorative marine-themed street lighting at a more pedestrian scale along the road, decorative paving at intersections and crosswalks, and intensively landscaped swales in the road median to beautify, calm traffic and enable better storm water management, of particular concern because the road is so close to the water and Chesapeake Bay Critical Areas. While the streetscape plans generated some acrimony between several business owners and the County when first initiated, by the end of construction people were clamoring for the County to extend it to adjacent roads. A total of \$5,850,000 was spent on this project, including \$4.5 million in State funds and \$1.35 million in County funds, plus an additional \$70,000 in private funds for upgrades to businesses.³²

New Road Extensions to Expand Regional Access, Open New Land for Development

While its contribution to smart growth goals is at best debatable, another long-awaited element of revitalization plans for Essex-Middle River was the 3-mile extension of Maryland Route 43 from the White Marsh area south to Eastern Boulevard in Middle River. The County's objective with this road extension was to expand access to the County's waterfront communities and open up 700 acres of land for manufacturing, offices, and technology-oriented companies. The road connects with Eastern Boulevard next to a MARC commuter rail station the County hopes will form the basis for some transit-oriented development, and across from the old Glenn Martin plant. The County projects the corridor will generate as many as 15,000 jobs for a new generation of east side residents, and has spent \$14.5 million toward the extension, in addition to \$45.5 million in State funds. Development occurring along the corridor so far is in the form of fairly conventional, suburban-style office parks. The road may lead to pressure for more intensified development on County farming lands east of Middle River.³³

Smart Growth in Essex-Middle River Has Involved De-Densification

Overall, I would characterize the revitalization efforts in Essex-Middle River as good examples of the kind of reinvestment in older communities that smart growth policies are intended to promote. Part of what the experiences in this community demonstrate, however, is that older suburbs are often struggling with concentrations of poverty, deteriorating housing, and a lack of diversity in their housing types that can undermine their appeal for new residents with choices. Yet if smart growth is to succeed, people who

could choose to live in newly-constructed subdivisions built on greenfields need to be drawn back to our existing communities. Ironically, to be competitive and attractive in the broader regional market, many older suburbs may need to be retrofitted with amenities and housing types that result in lower densities, rather than higher densities and more compact developments.

What has de-densification meant in Essex-Middle River? Revitalization projects which, while dramatically reducing densities at the parcel level, are still above minimum density standards under smart growth for newly-built suburbs:

- Riverdale went from having 1,140 apartments on 63 acres for a density of 18 units per acre, to becoming WaterView, with 175 single family homes and a density of 2.77 units per acre.
- Kingsley Park went from having 311 apartments on 18 acres for a density of 17.27 units per acre to a planned mixed-income, mixed housing type development involving 194 units with a density of 11.1 units per acre.
- Tall Trees went from having 840 apartments on 50 acres for a density of 16.8 units per acre to becoming a park with 0 units per acre.

The net effect of these three projects has been a decrease of 1,922 apartment units on 131 acres, for a loss in density of 14.67 units per acre, and a resulting net density of 2.82 units per acre.³⁴

In the broader community context, there remains a disproportionate number of apartments relative to the County as a whole and a concentration of poverty relative to the County and the region. But also, and most importantly, there is a growing momentum. The experience of Essex-Middle River suggests that evaluating successful smart growth purely in terms of density misses issues of livability and ignores the desires of actual residents of older suburban areas. But as the experience in Essex-Middle River with the Kingsley Park Renaissance Redevelopment Pilot program and the Urban Design Assistance Team also shows, better public processes can help shape those desires. Residents who were skeptical about government intervention, revitalization, density, and even affordable housing are now becoming believers.

Whether that good feeling could be translated into support for more density in the future remains unclear. Concentrations of poverty and a lack of diversity in housing types do not instill confidence about what higher densities might offer. When thinking about what smart growth looks like, we should be sure to consider how the communities we are planning will fare in different demographic cycles. We should keep in mind how residents' views of density may be shaped by experience. Good public process, including visual preference surveys, form-based codes, and other design guidelines can lead to support for higher densities, particularly in a context where the local market has demonstrated improvement.

Using Multiple Scales to Evaluate What “Success” Means Is Key

Considering the net effect of multiple smaller-scale redevelopment projects is important. Changes in land use at the local scale may be positive in promoting community

revitalization and supporting a smart growth goal, but their impact on a broader area such as a County or a region also needs to be monitored and addressed.

Transit Requires Measuring in Larger Scales of Time and Space

In the absence of dramatic new investments in a Baltimore Regional Transit system that would include high-speed rail service to Middle River or enhanced commuter rail, it is hard to imagine suddenly transforming the “dilapidated apartment” image of higher densities in Essex-Middle River into a community-supported Bethesda-style plan for dense apartment and condo redevelopment. Planning ahead to accommodate and support better transit, when and if it materializes, makes sense, but it may be difficult to support such transit planning and expenditures when no market data can demonstrate the viability of transit. The risks are twofold: if transit and housing densities aren’t linked, the lack of density may preclude transit, but just as importantly, the lack of transit may preclude high densities from being viable, and leave the community with the same problem of a soft rental market, vacancies, and crime.

Affordable Housing Remains a Serious Challenge, And Older Suburbs Often Illustrate How NOT To Address This Issue

Essex-Middle River has far more than its share of affordable housing for the County and the region; yet as some of this housing is torn down to diversify the income mix within the community, there is no County, regional, or State provision requiring the construction of more affordable housing elsewhere. Its disproportionate share of affordable housing developed over time due to many reasons including the distortions of wartime, poor planning, a demographic bubble, etc. Some affordable housing advocates have argued that due to the long waiting lists for housing assistance, no units should be demolished by a local government until there is a commitment in place that all of those units will be replaced by the local government, in the same community or elsewhere. This argument raises the classic tension within community development between people vs. place-based strategies. From the perspective of helping poor people who need shelter, preventing the demolition of units may make sense. But from the perspective of revitalizing a community, this argument could leave people waiting for decades for revitalization until some sort of regional affordable housing strategy is implemented, if ever. It is criminal to expect these communities to wait for an innovative regional housing initiative to materialize before revitalization can be pursued; yet it is also criminal to allow the issue of affordable housing to remain unaddressed.

Smart growth advocates need to play a stronger role in supporting affordable housing as a necessary component of having a diverse range of housing types throughout a jurisdiction, a region, and a state. States such as California have successfully mandated local planning for affordable housing, and inclusionary zoning bills in places like Montgomery County, Maryland are another strategy.

Forces Beyond Planners’ Control

Finally, it is worth noting that forces far beyond the control of planners, communities, and County government affect the possibilities for and pace of revitalization: Essex

Middle River most certainly benefited from a regional and national housing market boom that pushed home buyers to look in neighborhoods they may not have otherwise considered, and Essex-Middle River also benefited from the well-timed “creative destruction” of Hurricane Isabel, which while disastrous at the time, created an impetus for extensive rebuilding, expansions, and sources of cash flow for this purpose. While I doubt many residents would have planned on it or asked for it, the Hurricane dovetailing with the housing market boom that was pricing buyers out of other areas created, in many ways, “the perfect storm”.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to highlight some of the revitalization strategies pursued in an older suburban area of Baltimore County and their importance to the successful implementation of smart growth. Essex-Middle River presents some circumstances that, at minimum, complicate the notion that what smart growth means for an older suburb is higher density and more infill development (though I suspect ultimately years from now, this may be the result). Rather, I believe it highlights the need to pay more attention to the details of particular places, and to pay attention to the public processes, or lack thereof, through which revitalization initiatives are pursued. Good planning and public involvement can help build support for higher densities, and build trust between communities and government. Adequate public subsidies can ensure that redevelopment projects will be high-quality and contribute to raising property values and enabling older suburban residents to build wealth.

The relationship between social equity and creating neighborhoods of choice is another important reason to learn from and pay attention to older suburbs. Many of them are filled with working class and middle income homeowners, whose chief means of building wealth is homeownership, but whose neighborhoods and local real estate markets are most stagnant and least likely to enable them to build wealth. Revitalizing these communities creates opportunities for current homeowners as well as for new homebuyers to make a sound investment. Key to making wealth-building possible in older suburbs is to confront their decline and concentrations of poverty. Steps must be taken to diversify incomes in older suburbs, as well as in the rest of the region and state. In older suburbs, diversifying incomes is likely to require public subsidies to attract market-rate development to the area. Throughout the region and the state—including in older suburbs, there should be proactive planning for affordable housing. Creating momentum for homeowners in older suburbs creates momentum for further reinvestment and growth of these areas. Stagnant or declining older suburban real estate markets hurt smart growth because they hurt the prospects for these neighborhoods to become places people choose to live, invest in, and develop further.

Endnotes

- ¹ Benfield, et al, 2001; Forsyth, 1999; Hudnut, 2004; Nelson, 2002; Squires, 2002.
- ² U.S. Census, 2000; Baltimore County Office of Community Conservation, 1996, p.4
- ³ Nickel, Jackie, 2002; Brooks and Rockel, 326-6, 343; Robert Lewis, Ed., 2004.
- ⁴ Breihan, 1996, 3 and 7.
- ⁵ Nickel, 1999, 2007; Brooks and Rockel, 1979; Breihan, 1996
- ⁶ Brooks and Rockel, 1979, 385-7, 397
- ⁷ Nickel, 2007, 120.
- ⁸ U.S. Census, 2000 data comparing Baltimore County and Essex-Middle river census tracts 4502-4516.
- ⁹ U.S. Census, 1990 and 2000.
- ¹⁰ Baltimore Metropolitan Council, 2003, all; Katz and Lang, Eds., 2003; Lucy and Phillips, 2000; Orfield, 1997 and 2002; Swanstrom, Casey, Flack, and Drier, 2004
- ¹¹ Duerksen and Snyder, 2005, 154; 1000 Friends of Maryland, 2001, 8-9.
- ¹² Brooks and Rockel, 1979, 379-82, 443-4.
- ¹³ Baltimore County Office of Community Conservation, 1996.
- ¹⁴ Maryland General Assembly 2000 Legislative Session, Senate Bill 509; Participant observation; Baltimore County Department of Economic Development, et al, January 4, 2000.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*; Participant observation, 2000.
- ¹⁶ Interviews, Participant observation, 2000 & 2004.
- ¹⁷ Interviews, Participant observation, 2000, 2004; SB509.
- ¹⁸ Interviews, Participant observation, 2004.
- ¹⁹ Participant observation, 2004 & 2005; Essex-Middle River Renaissance Corporation, 2005.
- ²⁰ Participant observation and interviews, 2004 & 2005.
- ²¹ Renaissance Redevelopment Pilot Program, April 15, 2004; Participant observation, 2004.
- ²² Nawrozski, October 17, 2003; Mitchell, August 6, 2007; Baltimore County Office of Community Conservation, May 3, 2005
- ²³ Walker, January 7, 2005; Participant Observation, 2005.
- ²⁴ Participant Observation, 2005; Design Collective, Inc., 2005.
- ²⁵ Renaissance Redevelopment Pilot Program, April 15, 2004; Mitchell, August 6 and March 15, 2007.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ Interviews & Participant observation, 2000; Carson, January 16, 1997; Nawrozski, August 18, 1997.
- ²⁸ Nawrozski, November 16, 2000; WaterView Marketing Materials.
- ²⁹ Participant observation, 2000-2004; WaterView marketing materials; Baltimore County Department of Economic Development, no date, distributed to UDAT team members in October, 2004; Nawrozski, November 16, 2000, February 13, 2001, November 11, 2002; Maryland State Department of Assessments and Taxation, 2007.

³⁰ Atwood, May 27, 1996; Nawrozski, November 24, 1997, April 10, 2000, November 28, 2000, June 29, 2004; Interviews, 2000 & 2004.

³¹ Nawrozki, April 10, 2000, November 28, 2000, June 29, 2004; Interviews, 2000 & 2004; Participant observation, 2000 & 2004.

³² Interviews & Participant Observation, 2000 & 2004; Baltimore County Department of Economic Development, no date.

³³ Participant Observation, 2000 & 2004; Baltimore County Economic Development, no date.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

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This research relies heavily on participant observation of various meetings and public hearings, and interviews with participants conducted during 2000, 2004, and 2005.

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