

A Visit to East Baltimore

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On May 26, 2007, I visited East Baltimore, the area where my late father was born nearly a century ago. My host was Rosa Hart Burenstine, leader of Baltimore Community for Environmental Justice. She took me around her neighborhood, showing me residential streets, abandoned industrial properties, and the massive East Baltimore Redevelopment Project (EBRP). Normally I write up such visits myself, but Rosa so eloquently tells a hopeful story of urban renewal that CPEO has decided to publish her write-up of the EBRP partnership instead. See <http://www.cpeo.org/pubs/RosasStory.pdf>.

I would be uncharacteristically silent, however, not to make some key observations about the opportunities that lie ahead for greater East Baltimore, the neighborhoods on the periphery of the EBRP. As Rosa points out, the entire area has suffered decay and depopulation, the results of economic decline, environmental pollution, crime, neglect, and racism. But my windshield tour convinced me that the neighborhood is on the way back. Though many of the old row houses that constitute the neighborhoods are vacant and boarded or bricked up, the buildings generally appear to be structurally sound, with attractive facades. The pervasive litter that I have seen in other inner cities is absent. The entire area appears to await rebirth.



Occupied homes and bricked-up units with artwork

Economically, two forces could act as drivers of such an area-wide revitalization. First, the bioscience-led EBRP can serve as the anchor project, from which economic activity and civic pride can spiral outward. Second, the 2005 round of military base realignments is expected to bring 28,000 new households to Maryland. Most of the new Defense workers will be employed to the north at the Aberdeen Proving Ground, and to the south at Ft. Meade, but the city of Baltimore still expects to absorb about 2,500 of those new households. Furthermore, it expects to benefit indirectly from the regional boom.

Ideally, I believe that the city and the state of Maryland should work to maximize the influx to already developed, but depopulated areas such as East Baltimore. If they don't, then the Defense-induced boom will quickly overcome Maryland's pioneering efforts at smart growth, fueling a new level of urban sprawl. Local leaders are already working on plans to encourage and accommodate growth, but it won't be easy. It will require investments in infrastructure, education, public safety, and environmental cleanup.

It will also require active programs of housing rehabilitation, perhaps modeled after those already in the works at the EBRP. The project plans to offer directly impacted residents subsidized financing for both rehabilitation and first-time home purchase. It's too soon to know how well those will work, but they are clearly intended to make it possible for current residents (including those displaced temporarily by construction) to live in a physically and economically revitalized East Baltimore.

East Baltimore Development Initiative (EBDI) officials explain that some 70 percent of the housing units in its project area are vacant. Typical row houses are two to three stories and range in size from 800 to 1800 square feet. While some are beyond repair, the typical vacant unit can be rehabilitated and brought up to code for an estimated \$135,000 to \$175,000. Most occupied units also require work. EBDI estimates that such units will require about \$75,000 for core code improvements, energy efficiency, and lead paint remediation plus \$25,000 for comfort and amenities.

If the partnership spirit described in "Rosa's Story"—that is, diverse interests negotiating to ensure that each benefits from a major public-private undertaking—is applied to the revitalization of the larger area around the EBRP, then Baltimore can serve as a model for urban renewal on a grand scale.



Neighborhood Playground