

THE EAST BALTIMORE REVITALIZATION STORY:

A Resident's View

by Rosa Hart Burenstine

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My story, about the revitalization of my neighborhood, produces tremendously mixed, complex emotions. However, in the end—after working my way through these feelings—I feel **grand** and exceedingly **joyous**. This joy I am feeling is enhanced further by the fact that my neck of the woods, so to speak, will soon be as it was when my family and I arrived here in 1937. Back in 1937, my neighborhood was exceptionally clean and green. There were a multitude of services, such as grocery stores on almost every corner to purchase healthy foods, owned by folk who looked like me—that is, African-American—whose children were sometimes my classmates, etc. Chick Webb Recreation Center was two blocks from my house; we had two Enoch Pratt Free libraries in walking distance; our school, Dunbar Elementary/Junior/High/School (one campus) was right across the street from my home. Every neighbor was watchful, helpful, sincere; jazz clubs were everywhere; the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra played fine music three evenings a week during summer break right across the street on Dunbar's southside sidewalk. In other words, we **had** a grand neighborhood.

But, somehow, we allowed it to go to pot, just as most American cities today have gone to pot.



These are historic dwellings to be restored/rehabbed in the 1000 block of McDonough Street, just behind our East Baltimore Development Incorporated Headquarters

Now, however, I watch attentively and patiently every day, as Baltimore—especially my part of the City—methodically goes through her **rebirth**. I don't cry as often as I did when I returned home in 2001. I only cry occasionally now, when part of my history is demolished. Within the 88-acre footprint of the East Baltimore Revitalization Project (EBRP), grand old red brick row houses, with marble steps and corner stores, the little quaint jazz houses, are there no more. Mostly now, at least four years into her **rebirth**, I joy out at the unfolding of my **new** neighborhood. I am happy to miss the uncaring behavior of far too many neighbors and the horrendously dirty streets and gutters. I can easily visualize the complete success of our efforts to make East Baltimore beautiful again. Beautiful, again, for **the children** who will enjoy living here as I did years ago.

The Revitalization Project is an effort that I believe has never been attempted before in the history of urban renewal. The unique, bold, massive, \$1.5 billion dollar undertaking is designed to benefit the residents of my neighborhood, as well as the city as a whole. The three-phase project will be completed over 15 to 20 years. The developer of the first phase, the Forest City-New East Baltimore Partnership, is a joint venture of an international development corporation and several local minority-owned businesses.



My office is located in this elegant old historic structure in the center of this picture. Just one block down the street from Johns Hopkins, it was formerly the East Baltimore Police Station. We call her “1809.” It is the Satellite Office of East Baltimore Development Incorporated.

In the 30-acre Phase One, nearly 396 families have been relocated. Most of the relocatees are pleased with their new homes in other areas around the city. Those who have relocated elsewhere have “first dibs” to move back when new housing is built. Not only are there tax incentives to homeowners, but renters are being given the opportunity to purchase a home. There is training in how to correct one’s bad credit. On and on it goes.

Each day, I watch the first two new housing complexes grow. A 74-unit building for seasoned citizens is scheduled to open in August. On top of that, 74 units of affordable (workforce) housing—designed for firefighters, police officers, teachers, etc.—should be ready for occupancy in late ’07 or early ’08. Both buildings have one, two, and three-bedroom units.

The project is anchored by new biotechnology research buildings. The Forest City–New East Baltimore Partnership recently celebrated the “topping out” of the first biotechnology facility; five more facilities are planned. Potential merchants (an environmentally safe cleaner, a minority bank, restaurateurs, etc.) are being interviewed for space in our first biotech facility, 855 N. Wolfe Street, as of this writing.

Because of my extraordinary determination to record this incredulous project, from **a resident’s point of view**, I have access to each specialist and partner involved in this massive endeavor: the planners, contractors, developers, politicians, architects, demolition experts, funders, *et al.*, giving me a most unique vantage point to learn/know all of the details, hang-ups, agreements, disagreements, and financial aspects of the project. The partners include, to name a few: Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF), Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions (JHMI), East Baltimore Development Incorporated (EBDI, the supervising partner), Baltimore City (BC), State of Maryland (SMD), Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE), the Enterprise Foundation (EF), the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (DHUD), and community-based organizations such as my organization, Baltimore Community for Environmental Justice (BCEJ). I am President/Executive Director, funded by the Environmental Protection Agency to train residents in the demolition process.

Which brings me to the most important aspect of the undertaking: partnering. In my opinion, partnering is the reason for the success of the project despite some of our powerful disagreements. We have worked together, collaboratively, harmoniously, every step of the way, every phase of the plan, every piece of the legislation. We put this into action from the outset, focusing on the most controversial aspect of our project: **demolition**. Seventeen of us joined together and wrote the Demolition Protocols. These protocols will be utilized in the next two phases of the project; they will be utilized throughout the City of Baltimore and the State of Maryland. Hopefully, they will be utilized throughout the Country, and perhaps beyond. Our problems with lead dust and other demolition hazards, regardless of where we are on Planet Earth, are the same, I believe.

I have won the right to speak these words regarding our Demolition Protocols: They are fantastic! They are the only steps to take when demolition is involved. These protocols, incidentally, have been tested, analyzed, and approved by five of the most qualified lead dust experts in America: Janet Phoenix, Vernice Miller-Travis, David Jacobs, our own Reggie Harris at EPA Region 3, and Patrick Rafferty at the University of Pennsylvania.



This four-story building is our workforce housing complex. It is adjacent to our seasoned citizens complex at Broadway and Eager Street, two blocks north of Johns Hopkins.

The construction of single-family homes, including fair market-rate homes, is scheduled to begin early 2008. Employers across the city are offering jobs to unemployed folk from the community, from our area as well as other communities in the city. The elementary school will be restored in Phase Two; a Pre-K–8 Community School is in the planning stage.

Throughout the years, I have not only witnessed urban renewal. I have read accounts of it in New York, the Bronx, East Oakland, Fillmore-San Francisco, Chicago, and elsewhere, by many authors; but, never have I understood why the experience had not been chronicled by a resident living in the area being revitalized. Consequently, I felt I needed to tell the story from my point of view, as a resident of the EBRP. So, this is indeed another joy and an absolute honor, which I announced at the groundbreaking ceremony of our 855 N. Wolfe Street biotech facility—where I shared the podium with former Governor Ehrlich, Mayor Martin O'Malley (now Governor), Senator Mikulski, and a host of other dignitaries. As I continue to feel the mixed, complex feelings of watching, being a part of, and extending/sharing my input in our project along with many, many other residents, funders, partners, politicians, contractors, and developers, *et al.*, I feel exceedingly confident that the project will be a complete success, a model for others around the city, the state, and the nation.