

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN REVITALIZATION

Building on Historic Strengths to Restore and Preserve Community Health in Eager Street Commons, Baltimore



SUMMARY

- The Eager Street Commons Community Development Cluster is a small neighborhood in east Baltimore that sits adjacent to the historic Northeast Market, Johns Hopkins medical campus, and Patterson Park.
- Over the last two decades, this community has undergone a dramatic transformation, in part due to the industrious efforts of local residents and the city of Baltimore's Vacants to Value Initiative.
- Residents began to monitor and improve neighborhood conditions many years before Vacants to Value, and strong community leadership has been critical to the initiative's success.
- Community leaders, the Historic East Baltimore Community Action Coalition, and Vacants to Value stakeholders worked collectively to leverage local assets and nearby anchors to revitalize Eager Street Commons.
- Restoration of vacant properties in Eager Street Commons has advanced community health, including improved physical and mental health. However, challenges remain related to the management of green space, preservation of the neighborhood's historic identity, and safety concerns.
- This case example is part of a series of deep-dives in three communities. The full report, *Revisiting Revitalization*, provides a detailed look at community health lessons from Baltimore City's Vacants to Value Initiative.

NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT

The Eager Street Commons Community Development Cluster (CD Cluster) is a part of the Milton-Montford neighborhood, a small neighborhood located in the southeast quadrant of the city, east of downtown Baltimore. The neighborhood is bounded on the north by railroad tracks, on the west by Patterson Park Avenue, on the east by Luzerne Avenue, and on the south by Monument Street (**Figure 1**). The neighborhood is about nine city blocks. Overall, the community is predominantly residential, comprising single-family row homes. There are numerous businesses along Monument Street, which forms a commercial corridor, including mostly small-scale retail and nail salons, barbershops, tax preparers, pawn shops, carryout restaurants, a liquor store, and a small grocery store.

Milton-Montford is also immediately east of the Middle East neighborhood, which has undergone enormous transformation due to the Johns Hopkins medical campus. Over the last two decades, Johns Hopkins has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in construction projects in the Middle East neighborhood, including rental apartments, a new hotel, townhouses, and a central park.¹ Other community anchors include the Henderson-Hopkins Charter School and the Harry & Jeanette Weinberg Community Center, which houses Moveable Feast, an organization that provides



Figure 1

Eager Street Commons Community Development Cluster in the Madison/East End Community Statistical Area.

nutritious meals and other services to individuals who have critical or life-threatening illnesses such as HIV/AIDS and cancer.

History of Milton-Montford

Along with much of east Baltimore, development in Milton-Montford started in the late 1800s by immigrants from central and eastern Europe who worked in nearby factories. Beginning in the 1960s, the neighborhood underwent dramatic demographic changes as many white residents left the community for homes in the suburbs. African-Americans, many of whom already lived in the area, became an increasingly larger share of the community's residents.² This transition also marked a period of disinvestment across communities in east Baltimore, including Milton-Montford, as neighborhoods that were or became majority African-American were locked out of the mortgage market through redlining.³ Because many African-Americans, particularly lower-income individuals, were excluded from home-buying opportunities, potential buyers had difficulty buying homes in Milton-Montford, and potential sellers had difficulty selling their homes. Property values fell, and homes were increasingly abandoned. Over this period, crime rates, particularly associated with the drug trade, spiked, further reinforcing the cycle of abandonment and disinvestment.⁴

Current Neighborhood Conditions

Milton-Montford^c remains predominantly African-American and lower income, with about 88 percent of the population identified as African-American in 2016, slightly down from 90 percent in 2010. In 2016, the median household income was \$29,000, significantly below the city-wide median income of \$44,000. In the same year, 32.4 percent of households and 58.8 percent of children lived below the poverty line.⁵ Although the community is lower income overall, the share of households earning more than \$75,000 has increased slightly, from 8.9 percent in 2010 to 14.7 percent in 2016.

While improving, crime continues to be a challenge in Milton-Montford and in the surrounding community; violent crime rates and shooting rates were about 1.5 times and three times greater than the city-wide rate in 2016, respectively. Despite these challenges and the neighborhood's housing market having been classified as stressed^d in 2014, there are signs of recent

improvements.⁶ The percentage of vacant and abandoned properties has steadily declined from 25.7 percent in 2010 to 18.4 percent in 2016. Additionally, while the median price of housing dropped to a low of \$19,000 in 2015, this value increased to \$29,000 the following year. Still, opportunities remain to stabilize housing conditions as the density of vacant properties remains over two times higher compared to that of the rest of the city.⁵

Limited access to healthy food options and green spaces has challenged the health and well-being of this community. Diet-related diseases, including heart disease and cancer, are the top two causes of death in Madison/East End. Maternal and child health outcomes also rank in the lowest third, compared to other Baltimore neighborhood clusters. Furthermore, the percentage of children with lead poisoning is four times higher than in the city.⁷

VACANTS TO VALUE IN EAGER STREET COMMONS

Launched in 2010 by the mayor and housing commissioner at the time, the Vacants to Value (V2V) program is a multipronged initiative to reduce the number of vacant properties and spur revitalization in declining neighborhoods. The Baltimore City Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) leads the program's implementation.⁸

V2V strategically selects areas for public intervention based on the underlying market demand for housing in those areas. This targeted approach identifies the severity of vacancy, locates areas with the greatest opportunity to redevelop within an emerging market, and informs appropriate V2V strategies.

Eager Street Commons within the Milton-Montford neighborhood was formally declared a CD Cluster in 2011. The V2V CD Cluster model facilitates partnerships with for-profit and nonprofit developers interested in investing in these areas, by removing barriers to developer ownership and rehabilitation. For example, V2V expedites the process through streamlined code enforcement, facilitates the transfer of property ownership through a receivership program, and offers home-buying incentives that developers can use for marketing purposes. Furthermore, restoration in clusters ensures that nearby residents in stable or

^c The Milton-Montford neighborhood is combined with the surrounding neighborhoods to form the Madison/East End Community Statistical Area, as defined by the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance–Jacob France Institute.

^d The lowest level in Baltimore's five-level housing market typologies, "stressed" indicates that the neighborhood contains the highest vacancy rates and lowest homeownership rates and has experienced high population loss.



newly repaired homes are not negatively affected by homes that remain boarded up for extended periods.

Prelude to V2V

Efforts to restore the Milton-Montford neighborhood began long before the formal launch of V2V, as local leadership proactively worked to mitigate challenges with violence and criminal activity in the late 1990s. Residents on Eager Street worked closely with Baltimore Police officers to build rapport and strengthen community trust, to create a safe space for all residents. Officers engaged in neighborhood walks with families and their children, particularly in recognition of National Night Out, a community-police event to build awareness about anticrime efforts in communities. Such events provided important opportunities for police officers to spend time in the communities they served.

Local leaders also undertook numerous neighborhood cleanup and beautification efforts to promote a healthier neighborhood environment, such as removing trash and debris, advocating for new street lights, painting flowerpots and murals, and creating space for children to play baseball. Local leadership was critical to establishing relationships with numerous city agencies, which paved the way for Milton-Montford's turnaround.

In 2006, the Historic East Baltimore Community Action Coalition (HEBCAC) received financing from an angel investor to purchase and redevelop a large property in the neighborhood (901 N Milton Street). The \$9 million project converted a vacant building into the Harry & Jeanette Weinberg Community Center and provided space for nonprofit organizations, including Moveable Feast, and job-training programs. This redevelopment effort spurred subsequent investment in the Milton-Montford neighborhood through the introduction of V2V.⁹

V2V in Action

As a market-based program, V2V provided incentives to local developers to restore homes in a CD Cluster. In Eager Street Commons, community residents worked closely with HEBCAC, beginning in 2011, to create a shared community vision for revitalization efforts in Milton-Montford, by identifying homes to be rehabilitated, homes to be demolished, and the location of new parks. Serving as the primary developer, HEBCAC was responsible for construction and worked with Details (De)construction to demolish

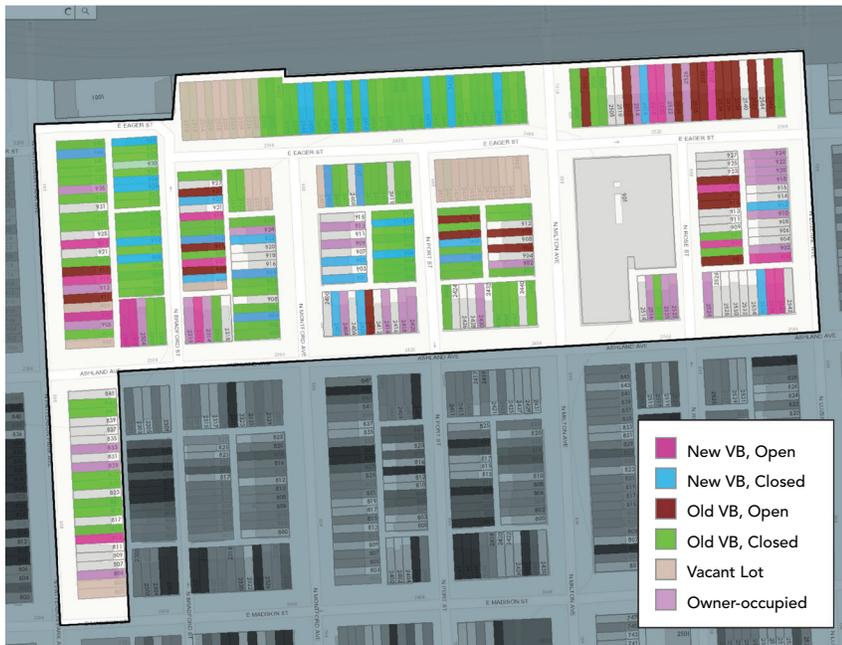
vacant housing in the neighborhood. Once V2V was underway, redevelopment efforts proceeded in two overlapping phases: demolition and construction.

Details (De)construction, a social enterprise of the non-profit organization Humanim, carried out the demolition phase. Some of this work in Milton-Montford focused on the strategic removal of homes in disrepair to create land that would be turned into green space. Community leaders worked closely with Details (De)construction to hire local residents, and homes were carefully taken apart brick by brick and then recycled into other projects. A stretch of vacant homes along the railroad tracks at the neighborhood's north end were demolished, and several other homes scattered throughout the neighborhood were also removed. Demolition funds came primarily from the city of Baltimore through a settlement with major banks in the aftermath of the housing market and foreclosure crisis. City officials channeled some of those funds to support the work on Eager Street. During redevelopment, residents of some homes slated for demolition were also offered the option of moving to new homes in the community or in other communities. Several residents chose to remain and moved into new homes built by HEBCAC. Since 2011, 65 homes in disrepair have been successfully deconstructed.

V2V also made it easier to engage in redevelopment because receivership and the streamlined code-enforcement process facilitated site control. Site control issues with vacant homes, particularly difficulties finding owners in order to sell the vacant properties, often created a significant barrier to redevelopment. V2V eliminated this obstacle by creating a legal mechanism, called receivership, to transfer properties from absent or negligent owners to developers. During the construction phase, HEBCAC rehabilitated homes one at a time after buyers had signed contracts.

Prospective buyers were shown a model home and offered the opportunity to select a vacant unit for their future home in the CD Cluster; the home was then remodeled to the prospective buyers' specifications. This strategy allowed HEBCAC to build only exactly what would be sold. HEBCAC ultimately acquired 53 homes. Of these, 23 homes have been sold, 15 homes are in line for redevelopment, and 12 homes are slated for future renovations, as of December 2016.⁹ Throughout the whole neighborhood, 110 homes that were vacant (i.e. assigned a vacant building notice) eventually received use and occupancy permits,

Figure 2 Vacant building notice dynamics in Eager Street Commons Community Development Cluster (June 2019).



indicating that the home is occupied or likely to be occupied (Figure 2).

Finally, the combination of community assets, support of V2V, and leadership of HEBCAC helped to foster a desirable place for prospective residents. HEBCAC constructed high-quality homes with energy-efficient designs, hardwood floors, and options to personalize the homes. Additionally, HEBCAC worked to minimize up-front costs for new buyers by using resources from the city, such as the V2V Booster Program, and from Johns Hopkins (if a prospective buyer was a Johns Hopkins employee) to provide down-payment assistance. With these resources, some buyers were able to purchase a \$200,000 home with as little as \$1,000 to \$2,000. Ultimately, community leaders and HEBCAC were able to work in close partnership with V2V to restore the Eager Street Commons CD Cluster. The project was near completion in 2017, with only a handful of homes left to be restored.

COMMUNITY HEALTH IMPACTS OF V2V

In-depth interviews with community stakeholders conducted by the authors revealed numerous pathways by which vacant homes, and their rehabilitation process, have impacted community health in this context.

Safety and Mental Health Impacts of Vacant Buildings

Vacant buildings can be a magnet for illegal activity that can negatively affect residents' health. The most prominent concern among interviewed residents was safety threats. Several interviewees noted that drug dealing, in particular, seemed to go hand in hand with vacant and abandoned properties because such buildings provided a convenient place to hide and sell drugs.

Nearly all interviewees stressed that vacant buildings, as a result of their associated unlawful activity, had a severely negative effect on mental health. Residents hesitated to leave their homes, for fear of becoming crime victims, which translated to fewer opportunities to be physically active

or spend time enjoying the community through other means:

“This house was vacant. He was putting the drugs in the back yard...and selling the drugs. They used to sell them right here by the alley. It was really, really bad. It was drug infested that's the word for it...And I stopped going outside sitting on the stoop because the drugs was so bad...” –Resident

As vacant homes were restored through V2V, many of these challenges diminished. Furthermore, the string of vacant homes between Eager Street and the Amtrak railroad tracks were deconstructed and transformed into a park, where residents can enjoy community life through cookouts, parties, and chance interactions:

“You don't have the boarded up houses no more. You definitely don't have that, so you don't have to worry about a person OD-ing, squatters and things like that...It's different. It's quieter. It's much, much quieter. It's more peaceful.” –Resident

Another reported benefit of redevelopment was homeowners' sense of greater financial stability and opportunity when their property values increased. Historically, vacant buildings have signaled disinvestment, and a neighborhood's economic decline can cause community members to feel they have little

control and agency to create change in their environments. Thoughtful investment in Eager Street Commons has created opportunities for future as well as long-standing homeowners. Remaining residents shared their desire to stay in this community; however, they appreciated that increased property values meant that they could sell their homes and leave if they wanted to:

“So that’s one of the reasons why we try to invest in those existing residents while we’re doing the work in say a vacant house. Because they should have an opportunity to participate in the economic advancement of that neighborhood. And if you create a situation in which they’re sort of getting pushed out or forced out, then that doesn’t really accomplish the goal.” –Developer

Environmental Impacts of Vacant Buildings

Vacant buildings in a community can create a physically unsafe environment, exposing residents to hazardous materials, trash, illegal dumping, and mold:

“I mean, there’s trash in there, so they’re impervious surfaces, so [potentially hazardous materials] that hit the ground was running straight into the storm water system...[Vacant buildings] all present a hazard, health-wise, and then, you can’t underestimate the public safety issues around them...” –Workforce development nonprofit organization

The accumulation of trash associated with vacant housing also contributed to challenges with rodents and other pests in this community, a concern that has largely been addressed as a result of V2V’s success in this CD Cluster:

“I used to have cookouts in the backyard and I stopped because it was infested with rats and the houses was boarded up. Now they done built three houses in the back. My son opened the door the other day because he put my trash out. He said mom, it is so pretty out here now, so pretty.” –Resident

Social Capital and Collective Impact

The collaborative decision-making process in the Eager Street Commons CD Cluster was instrumental in facilitating collective impact and positive outcomes related to community health. Given the history of

community organizing and level of readiness among all stakeholder groups, the Eager Street Commons community had a strong foundation in terms of the planning and execution of revitalization efforts. As a result, the joint redevelopment process further strengthened social capital in this community. Local neighborhood leaders worked closely with city representatives affiliated with the V2V initiative and with the primary developer, HEBACAC, to achieve a shared vision for revitalization. However, sustaining the community vision remains a challenge as the composition of community residents changes over time, resulting in pressures to revisit the community vision:

“You had to come up with a plan. It took years. It took years of brainstorming to get this done. I keep telling the people, ‘This did not happen overnight...’ We got involved with DPW, the fire department, the mayor. All the departments with the city, Housing, Disability, senior’s programs; anything that you could think of that could get us help in this community, we started networking... The difference now is, when you develop, when you’ve fought for a community and then you have, I’m going to say this, people that come in that just find houses and just have no respect of what you’ve done or you and they just start dividing. Dividing, that’s the hurtful part about this. You have people that are starting to separate and not have no respect for the people who did do things here when they came here.” –Resident

REASONS FOR SUCCESS

Over the last decade, the number of vacant homes in the community has dropped significantly, given the new housing development and establishment of green space. Overall, local residents, city officials, and other stakeholders see the Eager Street Commons CD Cluster as a highly successful redevelopment project.

Community leaders, HEBACAC, and other partners cited several reasons for the success of this collective effort:

- **Community readiness**

Efforts led by community members to improve the neighborhood in the years prior to V2V were cited as crucial to creating an environment for successful redevelopment.

- **V2V facilitated site control and financial incentives**

One interviewee noted that a persistent challenge to redevelopment was site control. Before development can occur, the vacant property must be purchased from an often-absent homeowner. V2V's facilitated site control enabled developers to acquire vacant properties from the city once it had assumed ownership. Additionally, financial incentives provided through V2V, such as the V2V Booster Program, reduced some economic barriers to purchasing new homes.

- **Employment for local residents**

Details (De)construction provided jobs to local residents (both from Milton-Montford and the surrounding communities) to demolish vacant houses. This had the immediate effect of building goodwill for the project among residents because community members, not outsiders, were taking part in the rebuilding. Over the longer term, residents who were employed also gained marketable job skills.

- **Collective investments by neighboring anchor institutions**

The broader Milton-Montford neighborhood is located near several institutions, including the Johns Hopkins medical campus. Adjacent assets created opportunities to draw investments from different sources that advanced redevelopment activities in this CD Cluster.

- **Construction of urban green space**

V2V's demolition strategy allowed HEBCAC to build a new park along the train tracks, which became a major community asset and a valued feature to current and prospective residents.

OPPORTUNITIES AND IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE TO PROMOTE COMMUNITY HEALTH

Based on stakeholder interviews, community members generally expressed positive views of the changes brought by the recent redevelopment. However,

opportunities remain to ensure that development continues to advance community health, particularly given forthcoming development projects, including a new set of homes, a playground, more community space, and a potential urban forest along the railroad tracks to help with noise and storm water management.⁹

Gifted with a history of close partnerships among V2V, community leaders, and other decision-makers, the Eager Street Commons CD Cluster is well positioned to further promote community health and address remaining challenges regarding the management of green space, preserving the neighborhood's historic identity, and safety.

- **Manage green space so that it is accessible to all residents**

Long-standing residents have expressed concerns about newcomers' efforts to create changes in the neighborhood that do not adequately respect and reflect the community's legacy. For example, tensions are growing over the use of the new park. Many new residents are dog owners and often fail to clean up after their pets, leaving the park less usable for others. As the Eager Street Commons CD Cluster continues to change, an important next step may be to re-evaluate the needs and capacity of community members, old and new, to manage green space in a way that makes it accessible to all residents.

- **Recognize and celebrate the neighborhood's historic identity**

The challenge between old and new manifests symbolically over the identity and marketing of the neighborhood. As part of revitalization efforts, the name of this community has evolved from Eager Street Commons to Station East. While change is inevitable, preservation of the neighborhood's historic identity is important to ensure that the efforts and successes of the community's past, present, and future are recognized and celebrated over time. While marketing efforts have good intentions of drawing investment and economic growth, they undermine the very foundation on which the community was built. Community leaders and other stakeholders in Eager Street Commons can draw on their past experiences of successful partnership to establish processes, such as community benefits agreements, that continue to

meet the needs of investors, developers, and community residents.

- **Engage neighboring communities to sustain community health**

Milton-Montford still faces challenges related to crime in neighboring communities. Although many of the immediate dangers associated with illicit activities have lessened, particularly in the redevelopment area, residents indicated that it is still not always safe to walk around in the evenings, especially alone. One way to promote safety in the broader community is to invest in building community organizations' and leaders' capacity to reset community norms and expectations. In partnership with neighborhood associations and local nonprofit organizations, community leaders can explore opportunities to conduct regular safety walks and more-formal neighborhood assessments to identify opportunities to engage local government.

CONCLUSION

Milton-Montford has seen dramatic change in the last decade. Many formerly vacant and abandoned properties have been rehabilitated into parks and new, safe homes. Strong community leadership supported by nonprofit organizations and Baltimore City has led to the success of revitalization efforts and community health in Eager Street Commons. Longtime residents reported that their community is safe, more attractive, and more inviting, as many detriments and eyesores have been removed. The community's ability to integrate old and new residents and continue a collaborative revitalization process will determine the neighborhood's long-term community health trajectory.

RESEARCH METHODS

To generate this case example, the authors used a mixed-methods approach, including a literature review and stakeholder interviews. Qualitative data included 25 in-depth interviews with representatives of various sectors, including V2V, the Department of Housing and Community Development, developers, neighborhood association leaders, nonprofit organizations, and community residents. The interviews were conducted from October 2017 to October 2018. Each interview ranged from one to two hours, and community stakeholders member-checked the findings.

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