

# ULI Baltimore Irvington TAP

09/28/16

An Urban Land Institute  
Technical Assistance Panel  
June 14-15, 2016



## IRVINGTON: *A Country Town* in the **City**



ULI Baltimore

On behalf of the Baltimore Development Corporation

## Acknowledgments

**Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake**

**Assistant Deputy Mayor Leon Pinkett**

**The Baltimore Development Corporation**

**The Baltimore City Department of Planning**

**The Baltimore City Department of Transportation**

**Baltimore Housing**

**The Irvington Community Association**

**B.U.I.L.D.**

**St. Joseph's Monastery Parish**

**Mount St. Joseph High School**

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## About ULI Baltimore

ULI Baltimore is the local Baltimore metropolitan regional District Council for the Urban Land Institute and serves Central Maryland and other parts of the state through its outreach efforts; the organization is a 501(c)3. As a trusted source for timely and unbiased land use information, ULI Baltimore provides a critical link to the improvement of state and local land use policy and development practices.

ULI is a nonprofit research and education organization supported by its members. As the preeminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum,

ULI facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information and experience among local, national and international industry leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better places.

Founded in 1936, the institute now has more than 40,000 members worldwide, representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines in private enterprise and public service. The mission of the Urban Land Institute is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land to create and sustain thriving communities worldwide.

## About ULI Baltimore's TAP Program

The objective of ULI Baltimore's Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) program is to provide expert, multidisciplinary advice on land use and real estate issues facing public agencies and nonprofit organizations in the Baltimore Region. Like ULI District Councils throughout the country, ULI Baltimore utilizes its broad membership base to administer one- or two-day panels, and offer objective and responsible advice to local stakeholders and decision makers on a diverse set of land use issues. These issues can range from site-specific projects to public policy strategies. The flexibility of the TAP program enables ULI Baltimore to present a customized approach for each TAP, one that allows panelists to study and address specific contextual issues.

The Baltimore Development Corporation and a consortium of stakeholders engaged ULI Baltimore to convene a Technical Assistance Panel with the overall goal of examining revitalization strategies for a portion of Frederick Avenue, close to the County line. The study area—Frederick Avenue from Caton Avenue to S. Rock Glen Road, as well as the surrounding blocks on either side, includes 1.3 miles of roadway and many of the surrounding neighborhoods. The study was performed in accordance with local planning requirements.

The two-day TAP convened on June 14, 2016 at Mount St. Joseph High School. The Panel spent the morning touring the study area; the afternoon was devoted to interviewing stakeholders, and the evening included an open public meeting for soliciting broader community input. On the second day the Panel re-convened to share what they had learned and formulate their recommendations. Stakeholders and the general public were invited to hear the Panel's presentation at the end of the day.

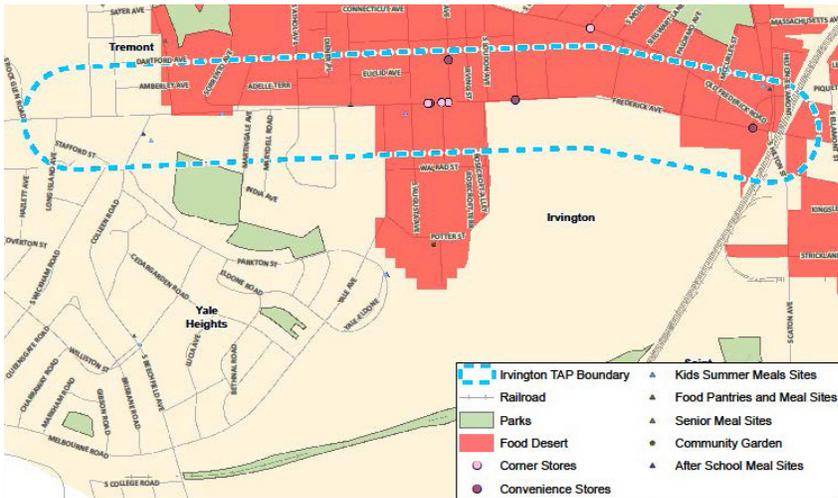
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## Maps of the Study Area

The following maps provide useful context for understanding the social and economic conditions in the study area.



Irvington Parcel Map



Irvington Food Environment



Irvington Housing Market Topology

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## Introduction

The National Road was America's first major roadway. It connected the farms and factories of the Midwest to the bustling port of Baltimore, which was then the third largest city in America. Though tiny by today's standards, this winding country road played a critical role in the young nation's economy.

As horse-drawn commerce streamed by, little villages emerged to serve the needs of weary travelers. And so Irvington was born – a country town, conveniently located a full day's travel by loaded cart from the Baltimore waterfront.

This historical legacy can still be felt today, more than a century after the remote country town was formally incorporated into Baltimore. In a city known for its uninterrupted blocks of dense development, Irvington is nestled within a huge band of open space. In a city known for its iconic rowhouses, Irvington boasts a wonderfully diverse housing stock. And in a city filled too often with barren concrete, Irvington is gifted with shady street trees and flowing creeks.

Irvington is not just another neighborhood in Baltimore – and the same can honestly be said of all the neighborhoods in our study area, which included parts of Beechfield, Ten Hills, Tremont, Yale Heights, and Saint Josephs. It grew from unique historical circumstances, and because of that it has unique assets to work with. Irvington is fundamentally a country town in the city, positioned well to attract new residents and businesses seeking a quiet environment alternative with excellent highway access.

The area has certainly managed to attract investment. The recent 100-unit Greens at Irvington Mews project was a \$17 million investment, and Mount St. Joseph has also invested some \$20 million in its athletic facilities in recent years. The new Family Dollar near Caton Avenue will also provide an important new retail option for consumers. Outside the study area, Uplands represents a major redevelopment of approximately 1,000 affordable housing units into a new mixed-income neighborhood. Similarly, the Wyndholme Woods project features both rental and for-sale units that have been very successful, indicating that this region of the city has the capacity to attract residents.

In addition, the area is specifically included as a Sustainable Community, making it eligible for State funds to support development. It also contains a strong base of historic properties that make it eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, which would make historic tax credits available.

Yet despite these assets and strengths, the corridor also faces serious challenges. These include:

- **FRAGMENTED LEADERSHIP.** While individual neighborhoods and institutions along the corridor have strong leaders, there is no mechanism that brings everybody together to work collectively on issues of shared concern. The problems of the corridor demand more than just dedicated individuals, operating on their own. They require a partnership between all the stakeholders, and a joint plan of action.
- **STAKEHOLDERS UNSURE HOW TO PARTICIPATE.** Although everyone we spoke to shares a genuine desire to see the area improve, several local institutions are still trying to figure out how best to participate in the challenging and time-consuming work of neighborhood

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A country town, conveniently located a full day's travel by loaded cart from the Baltimore waterfront.

transformation. It is clear that strengthening the neighborhoods will help these organizations directly. But they need help finding ways to harness their unique strengths and talents, without draining resources from their underlying missions.

- **POOR COMMUNICATION.** In a community where so many parents are desperate to connect their children with positive recreational activities, it was surprising to see how few residents knew about the many options that were already available to them. This is a strong indicator that the community needs more robust channels for sharing critical information. But it also suggests a genuine opportunity to increase community participation, and improve local quality of life, through better branding and marketing.
- **UNDERUSED ASSETS.** The community is blessed with a number of incredible assets that have not been fully harnessed. These include the beautiful and parklike cemeteries; the shady Maidens Choice Run; and the stunning architecture of St. Joseph's Monastery.
- **DESTABILIZING RETAIL.** The Irvington retail district does a poor job of serving the needs of local residents. At the same time, it also does a poor job of attracting commuters to spend their money in the neighborhood. In short, while the stores are busy (and presumably quite profitable) they are not helping to move the community forward. Even worse, the conditions in the business district are actually corrosive, undermining the neighborhood stability that local residents are looking for.
- **INVISIBILITY.** Residents of the Baltimore region are largely unaware of the existence of Irvington, its lovely architecture, and its dedicated citizens. To the extent it is known to the outside world, it is assumed to be simply an extension of the untidy and threatening business district that is visible to commuters. Irvington is obviously much more, and it needs to make itself known to the rest of the region.

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Irvington is a country town in the city, positioned to attract new residents and businesses seeking a quiet environment.

## Four Key Areas

Over time, these challenges can be overcome by focusing on four key areas:

1. **Organize the Corridor Around a Unified Vision for Progress;**
2. **Take Better Advantage of Community Space;**
3. **Improve the Housing Stock along Strategically Important Corridors; and**
4. **Create an Inviting Commercial District.**

This report will describe in detail how to take action within each of these four areas of focus.

### 1. **Organize the Corridor Around a Unified Vision for Progress**

Across the city, neighborhoods are coming to the realization that they cannot face their problems alone. The challenges they face are simply too large and complex. The solution is not to give up, but rather to bring several neighborhoods together around a shared agenda, and to harness the powers of every major stakeholder in the area.

#### **FORM A FREDERICK AVENUE PARTNERSHIP. (1 YEAR)**

On the north side of town, neighborhoods along York Road were once divided from one another, with each community struggling on its own to confront the widespread problem of a faded commercial corridor. But now, after great effort, they have learned to work together to make life better for everyone. And they have figured out how to include local merchants, area schools, and even the local university in this work. The work is hard and slow, but it is generating results because they are able to speak with one unified voice.

The York Road Partnership didn't happen overnight, but it has been able to keep itself moving forward thanks to three important factors:

- Participation by all the neighborhood groups, so that nobody is left out;
- A strong relationship between the Partnership and the local Council Member; and

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Baltimore residents are largely unaware of Irvington, its lovely architecture and dedicated citizens.

- Sustained participation by Loyola University, who not only provides meeting space and other logistical support, but has gone so far as to dedicate a staff person to improving the corridor.

Only by pooling resources and working together in a similar way can the Frederick Avenue Corridor hope to achieve meaningful progress. This will mean not only bringing together neighborhood leaders, but also:

- Area churches (including most especially St. Joseph's Monastery Parish);
- Major property owners (such as Enterprise Homes and FutureCare);
  - Area schools (including Mount St. Joseph and Beechfield Elementary); and
  - A *merchant champion* who can credibly represent the interests of merchants, while at the same time supporting the ongoing work of making the community more stable, secure, and successful. (BDC may be helpful in identifying this champion).

This Partnership will not only expand the power and effectiveness of stakeholders in the Corridor – it will also solve the communications problems that prevent residents from taking advantage of all the opportunities available to them. With a Corridor-wide Partnership, information can be shared, conflict can be worked through, and direct action can be taken.

One additional benefit of a Partnership would be to establish shared expectations and principles for landlords. The Partnership could adopt written principles establishing minimum requirements for cleanliness, upkeep, and tenant behavior, and distribute these to landlords across the area. (The same could also be done for merchants.) The message could be very simple: we will do everything in our power to support business people who uphold our standards, and we will pursue all appropriate remedies to ensure that everyone else complies with their legal obligations.

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Irvington has a wealth of public, semi-public, and private spaces that can be used to enrich the community.

## 2. Take Better Advantage of Community Space

Although residents may not realize it, Irvington actually has a wealth of public, semi-public, and private spaces that can be used to enrich the community, attract residents, and support young children. The trick will be to *activate those spaces*, filling them with life and activity.

Activating public space starts with holding new community events (which are cheap, can start right away, and builds a constituency of users). It then culminates in physically enhancing the spaces themselves (which costs money, takes time, and does little good if nobody uses the space to begin with). We will propose a combination of the two, involving a variety of short, medium, and long term improvements.

### ST. JOSEPH'S MONASTERY PARISH (1 YEAR)

St. Joseph's Monastery Parish is a world-class structure sitting atop a grand hill. If Irvington were in Europe, visitors would absolutely travel from around the world to visit St. Joseph's. The Parish should absolutely stand as a beautiful and dramatic eastern gateway, announcing proudly that you have arrived at an interesting and beautiful place.

Unfortunately, visitors along Frederick Avenue are instead greeted by a battered chain link fence, an overgrown parking lot, and ugly storage units made out of used shipping containers. The church itself is almost invisible from the street. Instead of serving as a proud gateway, the ugly lot suggests that nothing of value lies atop the hill – much less further down Frederick.

Imagine instead if St. Joseph's partnered with Mountain Manor to create a beautifully landscaped grand entrance. Parking could be arranged tastefully around lush planting beds that drew the eye upward towards the stunning building on the horizon. The hillside could also be terraced into a series of outdoor spaces where community and religious events could be held, like Easter Egg hunts or picnics.

These simple changes could transform the hillside into a dramatic asset for the church and the community, while still serving the important needs of Mountain Manor.

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Of course, the church has it within their power to begin activating their campus *right now*, before any changes are even made. St. Joseph's should commit to holding no less than one community event every quarter, which would bring together members of the congregation with residents of the neighborhood. In addition to the obvious events that the church could hold, such as Easter Egg hunts or Christmas caroling, there are many other ways to enliven community, such as a spring picnic or a summer waterslide cascading down their grassy hill.

St. Joseph's has the power to become a leader in the building of community, bringing its congregation and its neighbors together for events that are dynamic, enriching, and meaningful. We encourage them to think creatively, and without artificial constraints, about how best to assume this important role.

## **LOUDON PARK CEMETERY (1-3 YEARS)**

In cities across the world, cemeteries are not left empty all day. They are used as places of recreation, contemplation, and rest. Many are visited by tourists, who are eager to see the vast span of history laid out before them, or to visit the last resting place of important historical figures.

From this perspective, Loudon Park is truly remarkable. It is the resting place for Mary Pickersgill, who stitched the American flag that flew over Fort McHenry and inspired the Star Spangled Banner. It is the gravesite for H. L. Mencken, the world famous humorist whose work is still widely read 60 years after his death. And it is the home of two separate military plots – one for union soldiers, and one for confederates – that vividly convey the tensions of living in this border city during the Civil War.

Residents of the corridor should stop thinking of the cemetery as a fenced-off place to drive past. Loudon Park is not a blank spot on the map. It is a beautifully landscaped park, filled with sculptural and architectural masterpieces, sitting right at their front door.

In the past, there have been historic walking tours of the cemetery, and these could be restarted. But it would also take little effort to start a regular walking group that met weekly to stroll through the cemetery. In fact, working with the cemetery owners, it may even be possible for

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Imagine if St. Joseph's partnered with Mountain Manor to create a beautifully landscaped entrance.

the Partnership to host larger events like bike rides and 5k runs, which could then generate revenue for the Recreation Center or other Partnership activities. With time, these could even become major events, attracting financial sponsors and participants from across the City. This would certainly help to draw public attention to Irvington.

But perhaps the best opportunity of all is to host the greatest family Halloween party in all of Baltimore. Just imagine a parade of costumed children that started at St. Joseph's, which then carefully made its way across Frederick and through the usually-locked cemetery gates. There, families could give out candy, bob for apples, and share food in a safe and protected environment. The evening could be capped off with a family-friendly movie. This would be an unforgettable experience for children growing up in the area, while providing better parental supervision than simply wandering the streets after dark.

### **THE COLLINS DISCOUNT PARKING LOT (1 YEAR)**

Although it is not actually a park, the small parking lot just south of Collins Discount and the Thrift Store is actually a very practical place for holding regular community events. Visible, centrally located, and fenced in, it makes a great location for weekly flea markets, a small farmers market, or family-friendly block parties.

With the permission of the property owner, the Partnership could activate this space with wholesome activities, drawing residents to the edge of the business district without coming into direct contact with the unwholesome activities that often go on there. In a sense, this would be a chance for the community to gently assert its right to use Frederick Avenue productively. Perhaps the local foot patrol officer might even be willing to keep an eye on the events until a pattern of safety had been established.

### **CHURCH-SPONSORED COMMUNITY GARDENS (2 YEARS)**

In our interviews with local stakeholders, and our conversations with the general public, it was clear that many residents are eager to start community gardens. We certainly support this

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Loudon  
Park is truly  
remarkable.

effort, which would provide not just a source of fresh produce, but also an opportunity to build community.

Although vacant lots (such as the ones currently owned by Vacants to Value) can certainly provide useful space, community gardens often work best when there is an organization to keep an eye on them, to organize volunteers, and to provide a reliable source of water. For this reason, churches (which often have available yard space) can make excellent stewards of community gardens.

With so many churches in the area, it should be possible to find a few that are willing to take on this responsibility. The large south-facing lawn at St. Joseph's presents one such opportunity, but there are certainly others.

### **FRED B. LEIDIG RECREATION CENTER (1 YEAR)**

While the panel felt strongly that local children could easily use a brand new, state-of-the-art recreation center, we recognize this might not be feasible in the short term. And so, rather than speculate about how to design a new center, we instead have a series of suggestions for how to improve the one that is there.

Our first observation is that the center is very hard to see, tucked down below Frederick Avenue and attached to Beechfield Elementary. Given that many residents told us they do not even know all the programs offered there, it is important to increase the overall visibility of the center.

While many things can be done to improve the overall appearance of the center (including keeping the dumpster as far away as possible from the front door) we recommend a mural-based strategy to draw attention to the facility from the street. We believe that a beautiful, expressive mural could highlight the difference between the center and the school, and encourage people to come explore. It could also help serve as a western gateway to Irvington, signaling that you have arrived in an engaged community that values its children.

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This mural would be enhanced if the school agreed to allow its metal building to be painted at the same time. Dressing up that structure with color, pattern, or even an extension of the mural itself would serve to highlight the recreation center while also improving a somewhat tired-looking façade.

The center could also use some improved signage, located at the corner of Frederick and Beechfield. The signage could even highlight various programs available at Leidig.

### **SLENTZ FIELDS (2 YEARS)**

Like most people, we were thrilled to hear that the State of Maryland allocated \$600,000 to upgrade Slentz Fields. However, it is also important to make sure that the rebuilt fields are properly maintained in the long term.

We suggest talking with the Mount St. Joseph school to see if they would like to rent the fields for certain dedicated times of the day. If structured correctly, this might create a mutually-beneficial relationship between the school and the recreation center. In exchange for guaranteed use at certain times of the day, the school might be willing to contribute funds (which could go to maintenance and programming) and/or even participate in the maintenance effort. Everyone, including the school and the neighborhood kids going to the recreation center, would benefit.

### **YMCA AFTER-SCHOOL ENRICHMENT SITE AT COLLEGE GARDENS APARTMENTS (5 YEARS)**

The College Gardens Apartments in Yale Heights has a small but very nice after-school enrichment facility operated by the YMCA. This tiny gem of a resource sits by itself in the complex, detached from the other youth programming options around it.

We suggest that the community build a trail between the Leidig Recreation Center and the YMCA facility, which would wander past the Slentz Fields and behind Mount St. Joseph School along the forested banks of the Maidens Choice Run. This trail would be a recreational

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A trail would link together a string of resources for children.

amenity serving the whole community, but in particular it would link together a string of resources for children, including:

- The YMCA Center
- Slentz Fields
- Beechwood Elementary
- Leidig Recreation Center
- The small park area at Beechfield Avenue and Stafford Street across from the elementary school.

Making this trail a reality would require the participation of the Elementary School, the Recreation Center, Mount St. Joseph, and College Gardens apartments. But by connecting all of these resources together, and serving as a valuable recreational amenity in its own right, the trail would enhance the ability of all these places to serve the needs of children.

### 3. Improve the Housing Stock along Strategically Important Corridors

While the local housing stock remains generally high in quality, and nearby projects like Uplands and Wyndholme Woods have demonstrated that the market is receptive to additional sales of market rate homes, the neighborhoods reflect all the classic signs of stress in the residential market: the gradual transition of units from homeownership to rentals, deferred maintenance, and scattered vacants. It is not too late to solve these problems, but action must be taken now, before the challenges grow worse. We believe there are a series of steps that the community can take to stabilize its housing stock and attract a new generation of homeowners.

#### **FORM A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (CDC) (2 YEARS)**

A CDC is a nonprofit organization that focuses on revitalizing a neighborhood's building stock. It identifies problem properties, acquires them, rebuilds them, and returns them safely to the open market.

CDCs are essentially small development firms, but with a social mission that is rooted in the aspirations and needs of the community they serve. And as a nonprofit, they are eligible to receive grants, donations, and other public funds that private developers could not get. Because of this subsidy, they can take on many of the early challenges where the private sector

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Start with targeted blocks and build outwards.

can't make a profit. In so doing, they gradually strengthen the real estate market until a healthy network of professional rehabbers and homeowners can join in the work.

Irvington is an ideal community for a CDC, because the housing stock is not yet in terrible shape. If marketed correctly, the neighborhood can attract new homebuyers. But first it needs to turn around a number of problem properties, so that they do not drag down the rest.

While the underlying work of a CDC is not rocket science, it does require some basic working knowledge of real estate, construction, and financing. Baltimore churches, or other neighborhood institutions with a strong vision for the future, have started successful CDCs in the past. Many would be glad to share their knowledge and experience with Irvington.

It is worth noting here that it is not always easy to start a new CDC, and there is a long history of neighborhood-based CDCs that never fully got off the ground. However, we believe that in this case there is reason to be hopeful. First of all, there is an existing organization already established in the neighborhood that is well positioned to expand its efforts to include real estate work: My Brother's Keeper. My Brother's Keeper, in turn, is well positioned to be supported by BUILD, which could help facilitate its growth and connect it with mentors and advisors who are already doing this work across the city. Similarly, Enterprise Homes already works in the community, and may be available to play a supporting role – particularly with regard to identifying successful financing strategies. And as we will describe in further detail below, there may even be an opportunity for graduates of Mount St. Joseph to help lay the foundation for such a transition. My Brother's Keeper is an excellent organization with a strong vision for the community, with an existing board, a beautiful office, and an established history of fundraising. It is absolutely worth exploring whether they would be willing to take on the role of CDC, especially if they could do so with the ready support of outside partners.

### **TARGET RENOVATIONS ON AUGUSTA AND MASSACHUSETTS (3 YEARS)**

In order for a CDC to be effective, it must have a strategy for transforming not just individual homes, but the broader housing market. There are too many rundown or vacant houses in

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Massachusetts Avenue between Woodington and Monastery is also a quiet, tree lined, attractive street.

the Corridor for a small nonprofit to handle all at once. This work should be based upon a strategy that starts with targeted blocks and builds outwards.

Augusta Avenue between Frederick and Old Frederick is truly a grand street, lined with mature trees and populated by a delightful variety of historic homes. It ought to be one of the easiest streets for attracting new residents, despite the fact that its intersection with Frederick is one of the least stable corners in the neighborhood. The principal problem with Augusta is that many of the houses require more repair than a typical homebuyer would prefer to do – and, in many cases, more repair than the resale value of the home can support.

But this is the perfect environment for a CDC. The market is not so destabilized that it would need to fundamentally restore the confidence of homebuyers; the housing stock is not in such bad shape that every building needs to be gutted; and the surrounding residential activity (including new construction) demonstrates that a segment of the homebuying population is willing to consider this portion of West Baltimore at the right price point. What a CDC needs to do is principally bring the dilapidated housing up to market-ready conditions and market the neighborhood to buyers. So long as the construction is high quality, and the sale price is correct (which will certainly require tapping into subsidy), we believe that it should be able to attract homebuyers.

**MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE BETWEEN WOODINGTON AND MONASTERY** is also a quiet, tree lined, attractive street. It also needs a CDC to step in and renovate targeted homes. But Massachusetts is also strategically valuable because it terminates at two important neighborhood anchors. To the east, it is already anchored by St. Joseph's Monastery Parish, a grand architectural feature that we are encouraging to take on additional community-building activities. And to the west is the vacant parcel owned by Enterprise Homes, which is soon to become the second phase of The Green at Irvington Mews. While that parcel is not yet developed, it has the great potential to be made into a second strong anchor. Secured on both sides by solid and community-friendly uses, Massachusetts could then become a stabilizing force in the local housing market.

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Irvington is largely unknown to homebuyers.

## **CAREFULLY DESIGN PHASE II OF THE GREEN AT IRVINGTON MEWS (1 YEAR)**

In its undeveloped state, this parcel attracts illegal dumping and pulls down the community. But once developed, it can do the exact opposite, stabilizing the housing market and adding value to the adjacent housing. Completing the second phase of The Green at Irvington Mews is an important step forward for the western edge of the neighborhood.

Subtle issues of design will be critical to ensuring a harmonious relationship between the parcel and the neighborhood. New buildings should form a strong street wall on Woodington, ideally with parking behind the buildings or screened from view. Building heights and massing should reflect the needs of a quiet single family neighborhood, as opposed to that of a busy commuting corridor. Particular attention should be paid to the terminal vista created along Massachusetts, with the goal of anchoring that intersection with a strong façade detail, gateway feature, or other design element. And new streetscaping along the west side of Woodington should enhance the public realm, providing shade and communicating a sense of community strength.

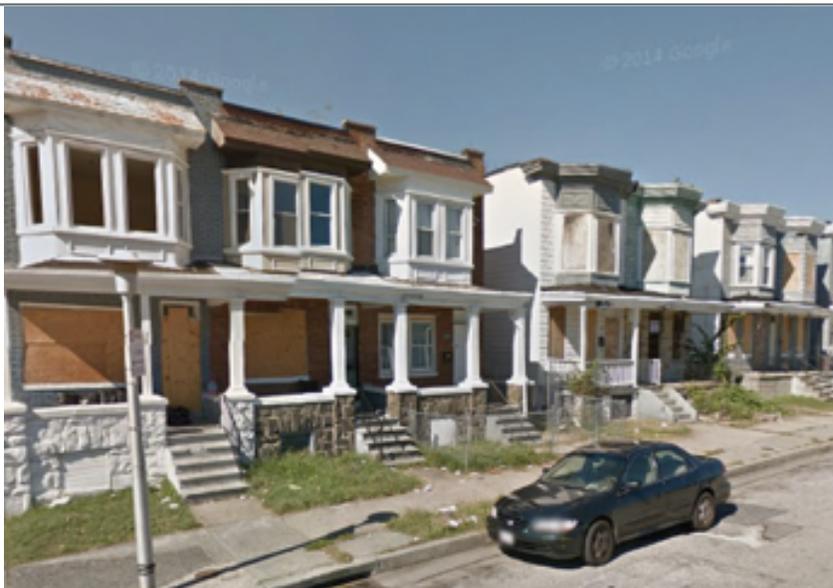
## **BUILD NEW CONSTRUCTION ON COLLINS (3 YEARS)**

The 200 block of Collins Avenue, across from the Thrift Store, is largely vacant. Yet the vacant homes attract squatters, who destabilize the adjacent alley and the entire retail corridor. If the few remaining residents could be relocated, this block provides an excellent opportunity for new home construction. In addition to stabilizing the block, new affordable homes would help to boost the local housing market, radiating strength westward to Augusta and north towards Massachusetts. A local CDC could work to acquire and replace those homes, or perhaps a more experienced partner – such as Chesapeake Habitat for Humanity – could be brought in.

## **LOOK TO MOUNT ST. JOSEPH ALUMNI FOR HELP (1 YEAR)**

Mount St. Joseph is an exceptional academic institution, with a long and distinguished history in the neighborhood. It is also blessed with a broad network of highly educated and extremely talented alumni, who care deeply about the school and want to see it thrive.

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Vacant homes attract squatters, who destabilize the adjacent alley and the entire retail corridor.

Yet over time, the slow decay of the neighborhood poses an existential threat to the school, which operates within an extremely competitive environment. In order to continue to attract its diverse base of gifted and qualified students from across the region, it must be able to assure parents that their children will be in a safe and inviting environment. While conditions have not yet deteriorated to the point that they affect enrollment, it would be unwise to wait until the school faced that dilemma. The time to act is now, while the prospects for success remain high and the cost of action is relatively low.

One easy way for the school to become engaged is to tap into its enthusiastic base of alumni. With a school as beloved as Mt. Saint Joseph, it is easy to imagine a small group of alumni volunteering to solve problems that directly affect their alma mater. This might be particularly true among younger professionals in their 20s or 30s, who as a group tend to be more engaged in volunteer activities than previous generations. Many might even have expertise in real estate.

One important early project would be to renovate the vacant housing on Yale Avenue, several of which face the football field and are directly visible from the bleachers. This would be a huge benefit to the school, as well as to the community.

### **GET ON THE LIVE BALTIMORE HOUSING TOUR (2 YEARS)**

One of the great problems of the Irvington real estate market is that it is largely unknown among the broader world of homebuyers. This challenge is exacerbated by the poor conditions along the retail corridor, which give travelers the mistaken impression that the housing stock must all be in poor condition.

Irvington must increase its visibility. One way to do this is to ask Live Baltimore to include the neighborhood (particularly the north side of Frederick) on its West Side housing tours. These tours change every year, and it is important to lobby for Irvington to be included.

Live Baltimore can also be an important partner to the CDC, an alumni effort, or other efforts in the Corridor.

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The current conditions in the Irvington Business District hold back the neighborhood.

#### 4. Create an Inviting Business District

There is no doubt that the current conditions in the Irvington Business District hold back the neighborhood, and indeed the entire corridor. The retail offerings do not adequately serve the needs of the community; the appearances of the stores discourage commuters from stopping in Irvington; and the dangers of crime (both real and perceived) undermine efforts to improve the whole Corridor.

We are not experts in crime prevention, and we cannot make specific policing suggestions. That said, it is clear that the conditions in the business district contribute to the underlying dynamic of illegal behavior, and creates instability that ripples outward into the residential blocks to the north and south. On its own, cleaning and beautifying the Business District will not be enough to change the underlying problems. But it is a necessary step. It also provides a useful series of initial tasks that build momentum towards more dramatic improvements. Lastly, it presents an opportunity to engage a merchant champion who is willing to step forward and support positive change.

The District can be improved by the following series of small, medium, and large-scale interventions:

##### **SMALL INTERVENTIONS (1-2 YEARS)**

- Property owners should be encouraged to install “No Loitering” signs, which give police the legal authority to ask loiterers to move along.
- The community could organize more regular street cleanups, including power washing of the concrete.
- Local artists could be commissioned to paint murals on metal security doors, which would make the District feel more lively when shops were closed.

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The corridor includes non-conforming retail sites.

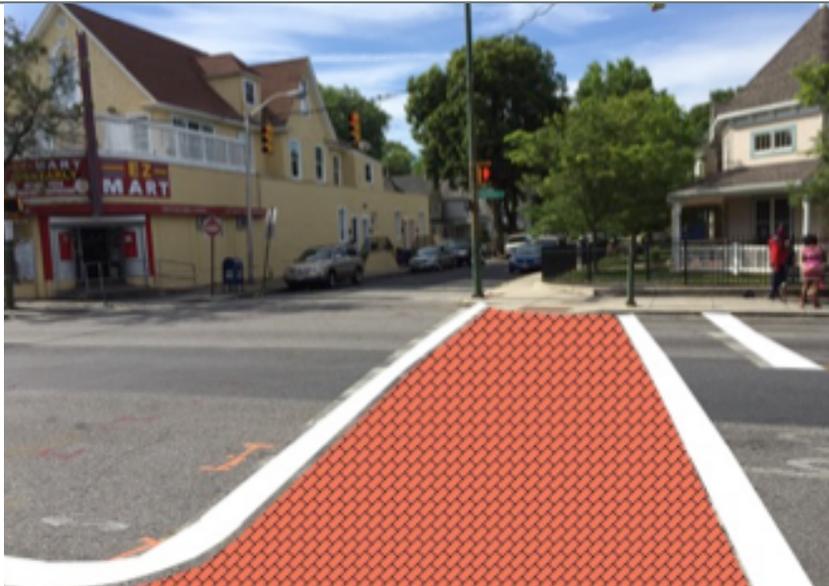
- The community could replace the vinyl banners that were blown down in a storm. Perhaps a design contest could be held, to encourage local artists to participate in their community.

## **MEDIUM INTERVENTIONS (3-5 YEARS)**

- The Department of Transportation should immediately begin studying whether peak parking restrictions are actually necessary. It is not clear from our observations that these restrictions are urgently needed. If they are not, then the restrictions should be removed, for the simple reason that they discourage commerce and decrease property values.
- The community should work with the Department of Public Work, Tree Baltimore, and – if needed – Blue Water Baltimore to plant new street trees. These trees must be planted using best practices in proper tree wells with adequate soil. There must also be an organized plan to water and care for the trees, so that they do not simply die in the first year.
- The Baltimore Development Corporation offers façade improvement grants, and its current investment in Sabians is an excellent starting point for the corridor. If BDC worked with property owners to improve the appearance of five or so buildings at the same time, it could go a long way towards making a more inviting and professional Business District.
- Similarly, BDC also has a microloan program that can help improve, expand, or start quality businesses in the District.

In addition to having inadequate retail offerings, the Corridor includes a number of nonconforming retail sites that do not belong in their current locations. We recommend enforcement actions against nonconforming uses, which would help to eliminate some problem properties and encourage a concentration of retail where it belongs – in the heart of the Retail District. Moreover, we suggest looking at rezoning some portions of the

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The current streetscaping does not adequately provide for pedestrian safety.

corridor to reduce the overall amount of commercial activity, clustering it more tightly in the heart of the Retail District.

## **LARGER INTERVENTIONS (5-7 YEARS)**

- The District could use enhanced pedestrian lighting, to create a sense of safety and visibility at night. The current lighting is inadequate to this task.
- The current streetscaping does not adequately provide for pedestrian safety. We recommend a series of bumpouts to decrease crossing distance, combined with enhanced – and, in some cases, textured and decorated – crosswalks. In particular, the crosswalks represent an opportunity to brand and define the neighborhood, helping people know that they have arrived in a special community that is cared for. While there are many places where bumpouts and crosswalks would be useful (see diagram), one critical connection is obviously between the senior building and the pharmacy directly across the street.

## **5. Attract new neighborhood retail (2 Years)**

Ultimately, the Business District needs more than just beautification. It needs more than just public safety improvements, even though these are critical. To truly thrive, it needs a retail mix that serves a broader cross section of the community, and responds to genuine community needs. This, in turn, will attract more of the community to the District, making it more of a functional, shared community space.

Of course, not every business can be attracted to the District. The reasonably low traffic counts preclude most chain retailers or stores with a regional focus. The presence of competitor destinations, such as Security Square Mall and Edmonson Village, further narrow the number of viable retail options. And, of course, the current safety and aesthetic environment discourage all but the most hardy investors (not to mention shoppers).

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That said, there is a path forward, and it can be found in neighborhood-oriented retail. It is clear that residents of the Corridor are eager for basic neighborhood retail options – a bakery, a café, a sit-down restaurant, a laundry, and the like. Moreover, these are the kinds of small businesses that can be principally supported by local clients, and do not require a large regional customer base. And lastly, the presence of these businesses would increase the livability of the Corridor, which would help to attract and retain homeowners.

But these kinds of businesses will not simply appear on their own. To prime the pump of the market, the community will need to provide two things: local entrepreneurs who are willing to take a risk to improve their neighborhood, and a partner agency willing to provide the subsidy that will probably be needed to get them up and running.

The Baltimore Development Corporation is well suited to serve in the latter role, particularly through the microloan and façade improvement programs mentioned above. And perhaps a future CDC can contribute by acquiring property and incubating new businesses under favorable lease terms. But the community is going to need to find entrepreneurs who are willing to step up and bring these businesses into existence. Under the current conditions, it is unlikely that a wave of outside investors will suddenly show up, eager to transform the Business District.

## Conclusion: Reclaiming the Town in the City

Irvington is, in a sense, a beneficiary of its long and proud history. The area is gifted with many incredible assets that other neighborhoods would honestly love to have: beautiful open space, strong academic and religious institutions, great architecture, excellent highway access, and a strong sense of community. These are great strengths that can be used to take the neighborhood forward.

But in order to make the progress it desires, Irvington must start to actively harness these assets, putting them to better and more productive use.

Everyone along the Corridor, including both residents and merchants, needs to recognize that their fates are tied to one another. The community as a whole must come together around a shared set of goals, and at the same time it must invite new members to join in its cause. New institutions must be created to confront the challenges of the present day, while at the same time historic anchor institutions must find new ways to engage with a changing community.

With greater coordination and collaboration, there is little to keep Irvington from making real and meaningful progress. All the pieces are present. The only thing remaining is to do it.

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