

COALITION of the WILLING

Advancing Community Health through Collaborative Revitalization in Greenmount West, Baltimore

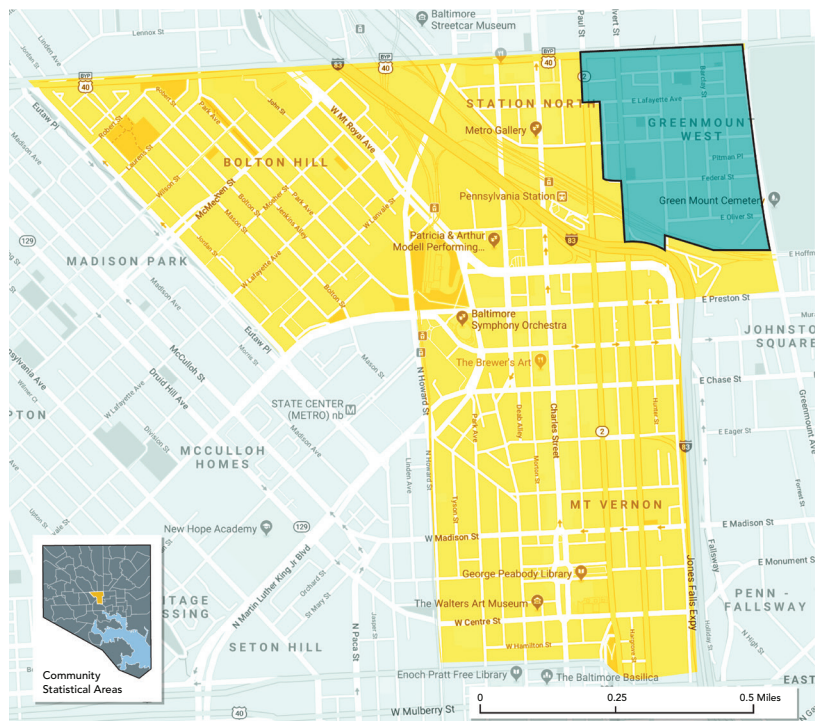
SUMMARY

- Serving as the residential section of Baltimore’s Station North Arts and Entertainment District, Greenmount West is home to a diverse and growing community of artists and commuters.
- Like other neighborhoods in the city, Greenmount West has overcome challenges related to economic disinvestment, crime, and housing abandonment.
- Prior to the launch of Vacants to Value in 2010, Greenmount West had established resources and dedicated staff to work with the Baltimore City Department of Housing and Community Development to develop a strategic plan for restoring vacant and abandoned properties. This relationship, in addition to Greenmount West’s history of successful community organizing, set the stage for this neighborhood to take full advantage of Vacants to Value’s tools and incentives.
- The Greenmount West Community Development Cluster has successfully restored nearly all the neighborhood’s vacant properties.
- Redevelopment in Greenmount West has resulted in growth in the arts district, improved safety, and a significant increase in market demand for housing. Now, efforts in this neighborhood focus on ensuring a place for lower-income and long-standing residents as well as maintaining and securing green space in the face of ongoing development pressures.
- 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 Greenmount West Community Development Cluster (CD Cluster) is located in central Baltimore, bordered by North Avenue to the north, the historic Green Mount Cemetery to the east, the Charles North community to the west, and the city’s historic Mount Vernon district to the south (Figure 1).¹ The neighborhood encompasses about 15 city blocks comprising a strong historic architectural fabric and the residential sections of Baltimore’s Station North Arts and Entertainment District. Home to an estimated 1,300 individuals and families, Greenmount West is a diverse, mixed-income community characterized by a varied housing stock, close proximity to transportation options, a growing arts scene, and more.¹

Figure 1 Greenmount West Community Development Cluster in the Midtown Community Statistical Area.



History of Greenmount West

Before the late 19th century, the land that would become Greenmount West was divided into two parcels and largely disconnected from downtown Baltimore. With the construction of new bridges over Jones Falls at Calvert Street and Guilford Avenue in 1880, the area opened up to new development and tremendous growth.² Within a decade, Greenmount West grew to more than 500 homes, drawing in more families and setting the stage for the neighborhood's character today.

Industrial development transformed Greenmount West in the early twentieth century, including operations such as Crown, Cork & Seal, the Department of Social Services, Lebow Clothing Plant, and Noxzema Corporation. However, by the 1950s, increased international trade, advances in vehicular transport, and other industry shifts resulted in an economic decline that threatened many residents' job stability. As a result of disinvestment in economic growth and social unrest, many middle-class families moved to the suburbs. Like other neighborhoods, Greenmount West began to experience increased vacant and abandoned buildings until the early 2000s.

Numerous public health challenges ensued throughout the city, impacting Greenmount West during this period. One longtime resident of Greenmount West recalled the ways in which the HIV/AIDS and crack cocaine epidemics during the 1980s and 1990s significantly contributed to premature deaths and devastated many families in this community.

Current Neighborhood Conditions

Over the last two decades, community leaders, developers, and residents have made intentional, concerted efforts to transform the neighborhood by building on existing strengths, such as Greenmount West's artist community. The neighborhood consists of artist housing, newly renovated row homes, and the commercial district along North Avenue that continues to grow, gaining high energy with new restaurants, theaters, galleries, music venues, and artist studio space. In general, the housing stock comprises single- and multi-family options, with only a few vacant homes left in the area. Providing some economic stability are the numerous surrounding institutions, including the Baltimore City Montessori Public Charter School and the Maryland Institute/College of Art, along with the historic Mount Vernon neighborhood and the North Avenue corridor. In particular, close proximity to

Baltimore Penn Station has played a critical role in sustaining market-rate housing in Greenmount West.

The demographics of this community have shifted over the years, with a decrease in black residents by 23.4 percent (95.1 to 71.7 percent) and an increase in white residents by 21.7 percent (3.0 to 24.7 percent) from 2000 to 2010; Asian residents have remained relatively constant at around 2 percent. Additionally, the number of young adults has grown, with nearly two in five residents within the age range of 18 to 34 years. The median household income of Greenmount West residents in 2010 was on par with that of the city, at \$38,000.³

In the greater Midtown^e area, including Greenmount West and neighboring communities, the housing environment today ranks in the top one-third relative to other Baltimore neighborhood clusters. Overall, the options for food and physical activity are comparable or below the city's average, with lower access to healthy food options, a greater density of carryout and fast-food restaurants, and limited green space. The leading causes of death in Midtown have tended toward chronic illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. Furthermore, drug- and/or alcohol-induced mortality still remains a challenge, accounting for an estimated 5 percent of deaths in 2017.⁴

VACANTS TO VALUE IN GREENMOUNT WEST

Launched in November 2010 by the mayor and housing commissioner at the time, Vacants to Value (V2V) is a multipronged approach to restore vacant properties throughout Baltimore City. Led by the Baltimore City Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), V2V targets neighborhoods classified as "middle market" and with lower rates of vacant housing. The V2V program uses a block-by-block approach, offering a set of tools to restore both city- and privately owned properties through a more streamlined and efficient process.

Among the first neighborhoods in the city to officially apply the V2V program was Greenmount West. V2V's CD Cluster model facilitated partnerships with for-profit and nonprofit developers interested in investing in these areas, by removing barriers to developer ownership. 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. Greenmount West spearheaded complementary efforts to the V2V initiative, including the first V2V neighborhood walking tours. Greenmount West was also among the initial neighborhoods to be awarded a property bundle through one of V2V's request for proposal processes in 2015, and convened the first joint DHCD and community V2V proposal review process.

Prelude to V2V

Prior to V2V's official launch, the Baltimore City Department of Planning and the New Greenmount West Community Association (GWCA) commenced a Greenmount West master planning process. Due to growing pressures to develop in the neighborhood, the master plan was created in early 2010 as a guiding document for achieving a diverse, mixed-income community while ensuring a place for long-standing lower-income residents. Community members believed this was especially important for Greenmount West, which had long been home to subsidized housing residents and established homeowners.

Central to this effort was the leadership of the GWCA, the Central Baltimore Partnership (CBP), a community development corporation founded in 2008, and Jubilee Baltimore. Dedicated to galvanizing the renaissance of neighborhoods in central Baltimore, including Greenmount West, CBP is a collaboration of about 100 partners, including Jubilee, who are guided by a steering committee of 24 organizational representatives that offers a more targeted approach in the development process. CBP facilitates the formulation of a shared vision across partners from the institutional, community, public, and private sectors; provides coordination services between partner organizations; secures resources; delivers technical assistance; and administers grant programs.

Collectively, GWCA, CBP and Jubilee Baltimore had begun numerous activities in Greenmount West before the arrival of V2V. In particular, GWCA was critical in guiding the Greenmount West Master Plan and organizing community members around shared concerns related to public safety, commercial development, sanitation, code enforcement, housing, and more. Supporting these efforts was CBP, which served as a convener and provided technical assistance to individual and groups of partners. For example, task forces centered on particular issues were designed to be led by a CBP member organization that worked

closely with the relevant Baltimore City government agency and with neighborhood organizations, private businesses, and others affected by the actions of that particular task force. Additionally, GWCA sought opportunities to work with investors and developers to establish community benefits agreements as part of proposed redevelopment plans. Although community benefits agreements were beyond the purview of the Planning Commission's formal approval process, the agreements enabled mutually beneficial objectives that ensured development projects received public benefits, such as tax relief or public land, and allowed residents to shape projects to their needs (e.g., living-wage jobs, funding for green space).

V2V in Action

V2V kicked off in Greenmount West's City Arts One gallery space in 2012 and held one of the first V2V neighborhood walking tours in the city, with the support of GWCA and dedicated community ambassadors whom interested home buyers could contact.

GWCA, CBP, and Jubilee Baltimore worked with the housing commissioner on a vacant property-disposition planning process, following the establishment of the Greenmount West Master Plan. CBP brought case studies from around the country to encourage innovative thinking and identified bundles of vacant properties that Greenmount West community members wanted the city to dispose of and properties that needed to go into receivership to be added to those bundles. With staff support from Baltimore Housing's Land Resources Division, CBP, and Jubilee Baltimore, a GWCA Disposition Committee^f was formed to create a forum whereby Baltimore Department of Housing and Community Development staff could vet development proposals and elicit community feedback and recommendations, prior to moving forward with a development plan. The committee also facilitated constructive dialogue about decision-making and provided a process to hold the city accountable to their commitments. Similarly, Greenmount West established a close working relationship with code enforcement officials through the creation of a code enforcement task force. This task force identified and targeted problem properties and worked with code enforcement officials to share those priorities, follow up on them, track them, get community input, set community priorities, and communicate that to the Department of Housing and Community Development.

^f The committee currently exists in its new form as the GWCA Development Committee, sustainably operating with Greenmount West resident volunteer leadership.



At the same time, Greenmount West pushed numerous properties into receivership, with significant support from the Greater Homewood Community Corporation (now Strong City Baltimore). These properties included a few single retail and commercial units, including the Lebow Factory building (vacant for over 30 years), which is now the Baltimore Design School, and the Centre Theater (vacant for over 20 years), which now houses CBP, Jubilee Baltimore, and other community organizations, including the Baltimore Jewelry Center, Impact Hub, JHU-MICA Film Program, and a computer gaming company, Sparkypants.

Due to the high vacancy rate in Greenmount West at the time, V2V was critical in driving the new market-rate development. Strengths in the arts and entertainment districts surrounding Greenmount West were also important, along with the Baltimore Pennsylvania Station adjacent to this community. Especially notable was the level of readiness and collective efforts of stakeholders in Greenmount West, who enabled joint decision-making and V2V's success in restoring vacant properties. As a result of this productive revitalization, the number of vacant properties in Greenmount West dropped by nearly 70 percent from 2009 to 2016 with few remaining vacant properties today (Figure 2).

COMMUNITY HEALTH IMPACTS OF V2V

Overall, residents are pleased with the neighborhood's transformation. Interviews with community residents and local leaders conducted by the authors revealed several pathways through which vacant properties, and rehabilitation of those properties, impacted community health in this context.

Freedom to Thrive

Community members shared stories about challenges related to loitering, drug use, gang activity, and squatting, which were common in Greenmount West prior to V2V. As vacant homes were rehabilitated, people moving into the area felt motivated to organize and address neighborhood concerns. For example, a safety committee was established, and as a result of such collective efforts, community residents reported that crime diminished over time:

“When something happened, [people] wanted to know what happened and why. It really built up the community association because we would have 30 people at safety meetings. [We] tried to institute regular safety meetings, instead of reactionary when something happened. We really tried to take a focused approach of it.” –Resident

With the decrease in safety concerns, interest in moving to Greenmount West grew among prospective residents, and more families and children moved into the area as people perceived Greenmount West as an environment in which children can thrive:

“We got a lot more children. I’m talking about children under the age of like 10, which we didn’t have for a long time.” –Resident

Mental Health and Community Cohesion

Interviews revealed the ways in which vacant housing contributed to a stressful living environment and impacted mental health, by fueling concerns about illicit behavior, safety, and uncleanness. As the



Figure 2 Greenmount West Community Development Cluster in the Midtown Community Statistical Area (June 2019).

restoration of vacant homes began, residents found this to have an overall positive impact on the neighborhood. However, community members also reflected on how the process of revitalization and the incentives negatively impacted community cohesion and the sense of belonging for some residents:

“You always start with those who [have] been here forever because then it lets them see that I’m invested in you, I want to give you the opportunity, and when you are given the opportunity...most of them are being asked to leave this community. It’s not to stay here and get a home. It’s, ‘Well we can help you buy a home somewhere else...It’s yes, we want you to have a home, but we don’t want you to have a home here.’ It’s basically saying, you’re not who we are courting. You’re not what we want. You don’t have the financial...” –Resident

Opportunities to Engage With Neighbors

Residents shed light on the importance of opportunities for children and adults to engage with one another and come together. These included more formal spaces, such as public parks, and informal events, such as holiday events, block parties, or yard sales:

“[A healthy Greenmount West has] opportunities to play, opportunities to engage with each other, opportunities to learn new things. That means, having safe places to play. That means creating opportunities for people to intentionally come together to learn each other.” –Resident

REASONS FOR SUCCESS

V2V has greatly supported the decrease in vacant homes in the Greenmount West community. Success in this neighborhood is evident, with a significant decrease in crime, tidied blocks, and restoration of once-vacant and abandoned homes. Stakeholders involved with ongoing changes and development in Greenmount West highlighted several reasons for V2V’s success in this neighborhood:

- **Community readiness**

Greenmount West leaders and community members have a history of organizing and

working with city agencies to address neighborhood concerns about safety and housing, among other topics. Therefore, residents have had an established forum through which to voice concerns and processes established to facilitate communication with city officials. Community leaders were active neighborhood ambassadors helping to promote and market their community and V2V properties. Greenmount West even hosted the first V2V program neighborhood tour.

- **Clarity in vision**

From the beginning, all stakeholders in Greenmount West had a clear vision for what the community could become. From this vision followed intentional and strategic efforts among all partners, from community organizing, to development of the master plan, to working with the city and developers, in order to ensure equitable and balanced development.

- **Diverse neighborhood assets**

One of this neighborhood’s greatest strengths is its location, with major market forces converging on the area of Greenmount West. To the south is Mount Vernon, a cultural, historic district that began to revive in the early 2000s; to the north is Johns Hopkins University and Charles Village; to the west is the Maryland Institute College of Art and its growing student body as well as the neighboring Baltimore Pennsylvania Station.

- **A dedicated fundraiser and capacity builder**

CBP spent time getting to know people and the history of the Greenmount West neighborhood, before commencing development activities. They were dedicated to helping to form task forces to build cross-neighborhood collaboration and to providing technical assistance in coordinated efforts.

OPPORTUNITIES AND IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE TO PROMOTE COMMUNITY HEALTH

While Greenmount West has experienced tremendous success and residents shared positive reflections on the changes that have occurred, challenges remain, and

there are opportunities to ensure continued equitable, balanced development in order to further promote community health:

- **Preserve green space**

With growing development interest, Greenmount West residents are concerned about the maintenance and preservation of remaining green space in the neighborhood. Through CBP's Community Spruce-Up Grant Program (funded by Johns Hopkins University and Md Department of Housing and Community and Development), grants (\$10,000–\$25,000) are awarded to groups, individuals, and associations to stimulate neighborhood-driven projects, and these stakeholders receive technical assistance from CBP as well. Previously funded initiatives include the Cabana Old Timers Club relocation and the Coordinated Greening of Greenmount West projects.

- **Amend the master plan**

Given the formerly high vacancy rates in Greenmount West, the neighborhood once prioritized market-rate redevelopment. However, some community members now feel that the strategy focused too much on redevelopment of the physical structures in the neighborhood and that investment in building up long-standing community members has been limited. Neighborhood residents and community partners are holding ongoing conversations about revisiting the master plan and making the necessary amendments to meet current and future needs.

- **Ensure a place for long-standing residents**

While everyone agrees that the V2V program has benefited Greenmount West, there are concerns that the program has not benefited everyone equally. In particular, a large proportion of established residents in this neighborhood are renters, and while there are numerous incentives to move new residents into the neighborhood, few programs support longtime residents. Instead, many residents are offered vouchers to relocate. There are also dozens of lower-income and senior homeowners whose housing conditions are extremely unsafe and life-threatening. With committed support from Md DHCD, Jubilee has been able to help almost a dozen Greenmount West homeowners remain

and age in place, with capital-home repairs (new roofs, plumbing, etc.). However, Jubilee and CBP continue to raise resources, with instrumental community outreach support from neighborhood leaders, and ensure residents are connected to home-repair, housing-counseling, and other social services.

CONCLUSION

Nearly all vacant homes in Greenmount West have been successfully restored. In addition to strengths in this community's location, readiness and active, ongoing engagement between V2V, developers, and community leaders have enabled a collaborative revitalization process and positive community health outcomes overall. Amidst development pressures, Greenmount West is equipped with a robust social infrastructure and poised to safeguard the interests of long-standing residents.

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. 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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RECOMMENDED CITATION

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