RESTORING the SOCIAL FABRIC

Challenges and Opportunities to Strengthen the Revitalization Process and Community Health in Park Heights, Baltimore

SUMMARY

- Park Heights is one of the city's oldest and largest neighborhoods and was previously a central part of Baltimore's growing economy, with thriving shops, restaurants, movie theaters, and a branch library.
- Through a collaborative effort among city officials, local institutes and organizations, and residents, the Baltimore City Planning Commission adopted the Park Heights Master Plan in 2006. Four years later, the Vacants to Value initiative provided additional tools and support mechanisms to address ongoing challenges with vacancies in the neighborhood.
- Drawing on interviews conducted from 2017 to 2018 with stakeholders in the Garrison Street and Oakley Street Community Development Clusters in Park Heights, preliminary information is presented on the ways in which vacant properties and efforts to restore them have impacted the community's health and well-being.
- A range of challenges, such as a uniquely large neighborhood footprint and lack of alignment in planning, messaging, and actions among community groups, the public, and private agencies, has delayed progress in Park Heights.
- Investment in Park Heights' social dimensions along with the development of its physical infrastructure is necessary to facilitate more sustainable progress and to, importantly, advance community health.
- 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

Park Heights, one of Baltimore's oldest and largest neighborhoods, is situated in the city's northwest corner, approximately 10 miles from the downtown central business district and within two miles of the Baltimore County line.[1] A largely residential area, it is home to an estimated 30,000 residents, comprising 12 smaller neighborhoods that collectively span 1,500 acres. Current residents identify two different Park Heights, a "Northern" and a "Southern" Park Heights, with Northern Parkway as the line of demarcation.

The Garrison and Oakley Community Development Clusters are part of the Pimlico/Arlington/Hilltop neighborhood[a] in "Southern" Park Heights (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1 Garrison and Oakley Community Development Clusters in the Pimlico/Arlington/Hilltop Community Statistical Area.

[a] This neighborhood designation follows the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance-Jacob France Institute Community Statistical Area.

Two major roadways, Park Heights Avenue and Reisterstown Road, run north-south through the neighborhood and function as the area's main streets; the neighborhood has limited commercial retail and some industrial activity that can be found on its western edge. Major institutions are also located throughout the Park Heights community, including the Levindale LifeBridge Health Center, Sinai Hospital, Pimlico Race Course, as well as educational and social service institutions.

History of Park Heights

The history of Park Heights dates to the early nineteenth century, when the neighborhood was a central part of Baltimore's growing economy. Reisterstown Road served as a main route for transporting wheat and corn from farms northwest of the city to the port, which then shipped the products to various parts of the world. A bustling middle-class neighborhood at the time, Park Heights thrived with shops, restaurants, movies theaters, sporting events, and other entertainment venues. As economic opportunities grew, the neighborhood quickly attracted European Jewish immigrants up until the 1950s. Beginning in the 1960s, Park Heights experienced a drastic population shift due to a substantial decline in manufacturing and industrial jobs, discriminatory housing policies, and predatory lending, resulting in the concentrations of white American and European Jewish residents in "Northern" Park Heights and African-American and immigrant residents in "Southern" Park Heights. From 2000 to 2016, the percentage of African-American residents remained relatively constant, at around 95 percent. The composition of residents by age, however, shifted over the same period, with a decrease by 11.1 percentage points in children and adolescents under 18 years old (from 27.2 to 16.1 percent) and an increase by 4.6 percentage points in adults 25 to 64 years old (from 49.5 to 54.1 percent).[2,3]

Current Neighborhood Conditions

In recent decades, the broader Park Heights community has experienced its share of challenges, including a declining population, housing and economic instability, and concerns related to crime and drug activity. The current median household income in this neighborhood is roughly $14,000 less Ì…>˜ Ì…i VˆÌÞ‡Üˆ`i w}ÕÀi œv f{{]äääÊ>ÀœÛiÃ{ä percent of children, many of whom are from single-parent households, live below the poverty line.[2] The unemployment rate of 17.3 percent is higher than the city's rate of 12.8 percent, and nearly one in four residents[b] has less than a high-school degree.[2]

Due to historical disinvestment and the loss of residents in Park Heights, the overall housing environment remains severely distressed. The vacant building density ranks in the city's top one-third, with the latest numbers estimating nearly 1,100 vacant buildings per 10,000 housing units, compared to the 560 vacant buildings per 10,000 housing units at the city level.[4] Furthermore, the median home sales price in this area has decreased, from an estimated $48,000 in 2010 to $40,000 in 2016.[2]

In regards to safety, the homicide rate has dropped ÃˆÌ˜ˆwVÀ>˜Ì•Þ ˆ˜ ÀiViÌ Þi>ÀÃÆ …œÜiÛiÀ] remained twice that of the city's, at 7.4 homicides per 10,000 residents in 2015. Moreover, the density of liquor, tobacco, carryout, and corner stores in the neighborhood are greater than the city's average, creating important challenges regarding access to substances and foods that are detrimental to the community's health and well-being. The leading cause of death is heart disease, followed by cancer, homicide, and diabetes.[4]

VACANTS TO VALUE IN PARK HEIGHTS

Launched in 2010 by the mayor and housing commissioner at the time, Vacants to Value (V2V) 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.[5]

V2V strategically deploys one or more interventions in selected areas by evaluating the market demand for housing, based on the city's housing market typology, and overlaying this information with an inventory of vacant properties.[5] This strategic approach helps to characterize the severity of vacancy, locates areas with the greatest opportunity to restore vacant properties in an emerging market, and informs the implementation of V2V strategies.

Within the 1500-acre footprint of Park Heights, the Garrison Street and Oakley Street blocks were declared Community Development Clusters (CD Clusters) in 2013 and 2017, respectively, due to growing developer interest. The V2V CD Cluster model

[b] Population age 25+ years.

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For example, the V2V model 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 newly repaired homes are not negatively affected by homes that remain boarded up for extended periods.

To better prepare the public, the V2V program hosted a series of informational workshops and housing tours in Park Heights, beginning in 2012, called Imagine Baltimore: Neighborhood Rehab Tours. These workshops shared knowledge on how to buy city-owned properties, rehab and market properties, and use home-buyer incentives.[6]

Prelude to V2V

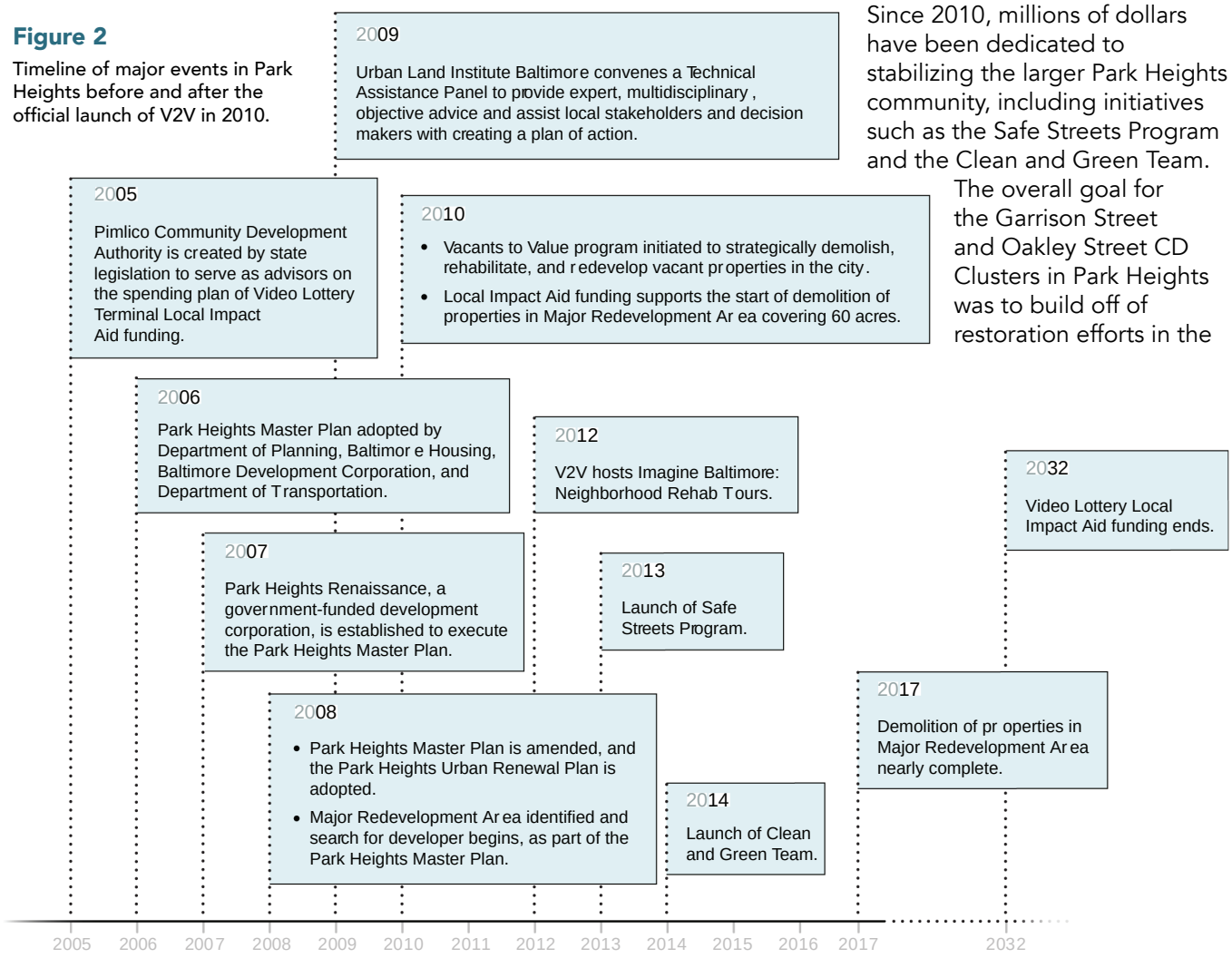
In fall 2003, the city's Department of Planning, DHCD, Baltimore Development Corporation, and the Department of Transportation formed a steering committee and hired a multidisciplinary team to develop the Park Heights Master Plan. Through a participatory planning process—involving Park Heights residents, business owners, community leaders, V ^ Ì Þ Ã Ì > v v] > ˜ ` i • i V Ì i ` œ v w V ^ > • Ã p Ì … i « • > ˜ conducted neighborhood open houses, community workshops, neighborhood assessments, surveys, and interviews to gather public opinion and build consensus for the plan's vision and recommendations. The Baltimore City Planning Commission adopted the Park Heights Master Plan on February 2, 2006, and in 2008 amendments were made to the plan as a result of community feedback on the Park Heights Urban Renewal Ordinance and Park Heights Rezoning bills (**Figure 2**).

V2V in Action

Since 2010, millions of dollars have been dedicated to stabilizing the larger Park Heights community, including initiatives such as the Safe Streets Program and the Clean and Green Team. The overall goal for the Garrison Street and Oakley Street CD Clusters in Park Heights was to build off of restoration efforts in the

Figure 2

Timeline of major events in Park Heights before and after the official launch of V2V in 2010.



major redevelopment area, a 60-acre plot of land centered at Park Heights and Woodland Avenues. **Figure 3** illustrates the vacant building notice dynamics in the Garrison and Oakley Street CD Clusters. Of the suite of V2V program strategies, the following were implemented:

1. **Streamlined Disposition**

   To expedite the process of transferring vacant buildings to home buyers and developers, the city's Land Resources Division created a clear, predictable, and expedient process to make selling city-owned properties three times faster.

2. **Targeted Demolition**

   In some areas where severely distressed properties are unlikely to be restored, V2V implements targeted demolition and land repurposing.

3. **Streamlined Code Enforcement**

   Streamlined code enforcement is implemented in areas with scattered vacant properties in a relatively healthy housing market. Building code violations, carrying a $900 penalty, are issued to spur rehabilitation; if the second V^Ì>Ì^œ~ ÀiVi^ÛiÃ ~œ ÀiÃ«œ~Ãi] 6Ó6 for a receivership case to move abandoned properties into auction. Properties in CD •ÕÃÌiÀÃ] …œÜiÛiÀ] LÞ«>ÃÃ Ì…i wÂÂ1 >`Ai VœÀ citation and move directly to receivership.

4. **Neighborhood Improvements**.

   For privately owned properties, the city's Division of Green, Healthy, and Sustainable Homes offered services to restore windows and exterior porches and to update heating units in homes.

COMMUNITY HEALTH IMPACTS OF V2V

In-depth interviews with residents and community leaders conducted by the authors revealed several pathways through which vacant properties, and their rehabilitation process, have impacted community health in this context.

Social Infrastructure and Sense of Community

With increasing vacancies in the neighborhood, residents spoke to the consequent changes in the structure of the community. They shared that prior Ìœ Ì…i Û>V>~VˆÃ] …œÕÃi…œ•`Ã ÜˆÌ… > "members were common, and children had safe spaces and peers with whom to play. In addition, store owners and church leaders lived, worked, and worshipped in the community. One resident described a previously stronger sense of social responsibility:

> "Yeah, [there were] more older family members. And, like I said, it was quieter. Neighbors helped neighbors out. They looked out for each other. As you see, we don't have too many neighbors anymore." –Resident

Upward Mobility

Community members described the ways in which the process of neighborhood revitalization should advance community health by creating opportunities for education, employment, and entrepreneurship:

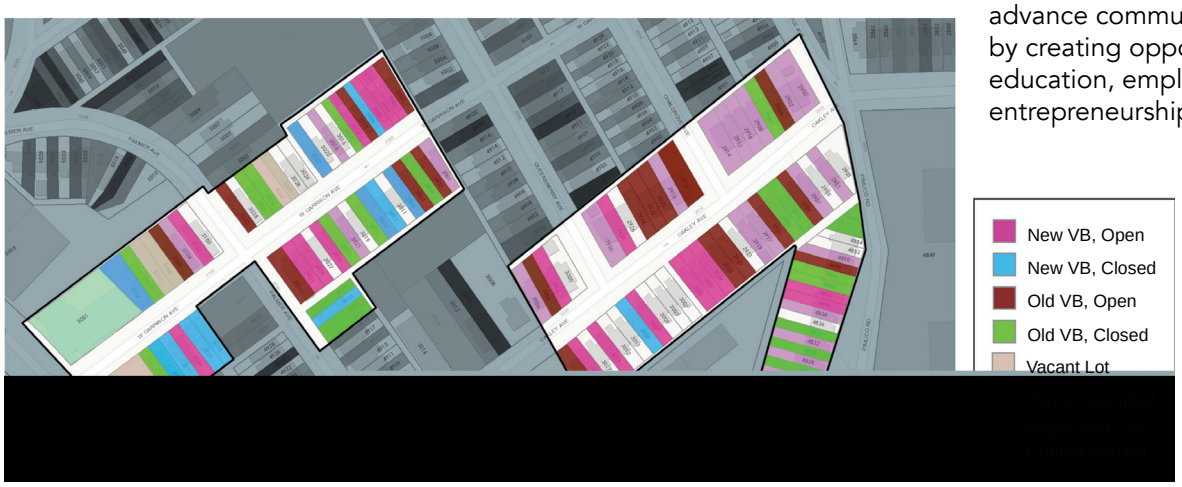


Figure 3

Vacant building notice dynamics in Park Heights' Garrison Street and Oakley Street Community Development Clusters (June 2019).