Technical Assistance for Sustainable Communities:
Building Blocks

Technical Assistance Tool: Implementing Transit Oriented Development 101
Baltimore, MD

To: Ms. Zelda Robinson, Ms. Arlene Fisher, and Ms. Frances Muldrow
From: Dena Belzer, Strategic Economics; Vernice Miller-Travis, Skeo Solutions; and Ilana Preuss, Smart Growth America
Date: June 12, 2014
Re: Suggested Next Steps as Outcome of Technical Assistance

1. Introduction: Purpose of Technical Assistance

In October of 2012 members of the Harlem Park Neighborhood Council submitted an application for technical assistance to Smart Growth America. The intent of this application was to receive assistance in implementing transit-oriented development (TOD). Harlem Park is located along the alignment for the proposed Red Line light rail line that would also connect to the West Baltimore MARC station—which is itself slated for a full scale revitalization - and serve as the node of a major transit-oriented development effort meant to connect West Baltimore communities to Downtown and many of the emerging employment activities further east of Baltimore’s traditional central business district. Community members in the Harlem Park neighborhood, like the rest of West Baltimore, have been very supportive of the Red Line project and the proposed revitalization of the West Baltimore MARC station and have served on numerous planning and advisory committees convened to ensure that any future TOD in the area will be consistent with existing residents’ goals and objectives.

As planning for this technical assistance activity moved forward, community leadership for the process expanded to include the West Baltimore Coalition. The technical assistance team, including Smart Growth America, Strategic Economics, and Skeo Solutions, held one meeting with West Baltimore community members, one meeting with City staff representing the Planning Department and the Code Enforcement Division of the Housing Department and conducted several phone interviews with City staff as well as with Mr. Mel Freeman, Executive Director of Citizens Planning and Housing Association, a non-profit organization active in West Baltimore. Final decisions about the technical assistance activity were made in conjunction with key community members including Ms. Zelda Robinson representing the West Baltimore Coalition, Ms. Arlene Fisher and Ms. Frances Muldrow representing the Harlem Park Neighborhood Council.

The technical assistance activity was a six-hour community workshop entitled: West Baltimore Moving Forward: Implementing Solutions for Reinvestment, Revitalization and Renewal, held on Saturday March 15, 2014 at the Harlem Park Elementary School. This workshop was structured to meet three objectives: 1) provide community members with background information about TOD and the history of planning for the Red Line in West Baltimore, as well as to provide ideas about
what kind of effort is required of community members to reposition themselves to be able to successfully advance a community reinvestment objective, like bringing TOD to West Baltimore; 2) identify existing resources, including but not limited to funding sources, that could be deployed to start addressing community concerns about TOD in West Baltimore; and, 3) to start a dialogue between the community and key City staff members about what actions can be taken in the near term to assist West Baltimore in addressing its immediate issues around a lack of investment and begin to better position the community to attract new TOD and other economic development in the future as the Red Line moves from planning into construction.

This memo provides a brief summary of the context for the technical assistance, focusing primarily on the community’s immediate concerns related to current conditions in their neighborhoods and how some key issues could be addressed as part of an effort to attract new residents and new community-serving businesses in the future. These issues are also considered in light of the extensive planning that has already been done for major parts of West Baltimore, for the area immediately around the West Baltimore MARC station, and for the station areas along the planned Red Line corridor. However, this memo’s most important function is to provide a summary of the very rich and productive discussion that occurred during the technical assistance workshop. Detailed notes from the workshop as well as two presentations made to attendees, one by Ms. Arlene Fisher representing the Harlem Park Neighborhood Council and one by Ms. Dena Belzer representing the technical assistance team are attached as appendix to this memo.

2. Background: Context for the Technical Assistance Workshop

West Baltimore has been an important African American community since the late 19th century, but began to experience significant decline in the post-World War II era, especially since the 1960s. Community members consider HUD’s early federal urban renewal efforts in the Harlem Park area as well as construction of Highway 40, the “highway to nowhere,” to be the two final public policy initiatives that further accelerated West Baltimore’s disinvestment and population loss, conditions that still persist 50 years later.

However, since the late 1990s, the City of Baltimore and others have been trying to address West Baltimore’s challenges, including undertaking a series of neighborhood planning efforts. According to a study prepared by the Baltimore Neighborhood Collaborative (BNC) in 2006, between 1999 and 2004, five community plans or groups of plans were prepared for various West Baltimore neighborhoods. According to the BNC study, these plans were primarily focused on leveraging new market opportunities by creating “transit-centered community development” in West Baltimore associated with the West Baltimore MARC station and the proposed Red Line, though frequently the specific needs of the Harlem Park community were overlooked.
In 2008 the City of Baltimore conducted a comprehensive planning process for the area around the West Baltimore MARC station that included a detailed analysis of existing conditions and extensive community input. This effort produced a development strategy for the area that builds off of existing assets, including the historic Ice House building, and would include both extensive new private development as well as public infrastructure improvements.

Also in 2008, Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon held a Red Line summit intended to identify opportunities to maximize the benefits that could accrue to the West Baltimore community resulting from Red Line construction and operation. Out of this event, key stakeholders including community members, the City of Baltimore, the state of Maryland and many others wrote a Community Compact that identified a series of goals and strategies for ensuring that West Baltimore would benefit from the Red Line. In addition to seven key individuals who signed the Compact, 70 other individuals and organizations also signed onto this agreement.

Following the West Baltimore MARC station plan and the Community Compact process, the City of Baltimore’s Department of Transportation began a planning process for each station area (or in the Harlem Park case, two station areas, the Harlem Park station area planning process was combined with planning for the Poppleton station) including appointing a station area advisory committee (SAAC) for each station area along the Red Line. Each SAAC worked with the Department of Transportation to prepare a vision plan and station area design concepts. The
Harlem Park/Poppleton Vision Plan was completed in 2011 and the Harlem Park Design Concept, focusing on the area immediately adjacent to the Harlem Park Red Line station, was completed in 2012.

At the time when the Harlem Park Neighborhood Council applied for this technical assistance, the group had recently finished working on these other planning efforts. However, community members were concerned that although they had all participated in the SAAC, that neither the Vision Plan nor the Design Concept for Harlem Park began to address many of the community’s existing challenges, including the large number of vacant and boarded up buildings; the lack of access to healthy food options or to health care facilities; lack of access to stores, businesses and services to meet the community’s daily needs; poor environmental quality associated with “drive-by” and often unlicensed building demolitions which produced high lead dust content in the air and soil; etc.

Further discussions with others familiar with conditions in West Baltimore highlighted additional challenges confronting existing community residents that should also be addressed even before focusing on new development and/or significant reinvestment in large-scale commercial projects in the area.
These issues include, but are not limited to: people living in homes purchased by their parents or grandparents but where the original purchasers are deceased and there may be no clear title to the property; ground leases where the ground lease holder can no longer be identified so the property ownership is unclear; and the high rehabilitation costs associated with three-story row houses which is the predominant housing type in these neighborhoods. This last issue is challenging in two ways. First, existing homeowners cannot afford to maintain their own property; and second, the high maintenance costs prohibit long-time residents from having the opportunity to buy and control additional property in their own neighborhood. Thus local residents have limited, if any, opportunity to capitalize any market upside that might emerge over time.

3. West Baltimore Moving Forward: Implementing Solutions for Reinvestment, Renewal, and Revitalization

In preparing for the technical assistance workshop, long-time Harlem Park resident Ms. Arlene Fisher prepared a presentation that touches on West Baltimore’s challenges, but also celebrates the area’s main assets. Ms. Fisher’s key points are summarized below:

**Community Assets**

- The core neighborhoods of Midtown/Edmonson and Harlem Park, which are the primary focuses of this effort, but are also surrounded by other strong neighborhoods, all of which comprise West Baltimore.
- The Red Line Community Compact
- The Harlem Park/Poppleton Vision Plan and Design Concept Plan
- Public art in West Baltimore
- Opportunities for commercial development in historic buildings, like the Ice House
- Harlem Park and Lafayette Square
- Documented history of Harlem Park going back to the Civil War
- New investment in streetscapes, such as Fulton Avenue

**Community Challenges**

- Vacant houses and properties
- Highway 40, the “highway to nowhere”
- Lack of a clear revitalization strategy for areas not adjacent to transit lines
Looking Forward

- Learn from the past mistakes of the “highway to nowhere”
- Create the Gateway to Somewhere – future neighborhood living

Setting the Stage for Place-Based Community Revitalization

In addition to the presentation from Ms. Fisher, the technical assistance team also presented four strategies for the community to consider in creating its own action plan for moving West Baltimore forward to prepare for future TOD. These strategies are general and do not reflect the final “action plan” for the community which is shown in Section 5 below.

**Strategy 1: Use the Red Line as a “Game Changer” for Edmonson/Midtown and Harlem Park.** Although the Red Line will not be operating for another 8 years, at a minimum, as the process moves closer to construction, more investors will start investing in West Baltimore. While the City and the community have worked hard to create the West Baltimore MARC Station Area Master Plan to address some of this future development potential, that plan’s focus does not include much of Midtown/Edmonson or the Harlem Park neighborhood. Nor does the West Baltimore Marc Station Area Master Plan focus on near term strategies to stabilize conditions for current residents and long time property owners. And, just working to encourage the market to start supporting new development around the MARC station could exacerbate the challenges that existing residents and property owners could face if/when market activity does start to accelerate around the MARC station. At that point it will likely be too late to put certain programs and interventions in place that will help to support existing residents and long-time property Community members from Midtown/Edmonson and Harlem Park need to continually remind various public and philanthropic investors that it will be crucial to build on the $2.5 billion investment in Red Line construction to start leveraging benefits for the adjacent neighborhoods even in the immediate near
term to ensure that current community members can benefit from the transit investment, rather than eventually potentially becoming a victim of its success.

**Strategy 2: Start with small incremental community improvements.** Small investments that transform the “look and feel” of a neighborhood can go a long way to changing a place’s image and making it more attractive to investors. Doing smaller projects with a smaller risk profile will start to establish a track record for success in West Baltimore that will then help to decrease levels of risk for much bigger investments such as renovation and reuse of the Ice House building. And, these small investments do not necessarily need to be real estate projects. Even community gardens and street trees help and there are already grant funds available to assist with these kinds of activities.

**Strategy 3: Focus on near term “investors” who will take the risk.** Although the primary focus of the recent planning efforts has been on attracting new private sector development, in reality, public agencies, philanthropic investors, and other investors who are less sensitive to traditional market risk, such as affordable housing developers, will continue to be the near-term sources of capital for West Baltimore reinvestment activities. Community members need to recognize this and continue to partner with these entities to help set the stage for the private, more risk-sensitive investors.

**Strategy 4: Cluster your near-term improvements.** Building on the previous three strategies, the element of place or location is also critical to thinking about near-term revitalization. Focusing investments and activities in one area or location or in a few concentrated places will help build momentum and create a better picture of success for future investors. This is the way to both “show them the money” that has already been invested and demonstrate that there is, in fact, “a there there.” In the longer term, as the Red Line construction schedule is more clearly defined, the transit stations themselves could become the focal point for this investment. But in the immediate near term, there may be other places to cluster investment to build in existing momentum. A good example of this would be to continue to build on investments already being made in and around the Harlem Park Elementary School.

**Creating the Conditions for Community Reinvestment**

Based on an in-person meeting and several phone meetings with neighborhood leaders it became clear that there were some internal challenges that community leaders needed to address as well. So we created a component of the technical assistance workshop meant to strengthen community capacity to drive a successful community reinvestment, revitalization and renewal process. One consistent theme we heard from agency staff and other advocates was that West Baltimore neighborhood leaders struggled to come to consensus on their approach and way forward.

In response to these perceived challenges, Vernice Miller-Travis of Skeo Solutions offered a training segment on organizational and leadership capacity building. Because neighborhood leaders have been engaged in efforts to revitalize their communities for several decades, their level of frustration with City agencies and political leadership was very high, and their willingness to work toward consensus had been severely frayed, and frankly their faith has been tested.
The portion of the workshop agenda entitled “Creating the Conditions for Community Reinvestment” focused on the following areas:

- Creating the space for productive dialogue, discussion and engagement,
- Creating the conditions for community-led planning,
- Collaborative problem solving and consensus-based decision-making.

The elements of collaborative problem solving and consensus-based decision-making seemed particularly useful and helpful in assisting West Baltimore neighborhood leaders and residents. We provided handouts that outlined what these types of tools offer.

“Consensus is the decision-making rule that allows collaborative problem solving to work. It is a way for more than two people to reach agreement. Consensus prevents domination by the majority, allows building of trust, and the sharing of information, especially under conditions of conflict. Consensus does not mean that everyone will be equally happy with the decision, but rather there is general agreement and support that the best decisions or recommendations that can be made at the time, have been made, with the people involved. Consensus principles include:

- Consensus requires sharing of information, which leads to mutual education, which provides the basis for crafting workable and acceptable alternatives.
- Consensus promotes collaborative thinking of a diverse group and leads to creative solutions.
- Because both parties participate openly in the deliberations, they understand the reasoning behind the recommendations and are willing to support them.
- The focus for each neighborhood stakeholder should be on making good decisions for the future of their individual communities and West Baltimore overall, and that represent the best interest of their constituencies, not simply to reach an agreement.”

Additionally, Vernice led a working lunch session on “Getting to Yes,” stressing the need to be able to reach consensus and agreement on a unified strategy moving forward to garner new investment and economic revitalization of their communities. Later in the workshop a key opportunity arose to test the “Getting to Yes” approach when Tom Stosur, the Director of City Planning for Baltimore, offered to work with community members on drafting an implementation strategy that combines many of the ideas and recommendations that emerged in this technical assistance workshop combined with existing city planning and redevelopment efforts the City is pursuing. At first some workshop participants were willing to reject this offer, but after some back-and-forth all were eventually able to view this offer from the City as a significant step forward toward their ultimate goal of neighborhood revitalization and renewal.

4. West Baltimore Moving Forward Action Plan

The primary focus of this technical assistance was to help community members identify existing resources, actions, and activities that they could deploy, in partnership with others, to bridge the gap between West Baltimore’s long-term vision for itself, as identified in the plans referenced above, and the immediate opportunities that could be deployed to move the area forward to prepare for TOD with the coming Red Line station. A full list of the options and opportunities
identified during the community meeting is included in the appendix to this memo. However, the activities, ideas, and resources that were discussed can be encapsulated into six actions as shown below.

**Action 1: Build Community Capacity to address the “place-based” challenges in West Baltimore**

- The first step towards revitalizing West Baltimore must be well-organized and effective community. However, to be successful, community members must grow beyond their existing skills to be able to effectively interact with the myriad of issues and obstacles confronting West Baltimore. This could be accomplished through a series of training workshops to expose community members to new leadership models and different approaches to community revitalization. Additional topics to be covered could include: effective models of decision-making, conflict resolution, collaborative problem solving and consensus building, and equitable development. Additionally the workshops could focus on developing an action plan for community revitalization and transformation as the key outcome.
- Community members should work with existing partners, such as CHPA, to prepare a grant proposal seeking support from local sources to conduct such a targeted capacity building exercise.

**Action 2: Establish a Process for Regular and Clear Communication between All Public Agencies Active in West Baltimore (Planning, Code Enforcement, Housing, Transportation, State) and Community Residents**

- Identify an individual, either through a newly created position or by assigning an existing City staff person, to provide ongoing coordination and communication between all City departments and West Baltimore community members. This person would act as an ombudsman for the community and would work actively to further actions and activities on behalf of the community as necessary.
- Hold regular meetings to discuss code enforcement issues including demolitions and potential Vacants to Values clusters, and other activities planned for West Baltimore that impact community quality, such as the rebuilding of Harlem Park Elementary School, so that all of these actions and activities can be implemented in a well-coordinated manner with ongoing community input/awareness.

**Action 3: Stabilize Conditions on Existing Area Residents**

- Clarify property tax policy to determine if any additional tax abatements should be considered for long-time West Baltimore residents. Even if the current Homestead tax protects long-term property owners, the policy should be reviewed to ensure that if property transfers from a deceased family member to a living family member, that the living family member can retain the restricted tax rate. This change may be something that requires legislative action at the state level.
- Research and assist property owners who may have an obsolete ground lease.
- Research and assist property owners who do not have clear title to their property.
• Work with existing property owners to anticipate possible construction impacts to their property and to prepare for these impacts in advance of Red Line construction beginning (may not be necessary, this might only be relevant to the demolition that was just completed to build the parking lots for the MARC station).
• One potential partner for these kinds of activities is the Community Law Center at the University of Maryland Law Clinic.

Action 4: Compile Data to “Tell the Story” about Current Investments and Market Potential in the Area

Such data includes:
• The number of existing homeowners in the area. The area is most often described by the number of vacant lots and vacant buildings; however, it would be more productive to identify the number of current homeowners as the foundation for a resilient community.
• The number of active churches and their active membership numbers.
• MARC Train ridership, which has significantly increased, associated with the recently launched weekend service.
• Jobs accessible via the MARC Train.
• The plans for rebuilding the Harlem Park Elementary School, including the dollar value of the project.
• The number of lots in the University of Maryland’s greening program.
• The Design Center work, including the number and dollar value of street trees being planted and/or other improvements being made.
• The number of lots owned by the City/Housing Authority and what this represents as development potential.
• Catalyst projects: Pulaski Street Vacants to Values, Ice House, Acme Building, Red Line, Urban Farm/orphan Asylum project. Each of these projects probably has an estimated dollar value representing considerable potential new investment. Just being able to say that these projects are all in process has value.

Compile this information into one or more documents that can be used in outreach to various potential stakeholders including developers as well as less traditional potential investors. An example of this later group could be family members of current neighborhood residents who have moved away and/or members of neighborhood churches whose families once lived in the area but who no longer own property. Reaching out and encouraging these people to reinvest in West Baltimore would allow families with historic ties to the neighborhood to reinvest now while values are still relatively low. While it is not clear at this time who would be responsible for compiling and packing this information. Some options could include the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance, Maryland Institute College Arts, Morgan State, etc. And, some of this information is already available in existing plans including the West Baltimore MARC Station Master Plan and the GRAMA plan. Also, more relevant information will be forth coming through a market analysis currently underway for the West Baltimore MARC station area. However, one entity should be assigned to gather this information, package it, and disseminate the final product to relevant developers, investors, and others who could contribute to revitalization efforts in West Baltimore. To the extent possible, this document should be updated on a regular basis to reflect new projects and investment as the information becomes available.
Action 5: Focus on Possible Funding Sources that could be Directed to Immediate Community Needs

A partial list of possible resources includes:

- Community Reinvestment Act investment from PNC Bank
- Arts Roots Fest
- Baltimore Development Corporation
- Housing Services Alliance
- Community Schools program
- City’s Anchor Institutions Initiative

Action 6: Create an Implementation Strategy for Midtown Edmonson/Harlem Park Focusing on Joint and Coordinated City/Community Actions and Activities to Address Current Issues And Move Towards Attracting Future Investment

- Create a working group including community members and City staff to develop a strategic approach to ongoing implementation activities for the Midtown Edmonson/Harlem Park area that focus on concentrated activities for specific locations, but that leverages all of the opportunities available today including but not limited to:
  - Vacants to Value program
  - Ongoing Red Line activities
  - Baltimore’s Anchor Institutions initiative
  - The renovation or reconstruction of Baltimore Talent Development High School
  - Engage with Live Baltimore
  - Engage with the Healthy Neighborhoods program
  - Baltimore City Department of Health
  - Baltimore City Department of Planning 2014 updated Housing Market Typology, residential market analysis for the entire city

5. Conclusion

This technical assistance is the first step in a new chapter for the Midtown/Edmonson and Harlem Park Neighborhoods. These communities have struggled and suffered based on poorly conceived public investments, like the Highway 40 “Highway to Nowhere.” But, the Red Line represents a new and positive opportunity to reinvest, revitalize, and renew these two historic neighborhoods. By taking the opportunity to form a strategic implementation-oriented partnership between the City of Baltimore and these neighborhoods, West Baltimore can also become a model for early policy and investment interventions to address future potential challenges associated with gentrification and displacement by solidifying existing property ownership and looking for opportunities for long-time community residents to participate in the increasing value created by the Red Line. However, to be successful in this endeavor, both the community and the City must move beyond their old models for interacting with each other. Each group must work to maintain a strong collaborative spirit and to recognize and value the ongoing benefits of this partnership. It is in this spirit that West Baltimore will be able to create the new “Gateway to Somewhere.”
Assistance provided with grant support from US EPA’s Office of Sustainable Communities under their Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities Program.