

# ULI Baltimore Pennsylvania Avenue TAP

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An Urban Land Institute  
Technical Assistance Panel  
October 19-20, 2015



Pennsylvania Avenue Corridor:

## Restoring THE Glory

Urban Land Institute Technical Assistance Panel



ULI Baltimore

On behalf of the Baltimore Development Corporation

Pennsylvania Avenue Corridor:

# Restoring THE Glory

Urban Land Institute Technical Assistance Panel

ULI PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE TAP



**Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi**

**“It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten”**

*- Ghanaian Proverb*

## Acknowledgments

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**Baltimore Housing**

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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 30,000 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 Pennsylvania Avenue, as well as where it intersects with North Avenue. The study area—Pennsylvania Avenue from Fulton Avenue to Martin Luther King Boulevard, and North Avenue from Monroe Street to McCulloh Street, includes 2.1 miles of roadway and many of the surrounding neighborhoods. This was the second of five commercial corridors that were the focus of the LINCS (Leveraging Investment in Neighborhood Corridors) program.

The two-day TAP convened on October 19, 2015 at the St. Peter Claver Church. The Panel spent the morning touring the study area; the afternoon was devoted to interviewing stakeholders,

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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.

## What Do We Want?

When asked, residents of the neighborhoods in the Pennsylvania Avenue Corridor are very clear about what they want for their communities. Indeed, they are hungry for precisely the same things that so many Baltimore neighborhoods cry out for:

- **BASIC SERVICES** that are delivered effectively and reliably. This is particularly true for the chronic problems of trash, lighting, and vermin.
- **PUBLIC SAFETY** that protects everyone from harm. Residents have resoundingly rejected the false choice between living in anarchy and living under a police state.
- **PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION** that serves community needs. This means better service, which is easier to use and cleaner to experience.
- **NEIGHBORHOOD RETAIL** that improves community livability. This includes a sit-down restaurant, more options for groceries, and a greater variety of spending options.
- **YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES** that give children better access to educational, economic, and recreational resources.

But unlike most other neighborhoods, residents in the Pennsylvania Avenue Corridor yearn for something special, something that is profoundly unique to this particular place:

**They yearn to reclaim their proud heritage of African-American entertainment, culture, and commerce.**

And they are absolutely right to demand this.

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Forged within the cruel crucible of segregation, the Pennsylvania Avenue corridor was a vibrant place.

## The Past is the Future

Pennsylvania Avenue was once the beating heart of Baltimore's African-American community. It was the city's premier cultural and entertainment district, featuring famed nightclubs, bars, and restaurants. At a time when black performers were not allowed in white venues, the Royal Theatre showcased an astonishing array of brilliant and now-legendary talents: Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Ray Charles, Sarah Vaughan, Mahalia Jackson, James Brown, and many others.

Forged within the cruel crucible of segregation, the Pennsylvania Avenue corridor was a vibrant place of commerce, community, and culture. And the adjacent neighborhoods were home to many of Baltimore's greatest figures, from Thurgood Marshall and Cab Calloway to Billie Holliday and Kweisi Mfume.

But as the 20th Century progressed, a series of interrelated forces worked to undermine the storied legacy of "The Avenue". The gradual collapse of de jure segregation freed Black families to move into neighborhoods from which they had once been excluded, pulling middle class consumers away from Pennsylvania. Meanwhile, the economic disruptions of white flight and deindustrialization wreaked havoc on the city's economy as a whole, with particularly drastic consequences for black families.

This gradual erosion of economic strength was punctuated by the riots following the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Businesses along The Avenue were damaged, and the riots dramatically accelerated the economically destabilizing process of white flight. By the 1970s, Pennsylvania Avenue and the surrounding neighborhoods were in decline.

The responses that followed, though noble and needed, did not succeed in reversing this downward trajectory. The housing-first strategy pioneered by Sandtown Habitat for Humanity resulted in the construction of hundreds of high-quality, affordable homes, but this virtuous and important work was unable to fundamentally stabilize the area housing market. Meanwhile, in some cases city efforts made matters worse – like the urban renewal projects that tore out chunks of the historic



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The history of Pennsylvania Avenue is the single greatest asset that the neighborhoods have at their disposal.

commercial district and replaced them with apartments, or the “Highway to Nowhere” that further destabilized the West Baltimore housing market.

While local citizens still urgently need decent affordable housing, the housing-first strategy has not resulted in fundamental economic change. We must therefore reconsider what other strategies present themselves, and which untapped assets can be harnessed for positive change.

*The legendary, dynamic, and shamefully overlooked history of Pennsylvania Avenue is the single greatest asset that the neighborhoods have at their disposal.* It is a unifying principle around which divided communities can organize. It is a brand under which new businesses can grow. It is an identity that can draw customers and tourists from outside the Corridor – not to mention from around the country.

**Though battered and neglected, the storied history of Pennsylvania Avenue is far from over. Indeed, it is the very pathway to the future. What might that future look like?**



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This commerce and culture was particularly heroic because it took place in a world of segregation.

## The Path Not (Yet) Taken: Beale Street

Pennsylvania Avenue is special, but it is not unique. And so it is useful to examine other places that share a similar history.

Today, Memphis' Beale Street is a beloved destination for cultural, historical, and culinary tourism. But it is easy to forget how similar it once was to today's Pennsylvania Avenue, which makes it critical to learn the many lessons that it has to teach us.

Starting in the late 19th Century, traveling musicians found a safe place to perform on Beale Street. Over time, this evolved into a thriving cultural district, filled with bars, clubs, and the elegant Orpheum Theater. Beale Street Baptist Church served as a major anchor for the black community, and would eventually play an important role in the civil rights movement. And always, music was playing. Indeed, many of the 20th Century's greatest artists – including Muddy Waters, B.B. King, Howlin' Wolf, Otis Redding, Elvis Presley and Isaac Hayes – got their start in Memphis, and many more would come to perform on Beale Street.

This tremendous outpouring of commerce and culture was particularly heroic because it took place in a world of segregation. That said, it is also true that the ***intense concentration of business and performance on Beale Street was itself driven by segregation.*** After all, segregation limited the number of places where blacks could safely own businesses, perform, or even spend their money. It forced the black community to geographically concentrate their efforts.

When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed at the Lorraine Motel on April 4, 1964, Memphis exploded into riots and looting. Many black-owned businesses were damaged. Even worse, this event exacerbated a growing wave of white flight to the suburbs, which had already been triggered by the process of school desegregation. Over time, tens of thousands of white students left the public school system; the compact, majority-white city became a sprawling region with a majority-black core; and middle class investment evaporated, leaving the remaining Beale Street businesses in dire economic conditions.

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A municipal urban renewal campaign demolished large swaths of Beale.

By the 1970s, the bustling activity of Beale Street was replaced by vacancy and abandonment. In a misguided attempt to help, a municipal urban renewal campaign eventually demolished large swaths of Beale and the surrounding neighborhood.

Beale Street did not begin to turn around until the late 1970s, when the community formed an organization dedicated to bringing the entertainment district back to life, and empowered to acquire property and redevelop it. The Beale Street Development Corporation brought together a wide range of stakeholders and unified them around a shared vision. It then focused its efforts on two key blocks, building strength that eventually spread to adjacent areas.

In 1978, to compliment this effort, the city created the Beale Street Music Festival. Held outdoors at Tom Lee Park, the three-day festival today attracts some 100,000 people per night. It also kicks off the month-long “Memphis in May International Festival”, which includes an International Week and the World Championship Barbeque Cooking Contest, both of which end up driving tourists to Beale.

Slowly over time, the core of Beale Street began to turn around. And by the 1990s, it had become a symbol of Memphis’ overall economic development strategy: leveraging its cultural, musical, architectural, and culinary history to attract new investment in the future. In 2001, this core strategy was enshrined in a series of strict new design guidelines that made it much harder to build bland, ugly buildings which would interfere with their economic agenda. Downtown Memphis would rebuild itself by connecting its future directly to its past, and making itself a lively, vibrant center of southern culture.

At about the same time, the city partnered with the Smithsonian to create the Memphis Rock ‘n’ Soul Museum, originally housed on Beale Street itself. Then in 2004, the city opened up the FedEx Forum – a basketball arena for the new Memphis Grizzlies and the University of Memphis – right around the corner from Beale. The museum then moved into a new and expanded facility adjacent to the Forum. As a result, the businesses of Beale Street directly serve the visitors to these major regional attractions.

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Downtown Memphis would rebuild itself by connecting its future directly to its past.

Beale Street's story should sound familiar to anyone who knows the history of Pennsylvania Avenue. Both were concentrated centers of social and economic activity, built within the cruel system of segregation. Each became the cultural heart of the local African American community, and built proud legacies out of music, commerce, and the struggle for civil rights. Both were deeply wounded by the riots that followed the death of Martin Luther King Jr., and were slowly drained of economic life by the process of white flight. And both suffered from misguided urban renewal campaigns that tore out chunks of their historic fabric in the name of progress.

But, unlike in Baltimore, the people of Memphis:

- **FOUNDED** an organization capable of responding at the scale that the problem demanded, which included a range of stakeholders;
- **FOCUSED** on a well-defined geographic area within a much longer street, which still retained the historic character that had been lost elsewhere;
- **CULTIVATED** a community of businesses that rebuilt a viable new version of their lost entertainment district;
- **MARKETED** the district as a living symbol of their core city brand;
- **PROTECTED** the district with design standards that maintained its historic feel while encouraging new investment;
- **INVESTED** in major cultural events and cultural attractions that brought in local visitors and tourists; and
- **SUSTAINED** this effort for decades, keeping their eyes on the end goal even when it seemed very far away.

**The question for Pennsylvania Avenue is not whether we can do the same. The question is only: *are we going to?***



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## What Holds Us Back?

Baltimore can take the same steps that Memphis did, and Pennsylvania Avenue can be reborn like Beale Street. But to make that happen, the neighborhoods of the Corridor must first overcome a series of hurdles that stand in the way of this urgently-needed progress.

In addition to the problems that plague many city commercial districts – including, most importantly, crime – the Pennsylvania Avenue Corridor has a series of specific challenges that have prevented concerned citizens from achieving the success they desperately want. These include:

- **LOCAL SPENDING POWER.** There are not enough local residents to support the cultural and entertainment businesses that Pennsylvania Avenue deserves. In order for these businesses to be economically viable, they must be capable of *supporting and serving* the local population, while also *attracting* outside visitors.
- **LACK OF RESOURCES.** The neighborhoods, business people, and organizations in the corridor do not currently have access to (or experience in raising) the funds needed to accomplish this vision. Only an organized strategy that balances *heroic vision* with *practical feasibility* will be able to attract sufficient outside resources.
- **LOCAL CAPACITY.** While local residents are obviously dedicated, hard working, and extremely talented, many lack the capacity – or, at least, the experience – to successfully accomplish this transformation. Getting the work done will mean *attracting partners who will support the local vision without taking over the process.*
- **DISTRUST OF OUTSIDE FORCES.** Given the many abuses suffered by these communities (segregation, discrimination, disinvestment, urban renewal, inadequate city services, opportunistic post-Uprising news crews, etc.) it is completely understandable that residents would be deeply suspicious of outsiders. This is entirely natural. *But it is also an impediment to securing the resources and partners necessary to accomplish their goals.* Residents will have to balance their natural protective instincts with a clear-eyed search for useful assistance.
- **DISTRUST OF ONE ANOTHER.** The neighborhoods of the Pennsylvania Avenue Corridor are not just divided from the outside world – they are internally divided between one another. *The lack of trust between (and even within) neighborhoods is a distraction that they cannot afford. There is too much work to do.*

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## How Do We Get There?

Pennsylvania Avenue needs to follow a strategy similar to that of Beale Street. We must:

### **1. FOUND AN ORGANIZATION THAT IS EMPOWERED TO ACHIEVE THESE GOALS.**

When we make this recommendation, we do not mean that the existing nonprofit, religious, and neighborhood organizations across the Corridor are in any way inadequate. Quite the contrary – they are all doing extraordinary work, against great odds.

Nor does this suggest that existing organizations should be replaced or supplanted. Far from it. In fact, we believe that the existing Pennsylvania Avenue Collaborative, which has not always operated with the sustained enthusiasm and widespread participation that it could, is an excellent start. We encourage the neighborhoods to build it up, turning it into an even stronger and more active umbrella organization, serving the needs of all residents.

Without a strong umbrella organization, it is almost impossible for a fragmented network of neighborhood-based organizations to solve Corridor-wide problems on their own. Without one, there is no single point of contact for communicating shared needs and expectations to City government – and no shared mechanism for holding the City accountable to those needs. There is no forum for developing a shared vision for the corridor, or for coordinating efforts to make that vision a reality. There is no process for seeking shared funding, or for attracting high-quality partners.

Without a serious and sustained effort at the Corridor level, everyone will be left to fend for themselves. And neighborhoods that should be partners will end up competing for the same limited resources.

This Collaborative (or whichever organization the community chooses) must represent not one neighborhood, but the entire Corridor. It must engage not one stakeholder, but all stakeholders. It must provide a collaborative environment in which trust can be encouraged and internal conflicts can be resolved. And it must find areas of agreement around which productive work can be organized.

The city can play a role in bringing together this Collaborative by strengthening and activating the Main Street Program for Pennsylvania Avenue. In particular, the City should assist in funding a full-time Main Street Manager -- someone who represents no single neighborhood, but advocates on behalf of the Avenue as a whole. Operating within the community, the Pennsylvania Avenue Main Street Program would jumpstart a strengthened partnership between the community, merchants and city agencies to address corridor-wide problems. While each member of the Collaborative would continue to represent their respective neighborhoods, the Main Street Program Manager will tie these forces together with a focus on revitalizing the commercial corridor.

One successful model of a multi-neighborhood collaborative organization in Baltimore is the York Road Partnership, where neighborhoods on both sides of York have been working

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together to fight crime, combat problem liquor licenses, and attract investment on terms that they can agree to. Other local examples include the Southwest Baltimore Partnership and the Central Baltimore Partnership, both of which unify diverse neighborhoods around common goals.

Of course, one big difference between these examples and Pennsylvania Avenue is the lack of a major anchor institution to help shepherd the partnerships forward. In this case, we recommend that the city help local citizens to convene their partnership, and support their efforts through an activated Main Street Program. At the same time, existing City staff should be prepared to support the partnership in accomplishing its initial goals, in order to maintain momentum.

The point is that it's being done elsewhere, and it can be done here. And this TAP process provides proof the different stakeholders working in the area can come together around a shared agenda.

## 2. FOCUS ON DEFINED GEOGRAPHIC AREAS.

While meaningful progress is possible on Pennsylvania Avenue, it is not realistic to simultaneously make progress everywhere. The Corridor is simply too long, and there is too much work to do. In order to move Pennsylvania Avenue forward, we will need to strategically focus our efforts.

This means identifying nodes along the Corridor where community efforts can be concentrated, in order to build strength. Areas of strength can then be built upon so that they grow over time, and eventually connect.

It also means identifying a purpose for each node, and crafting a specific strategy for each, because no two places are ever exactly alike.

We have identified the following nodes along Pennsylvania Avenue, each of which deserves careful consideration:

### A. THE AVENUE MARKET AND SHOPPING DISTRICT

The two blocks on either side of the Avenue Market contain the grandest commercial buildings in the Corridor, and have the potential to be a thriving entertainment district. In a sense, they are identical to the two core blocks of Beale Street, which managed by chance to survive the ravages of demolition and urban redevelopment. They are the historical seed from which a future can grow.

Moreover, the nexus of this commercial district, the market, and the metro stop ought to be capable of performing at a higher level than it currently does. Making this happen will require a series of short-term improvements that create the momentum necessary for long-term change.

**New Market Storefronts.** As it is currently designed, the Avenue Market is closed off from street life, providing a barrier that discourages shoppers to step inside. We recommend converting the blank walls on either side of the front door into storefront windows, so that the items for sale are more visible. But adding glass is just a start – these



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The blocks near the Market have the potential to be a thriving entertainment district.

storefronts could also have walk-up windows, so that passers-by could be served on the street. You could then add walk-up seating, with a durable bar top and affixed stools. All of this would activate the connection between the Market and the street.

These two stalls facing Pennsylvania will be crucial for reinventing the impression that the Market has with its potential customers. It will be extremely important to consider what precise offerings they will provide. Focus groups or a market study may be helpful in making this decision, but we would consider options like quick, to-go hot sandwiches. This could include breakfast sandwiches for people racing to the bus or metro. Similarly, the Market's excellent smoothie stand might benefit from increased visibility and the capacity to interact with people as they walk by.

It will also be important to find vendors who have the creativity and vision to operate their businesses differently than the way that many stalls are currently run, even if that means taking on somewhat more risk. Finding these vendors may require looking outside the Corridor, a fact that we will discuss at greater length below.

**Arabber Produce Market.** The Avenue Market has recently opened a new stall featuring fresh produce from Whole Foods. This is a wonderful step, but there is even more that can be done to activate the market, and serve the community's need for fresh produce. This can be done by tapping into (and, in a sense, supporting) a longstanding Baltimore tradition. By igniting the city's last Arabber to show up regularly every week, at a known time, the Market can provide a unique only-in-Baltimore experience. And if the Arabber tradition is able to attract more participants, then a group of them could even create their own unique farmer's market. This would be beneficial to the Arabbers (who would receive help in marketing their goods), their customers (who would know where to find them), the Market (which needs to attract visitors), *and to the Avenue's brand as a unique cultural destination where visitors can experience the best of African-American Baltimore.*

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**Market Music Series.** Local musicians of all ages are hungry for spaces where they can perform in front of an audience. A regular calendar of performances – including jazz, hip hop, and spoken word – would help to establish the Market as a center of culture and community. This, in turn, would remind people that it can also be a center of commerce.

There are already regular concerts at the Avenue Bakery, as well as elsewhere along the Avenue. These should be coordinated so that the Avenue becomes a place where musical culture is not just remembered, but routinely happens. We will discuss this idea further in later sections.

**Upgrade the Retail Corridor.** The current retail mix on the Avenue is, by and large, indistinguishable from what you would find in most other Baltimore neighborhoods. This is not to say that they are bad. However, they do not serve to elevate Pennsylvania Avenue above any other low-income retail corridor. Nor do they provide a convincing argument for why visitors should come to the Avenue.

In order to attract customers from outside the neighborhood, there has to be something that draws them in. Conversely, when people come looking for the “real” Pennsylvania Avenue experience, they need to find businesses that meet their expectations. We will further discuss what this looks like in a later section.

As you attract these new retailers, it will also be important to upgrade the storefront facades and signage, creating a sense of lively activity. The Baltimore Development Corporation has grant funds for façade improvements, and the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development has programs like the Neighborhood BusinessWorks grant and loan program for more substantive improvements.

## B. UPTON TRIANGLE PARK

Upton Triangle Park has the potential to be a great source of value to the community, and the seed from which new investment can take place. Residents spoke enthusiastically about the community events that occasionally happen there. This park is a great asset that needs to be developed further.

Jubilee Arts forms a powerful anchor for the southeast corner of the park. But urban parks require more than just one anchor – they need strong edges on all sides. Which is to say, a successful park is about the relationship between the open space and the surrounding buildings. The surrounding buildings provide people who use the park on a daily basis, as well as watching eyes to increase safety. In this case, there is still too much vacancy to support year-round activity. At the same time, there is not enough activity to attract significant investment.

**Plan More Events.** It takes a lot of time and money to develop buildings around the park. But a regular calendar of cultural events can be started right away, for minimal expense. And the more regularly the park gets used, the more it will serve as a center for the community and a natural spot for new investment.

All manner of community events can be held there, so long as there is an organization working hard to keep the space full and occupied. Students at Jubilee Arts could hold

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Upton Triangle Park can be the seed from which new investment can take place.

outdoor performances there. There could be jazz concerts and other musical events, coordinated with similar programming at the Avenue Market and elsewhere. There can be parades, or marching band performances. In short, the park can be used much more than it currently is.

**Pop-Up Café.** While periodic or ad-hoc programming is important, it is equally important to create a regular rhythm of activity, so that people come to expect it. One option might be to establish a “Pop-Up Café” that arrived by truck and set out tables every Sunday as church lets out. Such a café could create a festive and culturally significant environment in which to gather and mingle before heading home.

In addition to establishing a regular pattern of predictable activity, a Pop-Up Café provides an economic opportunity for a local entrepreneur. It would give that person a chance to build momentum without having to invest in an actual building. But if the idea took off, then over time it could evolve into an actual bricks-and-mortar café located adjacent to (or even inside) the park.

**Arabber Produce Market (Again).** Just one or more Arabbers could show up at the Avenue Market on a regular weekly schedule, they could also build a weekly presence at the park. So long as the two events were spread out over the week, there is no reason why they would conflict with one another.

An Arabber could even arrive at Triangle Park every Sunday, coinciding with the Pop-Up Café and the end of church services. That way, each event supports the other. There could even be an open call for performers from the neighborhood, who could put out a hat and earn a few dollars by performing in public. Similarly, Jubilee Arts students could also be invited to perform (or take lessons) in the park at the same time.

**The Sphinx Club.** We are excited at the prospect of seeing the Sphinx Club reborn, and think this will be an excellent anchor for the Northern end of the park. The Sphinx could easily have a mutually beneficial relationship with a rebuilt Royal Theatre, and both could

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A reborn  
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park.

become venues for the Maryland Film Festival and other broader cultural activities. We support this project, and think this site should be redeveloped in coordination with the Christ Temple Church site next door. It is absolutely critical to have a pioneer willing to invest in commercial activity along the park, to prove it can be viable.

As the park grows more active and draws in more people on a regular basis, and as the Sphinx Club proves successful, it is possible to imagine the park supporting other retail, such as a restaurant. Again, this would have a symbiotic effect of activating the park with patrons, while also benefiting from events like the regular Sunday gatherings.

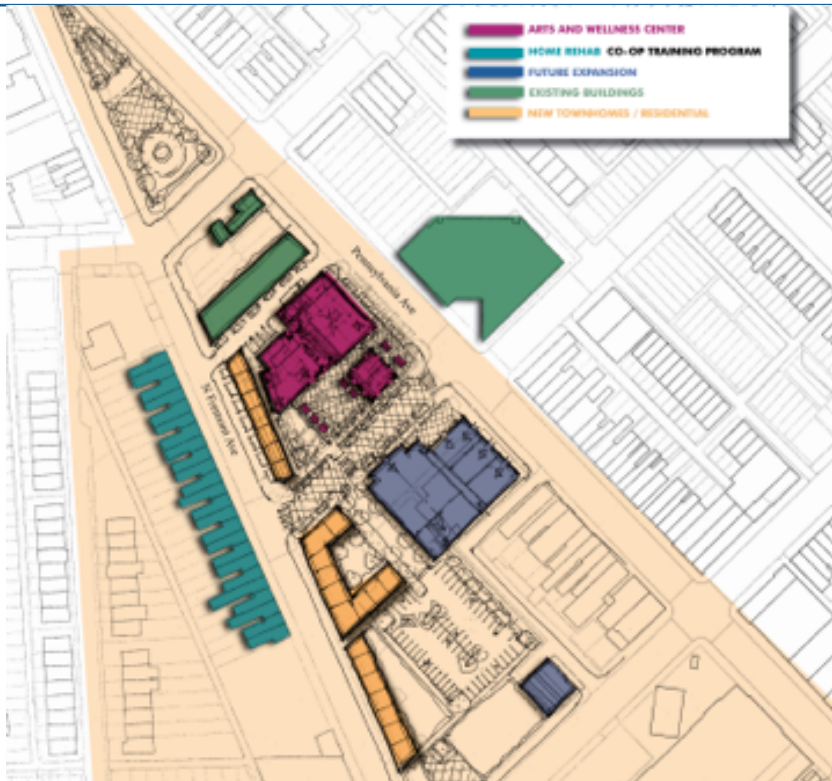
**The 1900 Block.** After the conclusion of the TAP process, we became aware of the effort to redevelop the vacant land between Jubilee Arts and Upton Boxing. Possible uses might include a bank, a construction company, job training, a business incubator, or other beneficial uses. However it turns out, this project would help to stitch together the other important uses along the block and anchor the southeast corner of the park.

**The Fan.** Once again, after the conclusion of the TAP process, we were also pleased to learn about the proposal by New Song Community Church and BCT Architects to develop a major new project on the vacant lots south of the park, known as The Fan. Serving as a new Town Center and Community Hub, The Fan will offer education, local foods, merchants, recreation, art, theater, music, and day care. Its mission will be to “create and support character-based programming and services that provide entrepreneurial, ownership, and employment opportunities. These efforts will leverage the skills, talents, and abilities of the residents of the neighboring communities so they might individually and corporately sustain strong relationships that bring hope, unity, social/cultural, and economic stability.” While the project is still in the conceptual stage, and is certain to change as time moves on, we applaud both the vision and the location, which anchors the south side of the park.



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While it will evolve over time, we applaud the vision and the location of “The Fan”.

**Relocation of Modern Junk and Salvage.** In order to support the forward-looking projects being proposed for the south side of the park, it is time to consider the relocation of Modern Junk and Salvage. This business, while useful and profitable, produces odors, noise, and grime that is not consistent with a thriving and active park environment — much less new mixed use development. There are many vacant parcels or underused buildings in the corridor, and now would be a good time for the city to begin a conversation about planning for their relocation.

## C. THE ROYAL THEATRE SITE.

Without a doubt, the Royal Theatre is the ultimate symbol of Pennsylvania Avenue’s storied past. Its demolition was a crime; its resurrection is a moral imperative. We strongly support the effort to bring back the Royal Theatre, and applaud those who have had the foresight and wisdom to make this a priority. They are correct that the Theatre should be the anchor of a broader approach to redevelopment, along with other business, cultural amenities, and activities for children. In sum, their vision is absolutely, positively, and unquestionably right.

That said, we are concerned that the current plans for a revived Royal are not in keeping with practical realities. And so, with great respect for the hard working people who have kept this dream alive, we humbly offer the following honest feedback.

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The Royal Theatre is the ultimate symbol of Pennsylvania Avenue.

For the foreseeable future, we do not believe there are enough customers to fill a several-thousand seat venue on a regular basis. After all, the original Royal Theatre only had 1,349 seats in its prime, and the Hippodrome relies on a circuit of touring Broadway musicals to fill its 2,300 seats. While we appreciate the vision, there is honestly no viable economic model for a new venue with more than twice the seating capacity of Harlem's Apollo Theater.

Nor are we certain that high-profile entertainers who currently visit Pier 6 or Ram's Head Live will trade in those successful venues for an unproven one with less visibility, even if it were in support of a noble cause. The cruel segregation which drove performers to the Chitlin' Circuit in the first place is (thankfully) a thing of the past, but this means that the Royal will have to compete for performers with a much larger set of other venues.

This is not to say that the Royal should be consigned to the dustbin of history. Far from it. But we strongly recommend a more gradual process, one that builds momentum, reestablishes a brand identity, and generates positive cash flow.

A more gradual process could look something like this:

**The Royal Concert Series.** It is worth remembering that the wildly-successful Beale Street Music Festival is held in a park every year, not in a theater. So we do not think that it is mandatory to wait for a new park to be constructed before starting music performance at Robert C. Marshall Park.

We suggest developing an inexpensive or temporary stage for recurring outdoor events at Marshall Park. This could be located at the vacant lot on Lafayette, just east of the Royal Theatre marquee. This spot, which faces the park, allows for large crowds to gather for events without interfering with recreational activities.

This stage could become the venue for a series of monthly concerts branded as the "Royal Concert Series". These concerts could cover a range of genres, and attract people from both inside and outside the neighborhood. They could even follow the successful



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model of the “First Thursday” events held in other Baltimore neighborhoods and cities across the country. Local vendors could set up tables and sell food, much as they already do for the concerts at the Avenue Bakery or Cylburn Auditorium.

While obviously not the same as a restored Royal Theatre, an outdoor concert series would give a chance to build momentum, establish a clientele, and prove the model. And it would require far less money to get started.

It is even possible that the smaller concerts we have suggested at the Avenue Market or Pennsylvania Triangle Park could also be branded under the umbrella of the Royal Concert Series, making each into a living advertisement for the site and the project.

These concerts could eventually evolve into a larger urban street festival, like SOWBOFest or Artscape.

**Transitional Space.** After the concert series has proven itself a success, we recommend moving into a smaller permanent venue, branded with the Royal name. This could even be in one of the storefronts near the Avenue Market.

A smaller, cozy venue could be a great place to attract clientele, and would not require millions of dollars of fundraising. It would be a natural extension of the momentum built by the performing arts series, and it would contribute directly to the enlivening of the commercial district. In fact, the presence of a Royal in one of the existing commercial buildings might spark someone to open up a restaurant next door.

**The Rebuilt Theatre.** After building momentum and establishing a successful (if smaller) venue, we would be thrilled to see a fully-rebuilt Royal Theatre on its original site. However, to achieve this goal will require more than just a building. It will require a team of people with the experience to program and operate performing arts centers, and the drive to do so in a location that has been sorely overlooked for too long. While we believe such people certainly exist, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of building a team in addition to a physical structure.

One way to bring this about might be to attract an existing cultural or historical venue, such as an African-American history museum, to the Avenue. By building the Theater right next to the museum, the two could support one another, while the museum provided the operational capacity to program and operate the theater. This clustering would then encourage other businesses to open nearby.

## D. THE NORTH AVENUE INTERSECTION

This intersection is critical for three important reasons. First, it is a major gateway where the Pennsylvania Avenue Corridor becomes visible to the rest of the City. Second, it is a principal connection point to bus, rail, and East/West automobile traffic. And finally, in the wake of the 2015 Uprising, this intersection represents an important historical landscape. Unfortunately, the intersection under-performs in all three categories.

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The North Avenue intersection is a critical gateway and historical landscape.

**Build a Stronger Gateway.** Although the library and the Arch Social Club are fantastic buildings, the intersection as a whole does not serve as an attractive and visible gateway, announcing that visitors have arrived at an important and beloved community. The new mural on the Arch Social Club building is an excellent start, but much more can be done to express pride, identity, and history.

In addition, the intersection lacks proper crosswalks, pedestrian improvements, plantings, and public art. We appreciate the designs in the West North Avenue Streetscape Conceptual Master Plan, and encourage the city to make them a reality. But at the same time, we feel that even more can be done to emphasize the importance of this intersection.

For example, the center of the intersection can be painted with a large mural expressing pride of place. While the mural would certainly have to be repainted every few years, this is an inexpensive way to attract attention and interest.

**Improve Transit.** Although residents have access to both bus and rail transit options (something that many neighborhoods would love), the overall conditions are extremely poor.

- **Bus Service.** Bus service is inadequate, and users are often crowded on the sidewalk under the hot sun or the driving rain, next to lanes of speeding traffic. There are not enough shelters for the ridership, and not sufficient attention given to the rider experience. We strongly hope that the new Baltimore Link strategy will provide an opportunity to provide stronger, more attractive, and more efficient bus service at this intersection.
- **Metro Service.** Similarly, the metro station is dirty and lacks adequate maintenance. It is a shame that such a valuable (and expensive) asset has been allowed to run down. The City Council members whose constituents use the station should put pressure on MTA to improve the quality of its maintenance and operations, which once again inadvertently communicate disdain and indifference to metro users.

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- **Transit-Oriented Development: Library.** In addition to these maintenance and operational failings, the intersection is not supported by adequate Transit-Oriented Development (TOD). Which is to say that there are not enough jobs, residents, or activities at this intersection.

There are certainly barriers to creating more TOD. The rebuilt CVS on the Northeast corner is unlikely to be much more than a single-story pharmacy for the foreseeable future. The Department of Health and Mental Hygiene facility on the Northwest corner is unlikely to move. And the storefronts on the Southwest corner are all individually owned, and so would be a challenge to redevelop. Each of these represent long-term options, but are not immediate opportunities.

That said, there is an immediate opportunity to make progress on the Southeast corner: by enhancing the already-wonderful library, and making it into an even larger and more valuable community anchor providing Transit-Oriented residential or office space.

The City of Milwaukee is no longer building its own libraries. Instead, it now partners with developers to house its libraries *within multi-story, mixed-use buildings*. For example, the Villard Square Branch houses a 12,770 sf library beneath three stories of apartments designed for grandparents raising their grandchildren. The Library's rent supports the cash flow of the larger project, which literally connects families in need with learning and support services.

On North Avenue, we could easily imagine an expanded regional library on the ground floor of an affordable apartment complex. In fact, we could imagine *a fully-integrated Library/Health Department complex* anchoring the ground floor, where the programs provided by each reinforce and connect with one another.

In short, *we must rethink the very concept of what a 21st Century library looks like*. This could mean combining library services with housing, office space, retail space, or other nontraditional components. For example, the Houston Public Library has partnered with the local Food Bank to provide 50,000 pounds of fresh food to families, along with a comprehensive program built around nutrition and fitness. The Denver Public Library provides a week-long technology summer camp where minority children work with professional mentors to learn web development, code their own websites, and tour local tech companies. And the Dayton Metro library created an entire special collection for local authors and artists, so that nearby residents could share their various talents with one another even if they were not formally published. The Urban Libraries Council tracks innovative programs from city libraries around the country, and Baltimore ought to be first among them.

- **Transit Oriented Development: Other Sites.** In addition to the Library site, there are several other privately-owned properties that could be redeveloped as TOD projects. In the medium term, we suggest working with the property owners to reimagine their properties as mixed-use sites with increased density. Depending upon market conditions at the time, it may even be possible to include some retail. None of

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these sites are perfect, and it is unfortunate that the CVS that faces the Penn North metro station was redeveloped as a single story building. But it would also be a shame to underdevelop other nearby properties – or worse, to let them languish within sight of a metro stop that could connect people to jobs.

It is also worth noting that the Ruppertsberger and Sons slaughterhouse operating in Penn North has presented a longstanding challenge for the surrounding residents. While we support local businesses, and wish to see them prosper in Baltimore, perhaps there might be a way to jointly relocate the slaughterhouse and Modern Junk and Salvage to a new location where they can grow their businesses without routinely coming into conflict with residents.

**Commemoration of the Uprising.** It goes without saying that the dramatic events of the 2015 Uprising were historic in scope, and that their consequences are still being felt. And, given the intense media scrutiny that landed (however briefly) on this intersection, the location is now familiar to people around the world who might otherwise have never known of it.

This creates an opportunity – and, perhaps, a corresponding obligation – to embody that history into the intersection itself, and frame the Uprising for future generations.

We would not presume to suggest what that message would be, or how it should be expressed. But there are many talented artists in West Baltimore who will certainly have ideas, and we encourage the city to seek funding to create a commemorative and interpretive work of public art.

We cannot allow the events of 2015 to recede from memory through inaction. Nor can we allow them to be defined exclusively by people from outside the community where they principally took place.

### 3. CULTIVATE THE RIGHT BUSINESSES.

At the early stages of the Avenue's transformation, *it is critical to shock the market with success*. The market is fickle, and so success is imperative. It must win by not failing.

In order to avoid early failures, the business district must be highly strategic. They must cultivate a series of carefully chosen businesses that can overcome the odds, shock the market, and set the stage for further growth.

Here is what they should look like:

- **They reflect the long-term vision for the Avenue, but respond to today's market realities.** A high-end restaurant might reflect community aspirations, but is certain to fail under current conditions. Likewise, a pawnshop might be very successful, but would not advance the higher vision for the Avenue. The community must thread this needle carefully, finding businesses that work today but also take the Avenue forward.
- **Their owners have the capacity to succeed.** While some local residents meet this description, it may also be necessary to find entrepreneurs from outside the neighborhood that will work collaboratively with the community on a shared vision. For

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example, it may be worth talking with the successful Caribbean-influenced groceries and eateries in Pimlico. In particular, it might be useful to seek out *former residents who have moved away*, but are now willing to bring their resources and experience back to the community (as took place at the Avenue Bakery).

- **They serve the community while also attracting customers from other neighborhoods.** Every successful Main Street in Baltimore makes money because it attracts customers from outside the neighborhood. This does not mean that they forget about their local residents; it simply means that local residents alone cannot keep upscale bars, restaurants, and music venues open. This is an economic reality. In order to succeed, they must draw from a much larger pool of customers. Local residents can then be beneficiaries of these establishments without the burden of having to support them alone.
- **They fill a strategic gap, offering what people in West Baltimore want, but can't get.** The success of the Avenue Bakery is the result of hard work and culinary talent. But it is also rooted in strategic opportunity: many African-American households are eager to buy high quality, affordable, and culturally relevant baked goods, and surprisingly few businesspeople have tried to fill that need. Any individual family may not have much to spend, but there are many of them, and almost no competition. The Avenue Bakery has a virtual monopoly in all of West Baltimore.

Pennsylvania Avenue can grow by plugging these strategic holes, and *becoming the place where African American households can get things they can't get elsewhere. Which is to say, by reclaiming the Avenue's historic role.*

Other options could include a breakfast restaurant; a moderately-priced sit-down dinner restaurant; and a barbeque restaurant (especially if it also did catering). Each of these could be occasionally paired with live performances, providing a Jazz Brunch, Dinner Cabaret, and Blues Barbeque.

We think that Baltimoreans with a cultural memory of going to Pennsylvania Avenue for dining and entertainment would be hungry to support these kinds of establishments, especially if their decorations included historic photographs and memorabilia.

We believe there are many ways to seek out the businesses that are needed here, and to support them so that they are successful. The community should start by visiting other places where this kind of work has taken place, and learn from their experience. They may also need to partner with successful developers who are willing to work within goals established by the community.

There may also be untapped resources available to help businesses thrive. These could include entrepreneurship training through Coppin, UB, MICA, or BCCC. It could also include a partnership with the Peabody Institute, which may be able to provide musical performers or suggest funding sources for cultural activities.



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## 4. MARKET THE DISTRICT.

Pennsylvania Avenue needs to develop a strong and resonant brand that boldly reclaims its historic role as the cultural heart of Baltimore's African American community. But this brand then needs to become visible – not just in brochures, but in advertising, on the web, and in social media. The brand must be actively marketed to customers across the city, supporting new businesses as they come in. The Pennsylvania Avenue Collaborative and/or Main Street Program should lead this effort, but as more cultural activities are brought online they can eventually be supported by the Baltimore Office of Promotion and Arts.

Meanwhile, ***the brand must be reflected in the physical architecture of the Avenue.***

This means encouraging businesses to decorate with murals and photographs, and to install colorful neon signs rather than cheap plastic ones. It also means getting the city to invest in streetscaping that reflects local history and brand, so that visitors feel they have entered a special and distinctive location. Local artists could install music-themed art in key locations. Crosswalks could be re-painted to show musical scales instead of just stripes. Public infrastructure must begin to emphasize specialness and vitality.

Regardless of the details, Pennsylvania Avenue must feel like a place of heritage and vitality, and it must be communicated as such. Nothing must be allowed to undermine the brand – no ugly buildings, no unrelated investments, no contrary messages. There must be clarity.

## 5. PROTECT THE DISTRICT

One tragedy of Pennsylvania Avenue is that its once-great architecture has been ravaged by neglect and demolition. Efforts to save the Avenue by tearing it down may have been well-intentioned, but they were not long-term solutions. History is the one great asset we have to work with, and that history becomes more theoretical and less tangible with every lost building.

The Avenue must be protected with specific historic guidelines that protect historic buildings from demolition, and clear design guidelines that make sure new construction and renovation enhances the character of the district.

In particular, it will be critical to encourage façade improvements, high quality signs (including bright lights and neon), well-lit marquees, and other elements of a bold and inviting historic district. U Street in Washington, D.C. provides an excellent example of how quality design encourages street life and attracts customers.

These design guidelines for private property must be supported by high quality public infrastructure. As mentioned above, this means paying careful attention to streetscaping, lighting fixtures, and street furniture. Each element must contribute to a sense of history and celebratory purpose.

Design standards, when done correctly, can maintain the historic character of the area, attract visitors, and encourage new investment.



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Baltimore should move the African American Heritage Festival to Pennsylvania Avenue.

## 6. INVEST IN THE DISTRICT.

Beale Street didn't come to thrive on its own. It was supported by investments in a series of major cultural events that drove visitors to the area. These events elevated its brand, while supporting its businesses.

**The African American Heritage Festival.** Just as Memphis created the Beale Street Music Festival, *Baltimore should move the African American Heritage Festival to Pennsylvania Avenue.* This will not be an easy change, and it cannot happen overnight. But in the big picture, it is critical to physically reconnect this contemporary celebration of black culture with the living legacy and historical tradition of Pennsylvania Avenue.

While the logistics would obviously be different, there are actually wonderful opportunities from moving the Festival. The North Avenue intersection could be closed off and reclaimed as a temporary gathering spot for music and dancing – just as it was used for during the best and most positive moments of the 2015 Uprising. This location could become a central focus for intense activity, transforming each year into Baltimore's own version of Congo Square – the famous site of culture, performance, and community at the heart of New Orleans.

Bands and speakers could perform at the Arts Social Club, with crowds spilling out into the street. Literacy programs and voter registration could take place at the library. For a few brief days, the entire intersection could be transformed into something incredible.

Vendors could line the sides of Pennsylvania Avenue, selling goods and food. Artists from Jubilee Arts could fill Legends Park, along with marching bands and student performers from the local schools. The Park could also house a stage for professional music performers.

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The Avenue Market could also be transformed into a location filled with temporary food stalls, flanked on either side by Arabbers selling fresh fruit. Visitors wishing to travel easily between the Market to North Avenue could simply take the metro.

One stage for this event would obviously be at the Royal Theatre site, allowing huge crowds to gather at the park for entertainment as they learned about the history of the Avenue. For a few brief days each year, the Royal would be reborn.

The logistics of this move are not as hard to manage as they would first appear. Pennsylvania Avenue is accessible from Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard from the South, North Avenue from the North, and by Metro for people arriving from Randallstown or East Baltimore. There are established bus routes. Parking could be accommodated in the nearby streets or at State Center.

In short, the idea seems crazy, until you realize that it is entirely possible. The black community of central Maryland could take action to celebrate its proud history while simultaneously reclaiming and supporting that very history. From that perspective, it seems far less crazy than holding the event in a parking lot.

## 7. SUSTAIN THIS EFFORT.

This work will not happen overnight. But Beale Street proves that it can happen, as does U Street and many other similar examples across the country.

## The Steps Are Clear.

There must be an organization that can make decisions and take action. There must be a strong vision. There must be credible business and development partners who can accelerate this process and support the local community. There must be branding and marketing, supported by quality design, major events, and new institutions.

If the community takes these steps, then our panel of experts believes fully that Pennsylvania Avenue can rise again. Especially if they are supported by a city government that collaborates with the community and helps move their vision forward.

But even with all this in place, understand that it may take a generation to get Pennsylvania Avenue fully back on its feet. It will not happen overnight, and there will be setbacks. It will take a huge amount of work, carried out over the course of many years.

**We believe this noble goal is worthy of such sustained effort.**

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**Urban Land Institute** **Baltimore**

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