PATHWAYS TO OPPORTUNITY: PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION FOR REVITALIZING THE ROSEMONT-WALBROOK NEIGHBORHOOD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

The purpose of the report is to provide neighborhood and institutional leaders in the development of the Neighborhood University Initiative (NUI) in the Rosemont-Walbrook neighborhood. Increasing opportunity in disinvested core areas is a dynamic challenge. To assist the NUI with their goals, the Kirwan Institute offers this position paper as a resource for policy makers, funders and local leadership. It provides a wider framework for understanding this particular physical environment, local organizations, community culture, and leadership.

The report focuses on providing an objective view of how other places are reshaping neighborhoods through university and neighborhood partnerships. The report shares insights from the perspective of the neighborhood’s champions and critically examines the NUI proposed actions through a structural lens. We believe this framework is critical to reinforcing the connection between neighborhoods and opportunity. As part of our research, we interviewed residents, city and non-profit administrators, and owners of neighborhood assets. Lastly, we provide a targeted assessment of best practices by similar neighborhood revitalization efforts and a series of recommendations for building on and strengthening the NUI plan.

Our goal in this process was to demonstrate the benefits of a partnership between the neighborhood and institutions using our Communities of Opportunity lens. However, execution in the NUI framework will be the result of partners, institutions, relationships and as-
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sets. The NUI, self-described principles of “Anticipate, Stimulate and Engage,” is a call to action we believe has the fundamentals to increase access and proximity to high-opportunity structures for the neighborhood, centered on the North Avenue corridor.

WHAT’S WORKING

Our findings reveal a strong optimism among area stakeholders and investors. The most noted opportunities and assets include:

- North Avenue corridor is one of only a few in Baltimore which runs nearly the length of the entire city
- In the focus area, a number of businesses are owned by people from Asia, Africa and by African Americans
- Along its northern boundaries, there is a strong homeownership contingent, primarily by older, long-time residents of the neighborhood
- The area has a strong aesthetic, educational and commercial base, including the Mellon Institute, Glynns Falls, Coppin State and Mondawin Mall
- Coppin State University is regarded for its role as liaison and partner because of its education-related outreach (i.e., taking over two state watch list schools in the neighborhood and improving them).

DEVELOPMENT AREAS

The potential of the neighborhood, however, is being held back - muted by limited resources, fear in the neighborhood of crime and drugs, and the threat of potential institutional exclusion of residents in neighborhood decision-making. The development areas of greatest concern by stakeholders and investors include:

- Lack of a clear lead revitalization agency
- Neighborhood character
- Lack of land assembly tools
- Capital needs
- Leadership pipeline and coalitions
- Building trust between generations

CONVERT DEVELOPMENT AREAS TO NEIGHBORHOOD ASSETS

Turning development areas into opportunity-enabling assets will require a flexible and comprehensive policy and investment framework. The Kirwan Institute’s extensive work in the implementation of the Communities of Opportunity model provides the NUI with the grounding necessary to turn policy into action using the region wide asset base. Our general recommendations are:

- Define success before intervening. A shared vision of a successful neighborhood or community is needed to convene and effectively engage the various stake-
holders. The goal should be focused on promoting sustainable community revitalization, not gentrification, which would displace existing residents.

- *Make equity, “fairness” and inclusion explicit goals.* Equity, fairness and inclusion must be explicit goals for neighborhood and community revitalization. Revitalization must seek to produce mixed income communities and infuse neighborhoods with a variety of housing options. Efforts should also reinforce existing social networks and organizations in the community, while attempting to connect marginalized and impoverished residents to opportunities.

- *Adopt a long-term approach.* Neighborhood distress did not occur quickly in marginalized communities, but represents decades of disinvestment, segregation and decline. Therefore, successful community revitalization will require a long-term approach and strategy.

- *Support establishment of anchor institutions.* Successful revitalization initiatives often involve anchor developments in the community. Highly visible and targeted investments can spur nearby private investment and provide a positive physical sign of reinvestment to encourage the private sector. Revitalization efforts must seek out these potential highly visible, targeted investments for distressed communities.

### PROPOSED INTERVENTIONS

From the outset, the NUI was framed as a bridge to a higher opportunity for the Rosemont-Walbrook neighborhood. Enough emphasis can not be placed on the ‘equity’ investment this vehicle represents both in its ability to assist in attracting capital, and, in the effort to increase economic and social inclusion for area residents.

- *Connect development initiatives:* Trying to create a new path for the neighborhood’s social, economic and health concerns is a dynamic process carried out both formally and informally. It also should be carried out in a holistic way: tying housing opportunities to high-achieving schools, for example. No one committee can do it all, but it can create options for utilizing specialist knowledge and connecting knowledge, capital and commitment.

- *Develop an intermediary agency:* Our findings point to the need for intermediaries that are well staffed, well resourced, and empowered to carry out complex, long-term revitalization projects.

- *Define organizational culture and train leadership:* Having a more representative balance of leadership is critical to creating and sustaining the sense of ownership for the neighborhood. This is particularly critical as many people outside of the neighborhood’s core leadership do not formally own property in the neighborhood.

- *Encourage and constructively manage disagreement:* Proper management and expertise can turn disagreements into productive outcomes. An emphasis on visioning – defining successful outcomes – and on developing capacity and consensus are linked objectives that require trust and coalition building.

- *Messaging and Feedback:* Clearly and simply articulate the core values, goals and goals of the NUI, and benchmark its progress.
The Neighborhood University Initiative (NUI) is a community based strategy to build partnerships between Coppin State University, Baltimore City, and non-profit organizations towards physically revitalizing the North Avenue Corridor, which encompasses the 2700 – 3100 blocks of North Avenue. The NUI’s primary goal is to create a mixed income community that connects residents to affordable housing, high performing schools, quality childcare and early childhood education, and responsive health care. The key catalyst for the NUI is the North Avenue and Hilton Merchants Association Task Force, a community based organization that is working to improve the life outcomes for low-income children and families living along the corridor and surrounding communities.

AUTHORS

Denis Rhoden Jr., AICP
Research Associate

Jason Reece, AICP
Senior Researcher

Christy Rogers
Research Associate

Jillian Olinger
Graduate Research Associate

Chauncey Robbs
Graduate Research Associate

Malik Jordan
Jordan & Associates Consulting

John A. Powell
Executive Director

Andrew Grant-Thomas
Deputy Director