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Mayor

PLANNING COMMISSION

Wilbur E. "Bill" Cunningham, Chairman

STAFF REPORT



Thomas J. Stosur
Director

January 12, 2017

REQUEST: John Eager Howard Elementary School INSPIRE Neighborhood Plan

RECOMMENDATION: Approval and Adoption

STAFF: Mary Colleen Buettner

PETITIONERS: Department of Planning at the request of the community organizations and institutional stakeholders of the John Eager Howard Elementary School INSPIRE area

OWNERS: Mayor and City Council and Multiple Private Property Owners

SITE/ GENERAL AREA

Site Conditions: John Eager Howard Elementary School is located in the Reservoir Hill neighborhood of Central West Baltimore at 2011 Linden Avenue. The primary INSPIRE Plan area (the quarter mile radius) consists of a large portion of the Reservoir Hill neighborhood as well as small parts of the Bolton Hill, Madison Park, and Druid Heights communities. The half-mile radius around the school encompasses the entire Reservoir Hill neighborhood and larger portions of the neighborhoods listed above, in addition to parts of Penn North and Upton. The Department of Planning chose to focus primarily North of North Avenue – in Reservoir Hill and Penn North – because that is where most students attending John Eager Howard come from and that's where the strongest opportunity to leverage the school investment resides. Westside Elementary School, in the Penn North neighborhood, has closed and students previously zoned for that school now attend John Eager Howard. While their new building is under construction, John Eager Howard students are temporarily attending school in the Westside building. Children in Reservoir Hill, Penn North and other surrounding neighborhoods will be attending the modernized John Eager Howard Elementary School. The approximate street boundaries are Ducatel Street on the north, Lennox Street on the south, Linden Avenue on the west, and Brookfield Avenue on the east.

General Area: The INSPIRE plan area mainly encompasses Reservoir Hill. The area is primarily residential with a mixture of low, moderate, and middle-income households; however, it also includes a small amount of commercial and institutional properties as well as a community farm and a variety of parks. Reservoir Hill has many large, historic homes, most of which are well maintained. The neighborhood has seen public and private re-investment over the last two decades, resulting in an increase in homeownership and a decrease in vacant buildings. The few remaining vacant buildings are either actively being renovated or are being addressed by the Reservoir Hill Improvement Council and the Baltimore Housing's Code Enforcement Division. In contrast, Penn North continues to struggle with the impact of decades of disinvestment in its housing stock and infrastructure, despite excellent transit access and proximity to Druid Hill

Park. The neighborhood has both pockets of high homeownership and relatively high rates of vacancy.

One of the few areas of concentrated vacancy in Reservoir Hill is along Callow Avenue. To begin to address this, a partnership between Druid Heights Community Development Corporation, Inc. (DHCDC), Healthy Neighborhoods Inc., and the Reservoir Hill Improvement Council, created the Reservoir Hill Rehabilitation Project. The Project is restoring 21 single-family homes on the 2200-block – just one block northeast of the school – and is working closely with the Baltimore City Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation to carry out best practices for historic preservation.

There are two parks with-in the quarter-mile radius around John Eager Howard, offering a variety of outdoor recreation opportunities. The John Eager Howard Park, directly adjacent to the school property, was recently renovated and includes a new playground and basketball courts. There is an open field on the school property which the community has a desire to upgrade into a youth sports field available for league play. The community and the Neighborhood Design Center are developing a Master Plan for German Park, located on Linden and Whitelock behind the St. Francis Neighborhood Center and adjacent to Whitelock Farm. This will develop a plan for the entire park, adding to a playground recently built by KaBOOM! and the Baltimore Ravens. INSPIRE bond funding will support capital improvements identified in the German Park Master Plan.

John Eager Howard Elementary School is also near the Whitelock Community Farm and the new community-managed, flexibly-used open space across the street. Druid Hill Park is adjacent to the Reservoir Hill and Penn North neighborhoods and offers walking trails, the Howard Peters Rawlings Conservatory, playgrounds, ball fields, and Safety City, a Department of Transportation-run program teaching children how to safely cross the street and bicycle. These neighborhoods, however, lack safe, comfortable pedestrian connections directly to Druid Hill Park.

There are multiple unique development opportunities in the INSPIRE area, some of which are actively underway. Directly across Lennox Street from the school is Madison Park North – an eight-acre site of vacant apartment buildings. Many of the school site plan elements along Linden and Lennox were designed to create a strong relationship to new development on that site. Demolition on the Madison Park North site has begun making way for a mixed-use project including a technology and incubator facility, retail, supermarket, 300-500 apartments, and a health care facility.

The “Mount Royal Mansion,” located at 2001 Park Avenue, is one of the oldest structures in the neighborhood. The Reservoir Hill Improvement Council occupies the bottom level as their offices of this City-owned building, but it is otherwise mostly vacant and requires extensive capital improvements. The City, community, and other stakeholders would like the building to continue to serve the public in some way in the future. As part of the Mount Royal Terrace Local Historic District and the Reservoir Hill National Register District, future development may be eligible for local, state, and federal rehabilitation tax credits.

Reservoir Hill and Penn North are close to multiple transit options, including bus routes, light rail, and metro service. The neighborhoods are also close to I-83. Whitelock Street is an important street linking the Westside school community in Penn North and the John Eager Howard school community in Reservoir Hill. This would be an excellent candidate for utilizing Complete Streets principles for roadway improvements to accommodate all users. It is already a multi-modal corridor serving as a primary walking route for the students, a bus route, and it is a link within the community to the Penn/North Metro station at Pennsylvania and North avenues. In the Baltimore Bicycle Master Plan Whitelock Street is proposed as a Neighborhood Route to receive bicycle upgrades potentially as a bike boulevard or a bike cut-through.

Both neighborhoods experience a large amount of cut-through traffic and speeding issues on small neighborhood streets. The demographic analysis of the plan area shows that there is low car ownership in this portion of the city. Additionally, many students within the John Eager Howard school zone do not qualify for school bus service. These factors, along with safety concerns, point to the need to develop solutions to make travel to and from school safer for children, especially in the winter months when it gets dark early.

CONFORMITY TO PLANS

The request conforms to the goals and objectives of the Baltimore City Comprehensive Master Plan, specifically:

- **LIVE Goal 1: Build human and social capital by strengthening neighborhoods.**
 - Objective 1: Expand Housing Choices for all Residents
 - Strategy 6: Create and preserve mixed-income neighborhoods in Competitive, Emerging and Stable neighborhoods with targeted disposition of City properties.*
 - Objective 2: Strategically Redevelop Vacant Properties throughout the City
 - Objective 3: Maintain and create safe, clean and healthy neighborhoods.
 - Strategy 1: Implement Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) Standards.*
 - Strategy 2: Target housing and sanitation code enforcement using the Housing Typology*
 - Objective 4: Target Neighborhood Planning to Leverage Investment

The request conforms to the goals and objectives of the Baltimore Sustainability Plan, specifically:

- **CLEANLINESS GOALS: Towards Our Vision of a CLEAN Baltimore**
 - Goal 1: Eliminate litter throughout the City of Baltimore
 - Goal 2: Sustain a clean and maintained appearance of public land
 - Goal 3: Transform vacant lots from liabilities to assets that provide social and environmental benefits.
- **GREENING GOALS: Towards Our Vision of a GREEN Baltimore**
 - Goal 1: Double Baltimore's Tree Canopy by 2037
 - Goal 3: Provide safe, well-maintained recreational space within ¼ mile of all residents.
- **TRANSPORTATION GOALS: Towards Our Vision of a MOBILE Baltimore**
 - Goal 2: Make Baltimore bicycle and pedestrian friendly.

ANALYSIS

The 21st Century School Buildings Program

In the fall of 2010, groundwork was laid to address Baltimore City's aging and inadequate public school buildings. Communities, education advocacy groups, the school system, and other stakeholders built a coalition of support for legislation and funding to modernize Baltimore's public schools. The promise of replaced and renovated schools is meant to help transform student opportunities and achievement, provide jobs and resources to families, and help revitalize neighborhoods.

INSPIRE Mission and Objectives

Each modernized 21st Century school represents tens of millions of dollars of public investment in the neighborhood it serves.

To leverage this investment, and to enhance the connection between the schools and the surrounding neighborhoods, the Department of Planning launched a new program called INSPIRE, which stands for Investing in Neighborhoods and Schools to Promote Improvement, Revitalization, and Excellence. This planning program focuses on the neighborhoods surrounding each of the schools, specifically in the quarter-mile radius around the schools.

Focusing on a limited geographic area allows plans to concentrate impact around the school so that assets and investments support the school as a community resource, build on each other, and continue to expand further into the neighborhood. Recommendations in the plan don't simply stop at a quarter-mile marker; a guiding principle is considering concentration of impact. In this way, the INSPIRE plans respond to the aspirations of the neighborhood and school stakeholders in a way that is achievable.

INSPIRE plans seek to lead to improvements in the environment and in the quality of life for students, their families, and neighborhood residents. The plans will also articulate the community's long-term vision for guiding private investment, and address environmental, social, and economic conditions.

John Eager Howard Elementary School INSPIRE Process

Between August 2014 and July 2016, Department of Planning staff worked with members of the school and neighborhood communities to better understand their neighborhood experiences, concerns, and needs. Through community workshops, surveys, and walking tours, stakeholders have helped inform the recommendations presented here. Feedback from over 250 residents and stakeholders informed the plan.

- The Department of Planning conducted five "walkability" tours from August 2014 through June 2016. The first two, focused on the area between Westside and John Eager Howard, included community members, school staff, institutional partners, and core stakeholders. Three additional walking tours were conducted around both schools with core stakeholders and staff from city agencies.

- INSPIRE workshops were held in September 2014 (to identify existing conditions and map assets) and February 2015 (to collect information to inform recommendations in areas of Housing, Sanitation, Transportation, Public Safety, Recreation, and Open Space).
- The Department of Planning administered a survey to parents, family members, and teachers during student pick-up and drop-off in front of John Eager Howard Elementary School. The survey was also distributed at a Reservoir Hill Improvement Council meeting, and it was available online. DOP received 99 responses.
- Between January and November 2016 the Recommendation Report, Implementation Table, and Community Project Ideas were shared with various representatives from the school, neighborhood, elected officials, and stakeholder organizations. DOP gathered feedback and prioritized recommendations at several Reservoir Hill Improvement Council Meetings and Penn North Community meetings. Both community groups served as excellent partners for the INSPIRE process and graciously opened their community meetings to the surrounding neighborhoods.
- Students from Morgan State University’s Undergraduate Architecture and Environmental Design Program worked on two important community sites, German Park and the Mt. Royal Mansion, within the INSPIRE area in their Design Studio.

Staff from City agencies, including the Department of Planning, Housing and Community Development, Baltimore Development Corporation, Department of Transportation, Department of Recreation and Parks, and the Department of Public Works also participated in meetings and/or the walking tour, and worked with the Planning Department staff to address stakeholder priorities.

Recommendations

There are two categories of recommendations, Primary Walking Routes Standard Improvements, and John Eager Howard Area Recommendations.

Primary Walking Routes Standard Improvements

To strengthen the connection between the school and community, the first set of recommendations focuses on blocks that have been designated as “primary walking routes.” Standard improvements along these routes will help ensure that students and other community members have safer and more walkable access to the school.

Through commitments from many City agencies, these key improvements will be made along the primary walking routes:

- Bringing sidewalks up to a safe and standard condition
- Repainting or adding crosswalks
- Installing or repairing ADA ramps at intersections
- Marking Safe Routes to School footprints
- Assessing crossing guard deployment
- Pruning and planting street trees
- Assessing street lighting
- Boarding open vacant buildings
- Picking up trash and maintaining vacant lots

John Eager Howard Area Recommendations

To address environmental, social, and economic conditions, and to help guide future investment, the second set of recommendations is divided into six goals. Recommendations for the John Eager Howard Elementary School Planning Area fall under these goals and strategies:

- **Invest in Housing and Market-Strengthening Development Opportunities**
 - Support and Increase Homeownership
 - Remove Blight
 - Create and Maintain High-Quality Rental Housing
 - Promote Large-scale and Strategic Development Opportunities
- **Create Sustainable Neighborhoods**
 - Turn Blighted Vacant Lots into Positive Uses and Contribute to the Green Network
- **Improve Sanitation**
 - Keep the Neighborhoods Clean
- **Improve Resident Safety**
 - Implement Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) Practices
 - Work with the School, Central and Western Police Districts
- **Create Opportunities for Health and Wellness**
 - Increase Use of Parks and Playgrounds
 - Enhance Healthy Food Environment
- **Create Connections and Access**
 - Improve Walking and Biking Access and Safety in Neighborhoods

NOTIFICATIONS

Staff has notified by email the Reservoir Hill Improvement Council, Penn North Community Association, Druid Heights Community Development Corporation, Mount Royal Community Development Corporation, Innovation Village, Whitelock Community Farm, St. Francis Neighborhood Center, No Boundaries Coalition, Beth Am Synagogue, Healthy Neighborhoods, Neighborhood Design Center, Strong City, ACLU, ABAG and leaders of the 21st Century Schools Team from Baltimore City Public Schools.

We have also notified 7th District Councilman Leon Pinkett and members of the 40th Legislative District, including Senator Barbara Robinson, Delegate Antonio Hayes and Delegate Frank Conaway. Other City Agencies impacted by this planning process were also notified by email of this action, including the Departments of Housing and Community Development, Transportation, Recreation and Parks, and General Services, Baltimore Development Corporation, Baltimore Office of Promotion and the Arts, and Department of Public Works.

Copies of the John Eager Howard Elementary School INSPIRE Plan will be available on the Department of Planning website.



Thomas J. Stosur,
Director