United States
Environmental Protection
Agency

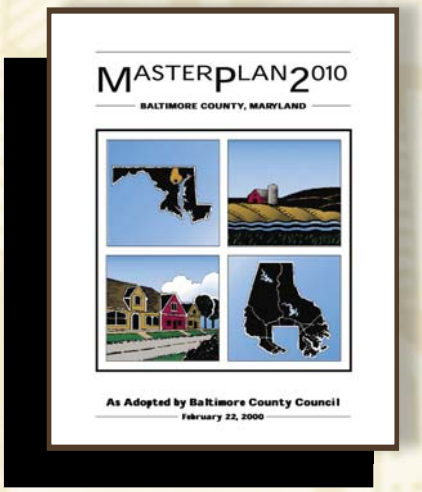
Sustainable Preservation and Enhancement of an Historic Urban Neighborhood: A Study of East Towson

EPA's Mid-Atlantic Integrated Assessment (MAIA) has identified unique solutions to environmental concerns developed by organizations throughout the mid-Atlantic region. Local universities are working with MAIA to document successful solutions. This publication is one of a series designed to communicate these solutions as a service to state and local governments, regional offices, and non-government organizations that make a variety of environmental decisions.

Background

In the late 1960s, Baltimore County, Maryland delineated two distinct land management areas, urban and rural, by creating an urban-rural demarcation line (URDL) – see Figure 1. The URDL was established to indicate which areas would receive public water and sewerage. It allows the County to manage growth in a manner that preserves important natural and agricultural resources and maximizes the efficiency of County revenues expended for transportation improvements, utilities, schools, and other capital projects. By providing public water and sewer services only in the urban area and not in the rural area, development has been concentrated in the urban area, thus reducing sprawl.

In 1972, Baltimore County adopted its first formal master plan in reaction to a 26% population increase from 1960 to 1970 – 492,428 in 1960; 621,077 in 1970. This plan attempted to create a philosophy of accommodating growth and development in an orderly, environmentally sensitive manner while conserving adequate open space.



Baltimore County's plans continued to address problems of urban sprawl. In 1975 the County plan established urban and rural zoning. The 1979 plan created growth areas and rezoned the agricultural area allowing only one house per 50 acres on parcels of 100 acres or more and no more than two new houses on the parcels between two acres and 100 acres. Since 1979, thousands of acres of additional land have been rezoned to the lower density. Currently, County planning is focused on revitalization of homes and businesses in Towson. Owings Mills and Perry Hall-White Marsh are the County's designated growth areas.

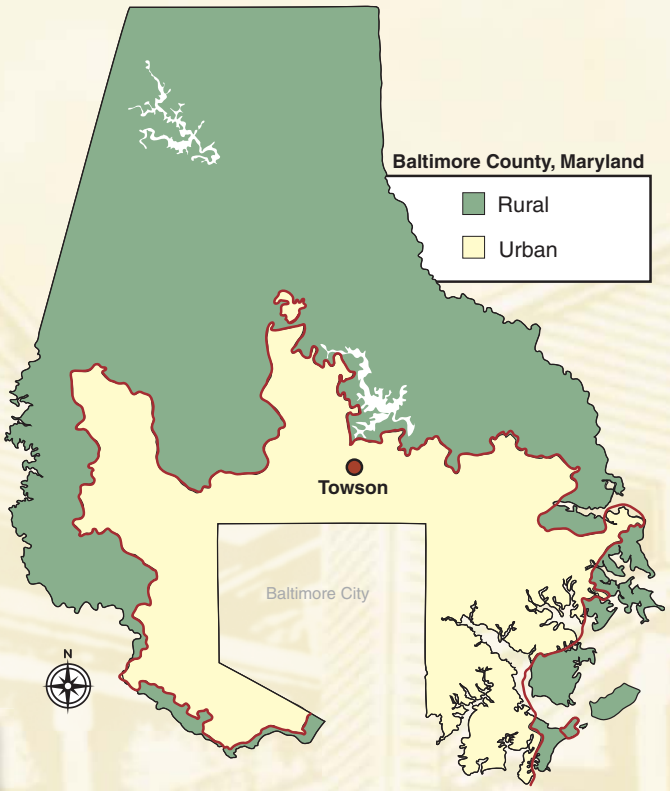


Figure 1. Map of urban/rural districts.

Towson is unique in that it is the only designated urban area in the Baltimore County Master Plan. It is the seat of County government, the legal center (containing Baltimore County Circuit and District Courts), a higher education center (containing Towson University and Goucher College), a medical center (including Saint Joseph's Medical Center, Greater Baltimore Medical Center, and Sheppard Pratt Health Systems), a corporate center (Black and Decker), a commercial center (Towson Town Center and Towson Commons), and a community of close-knit neighborhoods that surround and intertwine within the Towson urban area. There are other urban areas in the county such as Catonsville, Reisterstown, and Dundalk, but they do not have the above urban structure.

The East Towson community, within the Towson urban area was settled in the mid-1800s when Captain Charles Ridgely, owner of the Hampton Mansion north of Goucher College, freed his slaves. Originally, Ridgely gave his slaves 22,000 acres of land, including parts of White Marsh, Goucher College, and Sandy Bottom. Over the years, commercial areas crept into the neighborhood, and developers, realizing that the Towson neighborhood was prime commercial land, were able to buy the land cheaply from residents. Thus, East Towson became smaller and contained less residential housing.

Over the years, East Towson residents developed a lack of trust of County government due to broken promises. A blatant example is the Harris Hills Development Project, where ten years ago in 1995 the County worked with a builder to develop a residential community with affordable housing in East Towson (see photo). The first option to buy in this new affordable development was promised to East Towson residents and their descendants.

In 1999, the community was close to losing part of its history, the Jacob House (right), a 150-year-old log cabin that was built by slaves freed by Captain Ridgely. In 1998, a fire had destroyed part of an addition and the owner was in the process of demolishing the complete structure when the County stepped in. Although the East Towson community did not entirely trust the County, they had run out of options. With a grant from the Office of Community Conservation and a contribution by a neighboring business (Black and Decker), the community was able to have the house dismantled. The logs are currently being stored, and when the County identifies an appropriate location within the community, the Jacob House will be reconstructed.

Jacob House

By assisting East Towson in saving the Jacob House, the County regained some of the community's trust. Ultimately, the County helped the community realize its goals, including stabilizing and preserving it, developing and maintaining affordable housing, and maintaining the integrity of the entire community.

Harris Hills

The community was excited about the project because it was intended to allow generations that left East Towson the opportunity to return. Available housing had dwindled with encroaching commercial development, and the remaining homes were occupied by families who were born there. However, agreements with the community were broken, and people from the community were not given the first option to buy. The houses were sold slightly under market value and the County subsidized the 90 units at approximately $19,000 each.

Who did it?
Where did they do it?
What did they do?
How did they do it?

317 Lennox Avenue

Who did it? Initially, the Baltimore County Office of Community Conservation formed an advisory committee. The advisory group was made up of members of the community (residents, businesses, religious groups, and local historians); departments in Baltimore County government including the Office of Community Conservation and the Office of Planning; the Maryland Historic Trust; and the National Historic Trust. The community representation was to insure that development and renovation was in keeping with the wishes of the East Towson residents and not how developers or the County thought it should be. A broad cross section of people provided the expertise and guidance needed for the development project to come to fruition. The group identified potential problems associated with the project and how to resolve them. They discussed options such as new housing on vacant lots, renovation of existing housing, and how to architecturally blend the new with the old in the community. Design guidelines were developed to set standards for the architectural features of the community. The design guidelines suggested pitched gable roofs like many of the existing houses and no garages in keeping with the existing neighborhood. From an architectural standpoint, the new home design guidelines provided a similar look to the existing historic homes, while still meeting the needs of a more modern family with three bedrooms, two-and-a-half bathrooms, and a full basement.

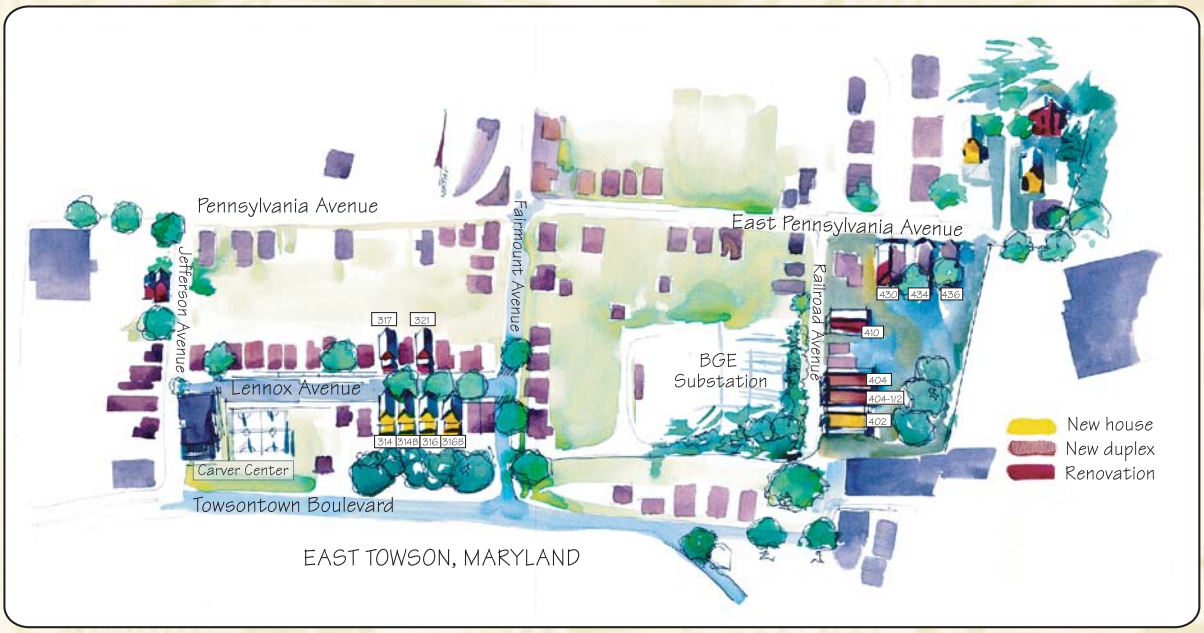
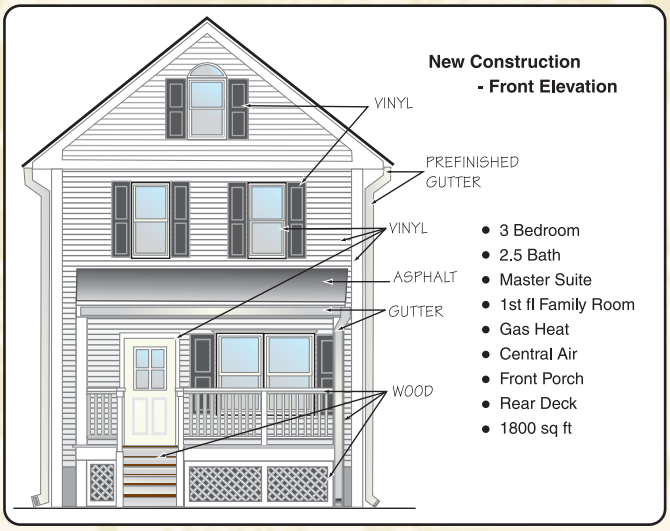


Figure 2. East Towson site rendering.

Carver Community Center

410 Railroad Avenue

Where did they do it? The project focused first on Lennox Avenue, because the Carver Community Center, located near Lennox Avenue, had recently been renovated. Lennox Avenue also contained the best example of what the original community looked like, and it was zoned residential. Pennsylvania Avenue, an adjacent street, was already changing – it had been rezoned residential office. Lennox Avenue, with its residential zoning, still had places where renovations and new residential development could make a difference.
On Lennox, two houses were chosen for renovation, lots were also purchased, and four new houses were constructed (see East Towson site rendering, Figure 2).



New Construction, Front Elevation

What did they do? Fourteen houses on Railroad Avenue, Lennox Avenue and Pennsylvania Avenue are currently part of the East Towson project. Of the fourteen houses, eight are currently complete and occupied. The remaining six houses are under construction or varying levels of renovation. A builder was hired for the new construction, and a property management firm is doing the renovation.

The County code requires a 10-foot building set back and off-street parking. Because the lots are small and historically there had not been off-street parking, the developer was granted exemptions to both of these requirements. The exemption allowed for an 8½-foot building set back and preserved no off-street parking. Generally, there were very few changes needed to the regulations or County codes for this project to be completed.

As part of the holistic design for the neighborhood, the committee proposed a community garden, acquired a volunteer designer to screen the Baltimore Gas and Electric Company (BGE) transformers with plants and a mural, planned narrowing of Fairmount Avenue to slow the traffic (calming), and proposed designs for creating a walkway. If the traffic calming is successful, the now-dismantled Jacob House will be reconstructed on a prominent site in East Towson. Also, due to East Towson's proximity to Towson businesses, the community has approached the County about restricting parking by non-residents and/or providing special residential parking permits.

It was determined that too much had previously been changed in the neighborhood to make it a national historic district. However, all houses within the community are listed in the Maryland Historic Trust (MHT) inventory. Although the houses and the neighborhood are not labeled as historic, the MHT has a photographic record of each house.

The MHT has been flexible in requiring the use of original materials because maintenance and energy efficiency can be an issue that affects affordability. For instance, if the original windows in the front of the house are restored, efficiency windows may be used on the side and the back of the house to decrease heating and maintenance costs. Compromises have also been reached on issues such as siding; a high quality vinyl siding with muted colors was used to create a more historic look and was more cost effective than replacing the original wood. The ultimate goal is to provide the owners with energy efficient and low-maintenance housing while preserving as much historic integrity as possible.

How did they do it? The advisory committee looked at the project holistically to determine which parcels were developable. The developer, St. Ambrose Housing Aid Center, worked with the committee and the County to acquire properties for redevelopment. St. Ambrose assists first-time homebuyers in purchasing affordable homes. It is a tax-exempt 501(c) 3 organization and depends on contributions to support its programs, which are all aimed at strengthening neighborhoods undergoing racial and economic changes. St. Ambrose operates a number of housing programs and at the community's direction, they acquired selected properties and parcels for redevelopment. Its development program acquired land that was vacant, already on the market, or through auction. Generally, word got out within the community that St. Ambrose was interested in purchasing land, and interested sellers would contact them.

Partners and Collaborators

Baltimore County Office of Community Conservation
Baltimore County Office of Planning
Black and Decker, Inc.
Fannie Mae Baltimore Partnership
Historic Towson, Inc.
Key Bank and Trust
Liberty Federal Savings Bank
Louis Diggs
Maryland State Historic Trust
Neighborhood Housing Services of Baltimore-Hillendale Office
Northeast Towson Improvement Association
Metro Housing, Inc.
St. Ambrose Housing Aid Center, Inc.
SunTrust Bank

Funding

Because revitalization of homes and businesses in Towson is a focus of County planning and the County had made mistakes in the area with the Harris Hills project, a new funding tact was also taken with the East Towson project to help the community realize their goals of developing and maintaining affordable housing. Working with several institutions, sources of funding for the new or renovated homes were found, including County bond funds from the HOME Investment Partnerships (HOME) Federal loan program and lending institutions.

Because the County subsidizes the homes, the owners are required to stay in the homes for 15 years. If the homeowner sells prior to that, they have to pay the County the cost of the subsidy. If the homeowner stays the 15 years, the County subsidy is forgiven during year 16.

Baltimore County does not provide low-income housing to its residents, but it does offer rent vouchers to qualified low-income families. Rent vouchers vary according to the family's income, number of family members, and where they live. The subsidy the County provides for a new or renovated home in East Towson is approximately equal to a monthly rent voucher over the 15 years, but this does not take into consideration the social benefits of increased home ownership – pride in ownership, maintenance of the property and surrounding area, stability of the neighborhood, reduced crime, etc. – which can far surpass the increased initial outlay of capital.

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Lessons/Accomplishments

1. It would be advantageous for redevelopment plans such as this one to be in the County master plan. Because the County had to gain the trust of the community in this case and it was a new process, it was not included.

2. The County was able to keep its promise of affordable housing for the community by learning from the mistakes of the Harris Hills project and by locating potential buyers who were interested in returning to the community up front.

3. The collaboration between the development team and the community resulted in the community's satisfaction with the outcomes of the project.

4. The committee was important to the overall success of the project because they represented a cross-section of people that could provide the expertise and guidance needed for the development project to come to fruition.

5. Neighborhood Housing Services, a non-profit organization, worked closely with the potential new homeowners to assure they were prepared for home ownership. Potential homeowners attended three to four workshops on home owning. Then they attended one-on-one counseling, entered into a contract, and worked with a lender for financing. Of the 14 houses slated for renovation or reconstruction, eight potential owners have completed the contract process and four have attended the one-on-one counseling and are preparing to enter into contracts.

Photographs and illustrations were provided by Baltimore County; modified by graphic artist for this publication.

The Mid-Atlantic Integrated Assessment (MAIA) is an interagency, multi-disciplinary research, monitoring, and assessment program to develop high-quality scientific information on the region's natural resources: current conditions, stressors, trends, and vulnerabilities. MAIA results and information must satisfy a broad group of stakeholders' needs, convey important information relevant to their assessment questions and issues, and be understandable and useful in making management decisions.

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