

Baltimore's Public Markets and Their Effects on Community Development

LAI Baltimore Chapter – June, 2017 Meeting

On June 21st, Robert Thomas and Michael Seipp visited with the Baltimore Chapter of LAI to discuss the City's Public Markets, and the effects of those markets on community development.

Robert, who is the Executive Director of the Baltimore Public Markets Corp. ("BPMC"), began with an overview of the City's markets. Robert advised the sizable lunch gathering that Baltimore has "a set of 6 public markets, more than any other major city". Recent media coverage has referred to the City's markets as "old school", conveying the sentiment that they are anachronisms within the modern trends toward mega-supermarkets, food halls and food courts which are springing up like mushrooms after a rain it seems these days. Robert provided his take on the unique criteria that make the City's markets "old school":

- Independent vendor businesses are primary tenants – who are local residents
- The availability of fresh staples/ingredients differentiates these from food halls
- "Hand-crafted" was in Baltimore's public markets before hand-crafted was a recognized term
- Vendors cater to the full range of "palettes & wallets"

The largest and most well-known of the City's markets is Lexington Market, which Robert referred to as the "Hub", with other City Markets being the "spokes".



Robert opined that the City's markets could benefit from some "old school best practices" that include (i) making room for greater vendor diversity, (ii) increased on-site production (AKA "maker-spaces"), and (iii) increased representation of ingredients (fruits, vegetables, etc.). Robert and BPMC's staff are continuously working to improve the City's markets so as to increase their appeal to the local, surrounding populations. Towards that end, Robert provided a brief overview of each of the City's markets and BPMC's plans for improvements:

Broadway Market – This market consists of two buildings. The "south shed" has been renovated and is open for business. The "north shed" has not been renovated. A developer had been lined up to commence renovations on the north shed before the Great Recession, but the project stalled during the downturn. BPMC now has an RFP out to the developer community to restart progress on the north shed.

Cross Street Market - Local developer Caves Valley Partners began an effort to substantially revamp this market at the beginning of 2017. Existing tenants wanted to stay and resisted change, so progress stalled for a time. Renovations are now expected to commence in September. The updated market may be modeled after Ferry Plaza Market in San Francisco, CA.

Avenue Market – Formerly known as the Lafayette Market, an RFP was issued for it, and responses are now being reviewed. The surrounding Upton neighborhood is not thriving, so BPMC is looking for proposals that "nurture community".

Lexington Market – Lexington Market, Inc. ("LMI") is embarking on a major redevelopment of this iconic market. \$40M is the present estimate for the East Building's transformation. The "right" project management is being sought to manage this redevelopment. The East Building plan entails building a brand new structure on the existing parking lot, and then demolishing the existing building so as not to displace tenants. LMI's intent is to focus on the old school best practices listed above to transform the market, so it becomes the "destination it once was". Robert advised that "[LMI] is figuring out that there is a lot more to being a market landlord than just collecting rents".

Northeast Market - Remodeled 2 years ago, this market is a success story with the local Hopkins-centric community patronizing it in healthy numbers. BPMC is attempting to develop strategies to serve the surrounding community better and to stay ahead of the curve regarding customer wants/tastes.

Hollins Market - "A lot going on here" advised Robert. An RFP was released to redevelop this market, with proposals now undergoing review.

Robert deferred additional comment on Hollins, as Michael Seipp is deeply involved in its redevelopment in his capacity as Executive Director of Southwest Partnership, who would be addressing the LAI meeting next. Robert ended his portion of the program by summarizing that there is "a lot of remedial work to be done on the whole market system after 20 – 30 years of minimal Market response to changes in the surrounding community".

Michael Seipp spoke next, providing a quick overview of the Southwest Partnership which is a non-profit, umbrella organization representing the seven neighborhoods that comprise the SW quadrant of Baltimore City. SW Partnership was formed “because of a lack of vision within the City Administration”.

Michael began with an interesting photo of the Hollins Market from around the turn of the century, evidencing the robust center of the community activity it was back in the day:



The Historic Hollins Public Market District

Markets were formed to “fill a need in local neighborhoods to supply fresh veggies, fish, meats, bread and other produce”. Michael’s family ran a wholesale fish business which supplied Hollins Market so he remembers the Market and its vendors fondly. Because the overhead was low for vendors, the food was affordable to the common man. In addition to being a “gathering place” where residents came weekly to do their shopping, the second floor of Hollins provided community recreation. So it truly was the center of the community during its heyday.

But with the rise of the drug culture, Hollins became a haven for dealers who scared away patrons. Vendors began to leave as patronage declined. And with the rising popularity of fast, processed foods, driven by the desire for convenience & speed by Boomers, Hollins began its slide towards obsolescence. “The demise of the Markets reflect Baltimore’s current ills and the changes in shopping habits of the boomer generation”, according to Michael.

But Michael sees the potential for positive change in this downward spiral. “The millennial generation wants more from life than speed & convenience”. They want experiences such as a vibrant market within a happening urban environment. Hence Michael believes that Hollins can

be the centerpiece of a turnaround within the SW Partnership's communities. He believes this turnaround needs a number of factors to succeed:

- Cooperation (i.e. funding) from the City and State Government
- More flexibility in zoning code
- More pedestrian friendly streets
- Easy access parking
- Destination Points (aside from Hollins Market)

Michael has been lobbying the City for a 250 to 300 space structured parking facility near Hollins to act as a catalyst. So far, "No buy-in from the City or State Government". But there are other signs of progress. War Horse Development (Scott Plank) has bought up approx. 60 properties around Hollins with plans to renovate them within the near term. "Anchors" within the area, such as U. of MD Medical Center, Bon Secours Hospital and U. of MD BioPark, are growing and transforming pockets of the community. These Anchors are increasingly engaged in the effort to revitalize their surrounding street-scapes. And the Abell Foundation has purchased and renovated two old warehouses, and is closing on a third, with an eye towards bringing increased employment opportunities to the neighborhood.

It's inspiring to see people such as Robert and Michael tirelessly attempting to affect positive changes within Baltimore. Their focus on improving neighborhoods, by improving the Markets within the City, is smart, difficult and admirable. The members of the Baltimore LAI Chapter thank them for their presentation to our group and their efforts toward an improved, more livable City.

Robert Thomas

Executive Director, Lexington Market, Inc. & Baltimore Public Markets Corporation

Robert Thomas is a "leader-learner" with experience in for-profit and non-profit environments, in operations and on Boards. As the Executive Director of Lexington Market, Inc. & Baltimore Public Markets Corporation, Robert has overall ongoing management responsibilities for the public market system in Baltimore consisting of 2 corporations, 6 properties throughout the city, 200 commercial tenants and 80 employees, all serving over 3 million customers per year. Robert oversees development and implementation of strategies to re-position each property to compete more effectively in the overall food retail marketplace and to respond more effectively to surrounding communities, to the region and to industry trends. Mr. Thomas has a degree in Architectural Design from M.I.T., with graduate work in Nonprofit Organizational Management from University of MD University College.

Michael Seipp

Executive Director, Southwest Partnership, Inc.

Michael has been working in Baltimore neighborhoods since 1969. He has held positions as a community organizer in several different organizations, has served as Deputy Commissioner of

Housing and Community Development for the City of Baltimore and Assistant Secretary of Housing for the State of Maryland. He led the effort to write the Empowerment Zone application which was funded for 100,000,000 dollars. He created the Greater Baltimore AHC, Inc., a non-profit development corporation. Previous to Southwest Partnership, he worked as Executive Director of The Baltimore Station, a residential program for homeless men who are primarily veterans of the Armed Services. A lifelong resident of Baltimore, he currently lives in the Lauraville neighborhood with his wife, Jennifer Williams, a hospice chaplain. He is helping to continue the Baltimore folk art of screen painting, supports the Baltimore City Municipal Golf Courses and gardens in his free time.