

Some out-of-towners' perspectives on Baltimore

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) May 17, 2018



The conference planners were concerned. Early in 2017, when the planning got underway in earnest, the headlines coming out of Baltimore were not heartening. Just two years earlier we had experienced the uprising in response to the death of Freddie Gray from injuries while in police custody. Since that time the city had been experiencing a spike in violence, with a record pace of homicides as part of the persistent narrative. The police department itself was under a cloud following a series of scandals. Then, as we approached the April 2018 meeting dates, two of the long-established neighborhood restaurants selected as dining venues were closing down.

As conferences go, the semi-annual meetings of Lambda Alpha International, the land economics society, are not very large. For planning purposes we budgeted for 80 participants for the gathering, dubbed the Land Economics Weekend or LEW. With the bad headlines, would they come?

As it turned out, we would have over 100 representatives coming from chapters all across North America – and some from farther afield, including Hawaii, London and the United Arab Emirates. Perhaps it was the easy air connections through BWI Marshall airport. Or, it may have been the very favorable rates afforded by an Inner Harbor hotel. Maybe there was something to learn about Baltimore beyond what they had seen on “The Wire.”

Indeed, the visitors had many opportunities to learn. In addition to an overview of the history and demography of Baltimore and region, they heard about the challenges facing the community, in particular its African-American residents, from Diane Bell-McKoy, president and CEO of Associated Black Charities. They also heard about new opportunities from Michael Beatty, president of Beatty Development Group. Not only did we hear about Harbor Point, which is well underway, but also the developer's plans for the transformation of the Perkins Homes public housing complex into a mixed-use, mixed-income community.

A tour of the harbor reminded everyone that the Port of Baltimore is much more than the tourist-oriented Inner Harbor. Docked alongside the Domino Sugar factory was a cargo vessel unloading its shipment of raw cane sugar to be refined by the 600 workers still at the plant. The port's leading role in handling container cargo and roll-on/ roll-off shipments was evident as we passed Seagirt and Dundalk marine terminals.

Back on land, the contrasts of life in east Baltimore could not be missed. We first gathered in Eager Park, to learn about the East Baltimore Development Inc. and the growing Johns Hopkins medical campus. We then ventured north and saw blocks of vacant and abandoned housing along with a few glimmers of reinvestment.

Perhaps one of the best ways to get those new to Baltimore to learn about the city was to get them away from the Inner Harbor and into the neighborhoods. The Dine Around experience was designed to do just that. Ten different neighborhoods, all about 15 to 20 minutes away from the headquarters hotel, were paired with notable Baltimore dining establishments. Here are just three of the reactions:

"For me, Woodberry Kitchen was one of true highlights of the Baltimore LEW. It is understandable why a reservation is so hard to come by. The food was excellent, and the atmosphere matched the cuisine. We have a number of "farm to table" venues in Chicago, but Woodberry sets a high bar."

"We toured (our hosts' Roland Park) home, walked in the neighborhood (which was drop-dead gorgeous) to the lovely French restaurant and the entire experience was delightful. ... We assumed the role of "looky-loos" and for

those of us from California it was a treat to see how different homes are built in other parts of the country. The neighborhood was a wonderful treat because the trees were leafing out and all manner of flowers were also greeting the spring.”

“Our (evening) started with drinks at The Maryland Club which was an amazing and interesting experience. The club is beautiful and from another era ... Our group then walked over to the Helmand Restaurant, (where the Afghan) food seemed very simple and straightforward but the spicing was very complex ... A very memorable evening. It was hard to write this review without repeating the word ‘amazing’ over and over. Thank you Baltimore.”

Transformation was the theme of the next day when we visited Remington and then Whitehall Mill. A stop at R. House for lunch was followed by an opportunity to take a walking tour with Seawall Development co-founder Donald Manekin. During the walk, a local came up to Manekin and, apparently referring to Seawall’s role in revitalizing the community, spontaneously commented, “You changed my life.”

There is much more to Baltimore than the doleful headlines. It is important not only to present the full picture to out-of-town visitors, but also to remind ourselves of Baltimore’s many positive offerings.

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