

# Transforming Lexington Market

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) July 29, 2022



Lexington Market has been an iconic presence in downtown Baltimore since its earliest days. Starting in 1782 on land between Eutaw and Greene streets donated by General John Eager Howard, the market was the destination of many horse-drawn wagons bringing in fresh produce from the region's countryside. It wasn't until 1803 that a large market shed was constructed to protect the marketplace from the elements. A later incarnation of the market building lasted until 1949 when it was destroyed by a six-alarm fire. A hastily constructed replacement in 1950, followed by the Arcade years later, served the community until it was clear significant reinvestment was necessary. In 2018, Baltimore City officials selected Seawall Development to lead the \$45 million transformation. The latest version of the market is about to make its public debut.

## An Early Peek

I recently had a preview of the new market in a meeting organized by the Baltimore chapter of Lambda Alpha International, a land economics professional organization. Seated in the upper level of the new market shed, a space evocative of the earlier era, we had a chance to learn of the latest transformation, while tasting some of the offerings of a couple of the soon-to-open market's vendors. These included samosas by Lumbini, an Indian-Nepali eatery, and a baked potato/crabmeat combo created by The Dancing Potato.

Describing the transformation underway was Paul W. Ruppert, the president and CEO of the Baltimore Public Markets Corporation, established in 1995 as a nonprofit organization. Ruppert himself has an interesting history, including an undergraduate degree in history from Penn. Later earning a master's degree in Irish Studies from Catholic University, Ruppert decamped for New York where for three years he managed the American Irish Historical Society. Returning to Washington where his family had a real estate business, he became involved in many ventures, including several restaurants and a bookstore in the Petworth neighborhood.

## **Baltimore's Public Market System**

Ruppert began his current work in June 2021. He is now responsible for managing the largest public market system in the United States. In addition to the flagship Lexington Market, he oversees five other neighborhood markets: Cross Street in South Baltimore, Broadway in Fells Point, Hollins Market on the west side, the Avenue Market in Upton and Northeast near the main Johns Hopkins Hospital campus. Ruppert notes that because of that Hopkins proximity, Northeast Market currently has the strongest patronage in his system.

In our discussion with Ruppert, it was noted that Lexington Market does not have the same success in attracting students, faculty and staff from the nearby University of Maryland professional schools. That's a reflection of some of the troubling issues that the market has faced in recent years, including panhandling, homelessness and crime, including open-air drug dealing. In acknowledgement that it is operating in a challenging neighborhood, the market is working with the University of Maryland School of Social Work to develop strategies to address these issues. There is also a security force numbering between 20 and 30 to respond to problems inside and around the market.

## **Many Functions of Lexington Market**

The new market will have 50 vendors providing both fresh foods and prepared items. That's down roughly by half from what has been in place. There will also be stalls for services, such as a florist and a shoemaker. Additionally, there will be 12 kiosks for 3-month pop-up shops. With more than 300 applicants, an extensive vetting process has taken place to secure what seems to be an appropriate mix of food and non-food offerings. An estimated 45% of the vendors will have Baltimore ties. Among the many functions the market serves – source of fresh foods, options for a quick lunch, a social gathering place and a venue to take in some of the programming planned for the site – Ruppert also sees it as the city's largest business incubator, offering new opportunities in a supportive environment for first time entrepreneurs.

No definite date has been set for the opening of the new Lexington Market. We are told to be alert for a Grand Opening weekend in early fall with public events over a Thursday – Sunday, including a ribbon-cutting with Mayor Brandon Scott and a Saturday afternoon Community Block Party. Soon you will once again be able to latch onto some of your old favorites, perhaps some Italian grocery staples from Trinacria, a bag of Konstant's roasted peanuts, or offerings from Faidley's raw bar. Enjoy.

---

*Joe Nathanson is the retired principal of Urban Information Associates, a Baltimore-based economic and community development consulting firm. He can be contacted at [urbaninfo@comcast.net](mailto:urbaninfo@comcast.net)*