

Baltimore Vacants Reinvestment Council (BVRC)

Minutes

February 3, 2025
Greater Baltimore Committee
111 S Calvert St., Suite 1700
Baltimore, MD 21202, USA
10:30 am - 12:30 pm

The meeting recording can be found here: [February 3rd BVRC Meeting Recording](#)

BVRC members in attendance:

- Jake Day, Secretary, Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development (Council Chair)
- Alice Kennedy, Commissioner, Baltimore City Department of Housing and Community Development (Council Vice Chair)
- Jason Perkins Cohen, Assistant Secretary, Maryland Department of Labor
- Rebecca Flora, Secretary, Maryland Department of Planning
- Gary McGuigan, Executive Vice President, Maryland Stadium Authority
- Jasmin Torres, Assistant Attorney General, Maryland Office of the Attorney General
- Cory McCray, Maryland State Senator, Maryland General Assembly
- Faith Leach, Chief Administrative Officer, City of Baltimore
- Michael Mockston, Director, Department of Finance, City of Baltimore
- Leslie McMillan, Co-Chair, BUILD
- Mark Anthony Thomas, President & CEO, Greater Baltimore Committee
- Matt Gallagher, President & CEO, Goldseker Foundation
- Beth Blauer, Associate Vice Provost for Public Sector Innovation & Associate Professor of Practice, Carey Business School
- Otis Rolley, Baltimore City Resident

Call to Order

Baltimore Vacants Reinvestment Council Chair Jake Day called the meeting to order.

Opening Remarks

Chair Day provided remarks about the Open Meetings Act and participation of the public in BVRC meetings. BVRC

Adoption of Meeting Minutes

Chair Day called for a motion to adopt the minutes from the January 7, 2025 meeting. Upon a motion duly made and seconded, the January 7, 2025 minutes were approved.

Data Requests

Chair Day presented a list of data requests from BVRC members with timelines for the delivery of the data requested.

Ms. Blauer asked if any data that the BVRC needs is based upon federal data sets. Henry Waldron, staff, responded that US Census data was an area of concern but that he did not have additional information on how that would be handled. Chair Day noted that Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development staff have attempted to secure relevant federally provided data in recent days. Ms. Blauer stated that the scope of a BVRC working group focused on data should include consideration of data preservation due to recent retrenchments.

Ms. Leach asked how the requested vacancy data were determined. Chair Day responded that the listed vacancy data had all been requested by the BVRC members.

Ms. Leach asked whether a broader discussion is needed to determine all of the types of data needed for review by the BVRC. Chair Day suggested that a working group focused on data could have a discussion about additional data that is needed and consider whether previously requested data is necessary. Ms. Leach asked where requested data would ultimately be hosted. Chair Day suggested that the appropriate location may be the Vacants Dashboard hosted by Baltimore City DHCD, but deferred to staff's determination.

Mr. Thomas noted that decisions on data hosting and requests should be made with consideration of impact and staff efficiency. Ms. Blauer stated that data compilation will be a continuous monitoring process in which the importance of specific pieces of data may not always be immediately clear.

Ms. Leach suggested a wider data conversation involving the whole BVRC to avoid one-off data requests. Mr. Thomas requested that a wider data conversation be prioritized for the next BVRC meeting. Chair Day responded that data needs should be included in the BVRC's conversation on overall strategy during the March or April BVRC meetings. Ms. Leach stated that goal setting will be most effective once the BVRC has data to consider.

Mr. Waldron, Director of Research and Analytics for Baltimore City DHCD, presented changes to the Baltimore Vacants Reinvestment Dashboard. He noted that metadata, which

demonstrates the inputs for each metric, have been updated for clarity and accuracy. He also showed that the FY25 goals had been added to the dashboard. He showed that info buttons had been added to provide additional assistance to user navigation of the dashboard.

Chair Day suggested that a single page on the dashboard dedicated to the various goals would be an effective way to emphasize and clarify this information. Vice Chair Kennedy noted that similar pages to show progress on metrics have been built and hosted by Baltimore City DHCD, so a similar page on the dashboard is likely within the staff's capacity to build. Chair Day inquired as to whether metrics tracked on other Baltimore City DHCD platforms that are relevant to the BVRC's goals could be hosted on the dashboard. Vice Chair Kennedy referred the question to Baltimore City DHCD staff. Mr. Waldron confirmed that metric tracking hosted elsewhere could be folded into the dashboard.

Mr. Mockston requested tracking of funding sources on a geographic level be hosted on the dashboard. Vice Chair Kennedy confirmed that Baltimore City DHCD has drafted a page for the dashboard showing funding sources, but that it was not yet complete. Mr. Waldron mentioned that efforts to track permitting may represent a good way to track private investment. Mr. Thomas suggested that private real estate partners will likely have access to useful data to track private investment citywide.

Chair Day noted that data management and analysis can be a shared responsibility and there likely needs to be a single location for all relevant data to be shared amongst all partners. Mary Buettner, staff, confirmed that staff does have the capacity to create a single repository for shared data. Ms. McMillan asked if data contamination could be prevented while hosting data in a shared location between partners. Ms. Blauer confirmed that data could be protected in a shared location and stated the need to focus on validating measures of impact.

Constraints and Obstacles

Vice Chair Kennedy presented Vacant Building Notice (VBN) data, including VBN change over time, use of demolition and stabilization tools, the rate and focus of housing inspections and the consistent rate of VBN issuance.

Ms. Leach requested that City DHCD provide the raw numbers for housing inspections. Chair Day asked if the changes in housing inspection totals reflected a drop in inspector staffing. Vice Chair Kennedy responded that the largest drops in staffing did not correspond with the largest drops in housing inspections.

Ms. Leach requested the raw data on the housing inspector staffing. Vice Chair Kennedy noted that the department is hiring additional staff.

Ms. Leach asked if inspections are all complaint driven or if some are proactively initiated. Vice Chair Kennedy responded that housing inspectors are surveying the whole block proactively when responding to a 311 request for service. Ms. Torres asked if the increase in VBNs in 2023 was due to a directive given to Baltimore city DHCD staff as a result of the firefighters deaths. Vice Chair Kennedy responded that there was not a specific directive.

Vice Chair Kennedy cited a survey by ReBUILD Metro of six neighborhoods that determined that properties that met the criteria for a VBN had been issued one. The survey documented 20 characteristics related to vacancy and assigned levels of severity to each property. Analysis shows that roof damage, holes in structure, open access points and tall grass are highly predictive features of vacancy. Vice Chair Kennedy noted that Baltimore City DHCD validated the survey's results.

Ms. McMillan asked whether the presented data reflected the existence of other structures that may be eligible for a VBN but which have not had one so far. Vice Chair Kennedy responded that the data could help identify properties that should be moved toward the issuance of a VBN as well as those where other remediation tools may be appropriate.

Ms. Blauer asked if the study conducted by ReBUILD Metro was geographically focused. Vice Chair Kennedy responded that the study was focused on six east and west Baltimore neighborhoods. Jennifer Guillaume, ReBuild Metro staff, stated that the study had focused on neighborhoods with a range of vacancy rates.

Mr. Gallagher asked whether Baltimore City DHCD had confidence in the VBN data as a reflection of the overall problem. Vice Chair Kennedy responded that she did.

Mr. Gallagher asked, since the demolition activity is decreasing, how much of the activity is emergency demolitions and how much is planned demolitions. Vice Chair Kennedy responded that the planned demolition numbers are modest and expected to increase in future fiscal years due to the increase in capital funding for demolition from BVRI.

Vice Chair Kennedy indicated that communities that have participated in vacancy reduction efforts over the years have not recently emphasized the need for demolition. In areas that are being newly prioritized, demolitions will likely be more frequent. Mr. Gallagher asked whether the City intends to present a demolition wishlist for FY26 to the state in the next few months for which the state will frontload demolition funding and lead to a spike in demolitions. Chair Day noted that the Maryland Stadium Authority will also need to provide information on whether there are contractors available to accommodate such a spike in demolition activity. Ms. Leach noted that the extent to which Baltimore City has updated processes to efficiently move funds required for additional contractors will also present a constraint.

Ms. McMillan inquired as to the use of additional funds outside of the identified impact investment areas. Vice Chair Kennedy noted that geographic areas of focus have expanded beyond the Impact Investment Areas, including community asset building neighborhoods that have conducted block level planning to identify the appropriate targets of demolition efforts.

Ms. Leach stated that the underlying factors leading to the creation of the vacancy reduction and demolition goals should be presented by Baltimore City DHCD to the BVRC to allow for a better understanding of their progress. She also stated that Baltimore City has considered the reduction in housing inspections generally and the need to return them to pre-pandemic levels.

Mr. McGuigan noted that demolitions are likely scalable due to the high-machinery, low labor nature of the work, but that he is uncertain of the scalability of stabilization work, which is more

labor intensive and requires additional sub-contractors. Mr. Perkins Cohen noted that current and accurate data demonstrating existing need would be required to initiate efforts to scale up private sector capacity to take on stabilization contracts.

Chair Day noted that emphasis on stabilizations in the agreement with the Maryland Stadium Authority is new. He also noted that the list of properties provided by Baltimore City DHCD to be eligible for FY25 capital funding included all the required information and if a similarly comprehensive FY26 list is provided to Maryland DHCD in April 2025, he expects to be able to provide FY26 BVRI funding right at the beginning of the fiscal year on July 1st.

Mr. Gallagher asked how many demolitions occurred in Baltimore City last year. Vice Chair Kennedy responded 271. Mr. Gallagher noted that this was less than one demolition a day and he was confident the private sector could accommodate additional demand and emphasized the need to focus on whole block opportunities in the development of the property list.

Ms. McMillan inquired as to whether the list of targeted demolitions could be shared with neighborhoods that have conducted block level planning to ensure that properties or blocks identified for demolition have not been missed. Vice Chair Kennedy stated that the creation of the list is based on ongoing community organizing efforts to identify appropriate targets for demolition, and that additional meetings could be held upon request to address specific concerns.

Mr. Thomas stated that the private sector has also stalled efforts to align with the eventual block-by-block vacancy reduction implementation strategy. Vice Chair Kennedy stated that she would like to hear more on those stalled efforts, as she believes there are effective ways to have those conversations with the private sector while being sensitive to publicly providing parcel-level plans that could create market speculation.

Mr. Gallagher stated that access to lists of priority blocks from preferred, credible private sector and community-level partners would be beneficial. Vice Chair Kennedy confirmed that the block-level planning efforts represent priority blocks, so Baltimore City DHCD staff will coordinate with the state on how best to present that information to the BVRC. Mr. Gallagher stated that projects or initiatives that are closer to actualization could help create momentum and support for the BVRC's overall initiative. Ms. Leach stated that Baltimore City staff can talk offline about how best to present the existing block-level planning to the BVRC.

Ms. Blauer stated that specific goals are required to focus the work of the BVRC. Ms. Leach stated that the next four to five meetings should include a deep dive into the data, the existing strategies, and streamlining of processes that needs to be put in place. Chair Day emphasized the need to review goals and outcomes as a council over the next five months and noted that staff has developed a BVRC workplan. He also stated his desire for future BVRC meetings to include presentations on the Mayor's Vacancy Reduction Plan and Whole Block approach.

Ms. McMillan asked the council to consider the growth of the investment made by the City and State. Chair Day noted that we likely would not have time to address this issue in March or April, but that the BVRC would have time to discuss fundraising at a later meeting. Ms. Leach noted

that her concern regarding staffing and on-the-ground capacity in Baltimore City DHCD could be rolled into one of the larger topics to be discussed in March and April.

Working Group Scope

Chair Day stated that the working groups represent an opportunity to incorporate additional talent into the mission of the BVRC.

Chair Day presented on the intended role of the Financing Working Group.

Mr. Mockston expressed support for the listed responsibilities of the Financing Working Group and suggested the group incorporate capital flows into its planning. Ms. Leach suggested that the group should also consider where funds should be held. Mr. Thomas noted that they would also need to consider where private funds are held and that he has considered other models that have worked for other communities to pull resources for revitalization.

Ms. Blauer stated that the Financing Working Group should also consider the long-term solution to financing housing in Baltimore. Mr. Gallagher inquired as to whether the City and State finance agencies would be able to provide the support to this working group. Mr. Mockston indicated that staff would be made available for this effort.

Ms. Blauer stated that there is a discrepancy between the listed role of the Financing Work Group as looking to fill gaps and the stated strength of Baltimore as an investment opportunity. Chair Day stated that the listed roles of the working groups are not fixed and could be edited amongst the members of the working group once they are identified.

Chair Day presented the structure of the working group model. He stated that each working group should have three to four BVRC members, one of whom will need to serve as the chair. He also stated that BVRC members will be able to self-select to a working group through a survey that staff will share with them, and members of the public will be able to apply to be on a working group in a second survey. Ms. Blauer noted that the framing of each working group's role needs to attract participants to the effort who will be able to provide effective support.

Chair Day presented the role and purpose of the Capacity Building Working Group. Mr. Gallagher stated that the capacity deficiencies for this initiative appear to be concentrated in the public sector and should be the initial focus of this effort.

Mr. Mockston inquired as to the timeline for the Capacity Building Working Group to make recommendations. Chair Day stated that he would like these groups to be stood up quickly and begin to make early recommendations as soon as possible.

Ms. Leach suggested that the Capacity Building and Delivery Chain Working Groups could be combined. Chair Day suggested merging the concept of capacity building into the Delivery Chain Working Group and the concept of stakeholder engagement into the Economic Opportunity Working Group. She also stated that the private sector capacity building focus could be placed in the Economic Opportunity Working Group. Chair Day expressed support for these proposed changes and suggested an additional working group focused on data processes.

Ms. Blauer stated that data will drive each working group. Chair Day stated that he believed there is a need to consider data separately because an additional working group on data processes may provide the BVRCI access to new expertise. Mr. Gallagher stated that ideally a Data Working Group could create an annual BVRC report to publicize. Ms. Blauer asked whether a Data Working Group could also be tasked with creating templates for the rest of the working groups to use. Mr. Gallagher stated that a group dedicated to demonstrating progress will be essential to the continued success of the BVRC.

Ms. Leach stated that the BVRC will need to consider when evaluation will occur. Ms. Blauer stated that evaluation needs to be ongoing. Chair Day stated the BVRC needs to develop a culture of assessment, which will require developing data-driven goals as soon as possible.

Ms. Leach inquired as to the reporting requirements included in the recent Tax-Increment Financing (TIF) legislation for Baltimore. Mr. Mockston responded that there is a reporting requirement for the level at which the funding is spread equitably, but noted that meeting these distributive requirements is not necessary to unlock the next round of financing. Ms. Leach noted that the state and the city have committed a large amount of funds to this effort and high-quality reporting should be required, potentially even from a third-party review.

Chair Day stated that the Delivery Chain and the Economic Opportunity group have been redesigned to include components of the Capacity Building group, the Data group has been added, and the Financing group remains the same.

Chair Day presented on the scope of the working groups' responsibilities. Jasmine Torres stated that data that the BVRC may need from the federal government should be downloaded or requested promptly. Chair Day stated that staff has actively pulled necessary federal data and any additional data that BVRC members may think necessary should be referred to staff.

Closing

Chair Day stated that the next meeting of the BVRC will be on Monday, March 3rd. Chair Day closed the meeting.