

Baltimore Vacants Reinvestment Council
December 12, 2024
Greater Baltimore Committee, 111 S. Calvert Street, Baltimore, MD 21202
12:30 am - 2:00 pm

Minutes

The meeting recording is [here](#).

Council 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)
- Erin Roth, Assistant Secretary, Maryland Department of Labor
- Rebecca Flora, Secretary, Maryland Department of Planning
- Gary McGuigan, Executive Vice President, Maryland Stadium Authority
- Tom Sadowski, Executive Director, Maryland Economic Development Corporation
- Jasmin Torres, Assistant Attorney General, Maryland Office of the Attorney General
- Stephanie Smith, Maryland State Delegate, Maryland General Assembly
- Faith Leach, Chief Administrative Officer, City of Baltimore
- Michael Mocksten, 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

1. Call to Order

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

2. Opening Remarks

Chair Day provided remarks about the purpose of the Council and reiterated the focus on whole block outcomes, community-led development, minimizing displacement, fostering equity, and operating with transparency and accountability.

3. Adoption of Minutes

Chair Day called for a motion to adopt the minutes from the November 7, 2024 meeting. Ms. McMillan asked for a correction to the minutes to state that the shared values document that

she distributed at the November 7 meeting was previously agreed upon by BUILD, GBC, and the City and negotiated also with the state. Chair Day said the minutes would not include that those values were negotiated with the state as the state is determining the values with the Council. Chair Day stated that the minutes would be amended to say Ms. McMillan handed out a shared values document agreed upon by BUILD, GBC, and Baltimore City. Upon a motion duly made and seconded, the November 7, 2024 minutes with the amendment were approved.

4. Adoption of Shared Values

Chair Day presented the draft values and guiding principles and asked for discussion and adoption of the values and guiding principles. Chair Day called for a motion to start a discussion of the values or to adopt the draft values. Upon a motion duly made and seconded, a discussion of the values commenced.

Ms. McMillan stated that the anti-displacement value gives room for displacement and would rather see the words no displacement.

In addition, Ms. McMillan stated that the work of BUILD has been community led not community centered and that the values need to show that.

Ms. McMillan also asked if the term complete neighborhoods includes whole blocks, whole neighborhoods. Commissioner Kennedy stated that the guiding principles reference whole block outcomes.

Commissioner Kennedy also stated that the values use the phrase minimize resident displacement because there are communities in which the city is working where the community is choosing to relocate residents on certain blocks and in certain neighborhoods.

Ms. McMillan stated that using the word anti-displacement opens the door for other people than community members to make decisions about displacement. Commissioner Kennedy stated that the anti-displacement value includes the phrase community-led development.

Chair Day stated that it makes sense to replace community centered with community led if we are already using that language in that first paragraph. Mr. Rolley recommended changing the term community centered to community led so that it matches how the Council defines anti-displacement. CAO Leach recommended changing the word in the anti-displacement value statement from promote to commit so that the value says we will commit to community-led development.

Secretary Flora stated that community centered and led are purposeful. She further explained that community led is the community being fully engaged in the decision process whereas community centered ties to conservation and community culture and history and centering around the place, overlapping with the last value of community culture and history. Mr. Rolley asked about changing the conservation of community culture and history value to community centered. Secretary Flora shared concern with dropping culture and history out of the title bullets because how we respect and build on community culture and history is very important.

Mr. Sadowski suggested that the anti-displacement value focus on maximizing retention. Delegate Smith stated that it is important to recognize the agency of existing community members and maximizing retention is about providing an opportunity for someone to make that choice should they want to.

Ms. Blauer stated that the value should state that the Council wants to do the work without displacement.

Mr. Rolley asked if the values have to be approved at today's meeting. CAO Leach suggested to be efficient with time that the Council members workshop the values language and come back at the end of the meeting and vote. Commissioner Kennedy stated that the Council could also put together a working group if the members cannot get to a vote today.

Chair Day stated that the values discussion could conclude at the end of today's meeting or stretch into January. He also stated that some clear themes are emerging: that we want to acknowledge and address the value of culture and history of Baltimore neighborhoods and architecture and people connected to place; we want processes to be centered around those community assets; we want the community to lead; we do not want to displace; we want to maximize retention; and we want people to have agency.

Mr. Rolley suggested Council members take an additional 15 minutes to wordsmith the values to see if the Council can come to an agreement. Chair Day agreed to provide more time as long as there is enough time for the other agenda items.

Council members engaged in a discussion to change some wording to incorporate the various recommendations from the previous discussion. As a result, the anti-displacement value was changed as follows:

Retention. We will maximize resident retention and minimize resident displacement as we reduce vacancy. We will commit to community-led development that ensures resident choice and that current residents benefit from improvements in their communities. We will actualize this value through intentional community planning that assesses the risks of physical and cultural displacement and develops strategies to prevent displacement.

Keep Our Neighbors in Baltimore was proposed as an overarching statement.

Chair Day called for a motion to table the values discussion to January. Upon a motion duly made and seconded, the motion to table the values discussion to the January 7, 2025 BVRC meeting was approved.

5. Vacancy Reduction Geography

Vice Chair Kennedy presented the city's vacancy reduction geography, including the selection criteria and the selected areas. Vice Chair Kennedy stated that the vacancy reduction geography provided the basis for the \$3 billion calculation and the 37,500 "must address" properties that includes vacant properties, vacant lots and occupied properties for repair assistance. She also stated that these geographies support the analysis of the PFM report.

Vice Chair Kennedy presented three categories of areas included in the vacancy reduction geography. The first category includes the Impact Investment Areas that the city identified in 2019. The next category includes neighborhoods with high vacancy rates and with similar characteristics to Impact Investment Areas. The city refers to these areas as community asset building neighborhoods. The third category includes strategic blocks with high vacancy rates. This is where the city includes the West North Avenue Development Authority geography. Vice Chair Kennedy stated that though the West North Avenue Development Authority area is included in the West Impact Investment area, the data is not duplicated.

Vice Chair Kennedy asked for questions.

Ms. McMillan asked if the city decided these neighborhoods. Vice Chair Kennedy stated that these have been part of conversations with the city and communities for more than two years and they were the basis for the \$3 billion vacancy reduction planning effort.

Ms. McMillan stated that she thought that BUILD, GBC, and Baltimore City would be prioritizing neighborhoods together and is concerned some neighborhoods are left out. Vice Chair Kennedy asked for an example of a neighborhood that BUILD doesn't see on the list. Ms. McMillan cited Franklin Square. Vice Chair Kennedy stated that Franklin Square is in the Southwest Partnership Impact Investment Area. Ms. McMillan stated that a Baltimore City resident may not understand that their neighborhood is included in that area. Vice Chair Kennedy clarified that there are 22 neighborhoods in the Impact Investment Areas.

Mr. Thomas said that once the Council starts scaling up the block by block strategy and orienting more private investment, the Council may fine-tune the geography, but that it is helpful to understand what work has been done to date.

Secretary Flora recommended that Vice Chair Kennedy provide a graphic that shows what work has unfolded to date so the process for selecting geographies is clear to the Council.

Mr. Rolley asked that Vice Chair Kennedy walk the Council through the neighborhood preservation work and the community planning completed to date.

Mr. Gallagher asked Vice Chair Kennedy to elaborate on the range of vacancy and for the total vacancy rate in the vacancy reduction geography. Mr. Gallagher also stated that the Council will have to discuss interventions in more stable neighborhoods with some vacancy and how they get triaged and prioritized for intervention and action.

Vice Chair Kennedy suggested moving to the dashboard section of the agenda as it will start to show some of the data points, including the vacancy rate by neighborhood. Vice Chair Kennedy stated that the dashboard is the first data tool of others to come, including whole block and block level tracking.

6. Measuring and Monitoring Progress

Vice Chair Kennedy asked Henry Waldron, Director of Research and Analytics for Baltimore City Department of Housing and Community Development, to present the draft vacancy dashboard.

Mr. Waldron stated that the vacancy dashboard was designed for the Council to understand the progress of the vacancy reduction strategy and Reinvest Baltimore goals as well as a public facing tool to make the city's efforts transparent. The first page is a welcome page with a brief summary. The second page shows the overall progress on vacancy reduction, including the net VBN inventory, a graph showing the actual vacant building count with a projection that shows meeting a five-year goal of reducing VBNs by 5,000 in five years as well as getting to the level of zero VBNs within 15 years. Mr. Waldron demonstrated the map and the filtering by neighborhood, priority geographies and council districts. Mr. Waldron also highlighted another section that shows the vacancy rate by neighborhood.

Mr. Waldron stated that the next page highlights population and household change. At the center a graph shows the population data starting with Census data through 2020 and the most recent ACS estimates with a map that shows population change by neighborhood. The page also shows household change; the trend shows that the actual number of households in Baltimore is increasing based on the last Census.

Mr. Waldron showed the next page of the dashboard, which focuses on the acquisition process, showing acquisition by method and filters the visuals on the geographies, acquisition method and completion year.

Ms. Millan asked if this page can show a shorter time frame than one year. Mr. Waldron stated that the dashboard currently shows annual data. Chair Day stated that it will be valuable for the Council to look at data in smaller increments in time such as by month. CAO Leach stated that Vice Chair Kennedy receives a daily report so the city has the ability to report by month.

The next page shows the pipeline of properties for disposition (properties that the city has sold), including the total number of properties sold by year and then further broken out by lot and building.

Chair Day asked if the city can identify an entry point and an exit point for dispositions to show how long the process took. He asked that the dashboard measure an objective that, for example, 95% of the time disposition takes less than a certain number of days.

Mr. Waldron stated that City DHCD could look into that. Chair Day stated that the time piece is critical to understanding capacity.

Mr. Waldron showed the next page of the dashboard, which focuses on code enforcement. The abbreviation FTA means failure to abate vacant building notices, which are \$1,000 citations that the city issues to property owners. The graph shows the number of VBNs issued, the number of FTA citations issued, and the number of VBNs with permits opened within six months of receiving an FTA citation. The last page focuses on demolitions and stabilizations, including

publicly funded demolitions compared to private demolitions, which are highlighted at the bottom. The page also includes data on stabilizations.

Mr. Waldron stated that City DHCD is in the process of working on a capital spending page to understand where money is invested and the impact of those investments by measuring vacancy reduction, property tax revenue and other metrics that would indicate neighborhood strength or block level strength.

Ms. McMillan asked if the city is also tracking the vacant lots. Mr. Waldron stated that the data is not currently in the dashboard. He also stated that the city does not issue a vacant building notice equivalent to vacant lots and does not track them in the same way but the city does understand where the vacant lots are.

Vice Chair Kennedy shared that over the first six months of calendar year 2025, the city is doing an analysis of how best to categorize vacant lots. The city has a significant number of vacant lots that are maintained by different groups, including through the adopt-a-lot program and those being held for the Baltimore Green Network Plan and for storm water management.

Chair Day stated that it is critical for the Council to articulate items members hope to see as the city continues to further develop the vacancy dashboard. He shared that the dashboard needs to tie into our outcomes objectives and provide a view into the labor force and workforce.

Mr. Gallagher stated that it would be helpful to see how many buildings were acquired, disposed of and demolished and the number of rehab starts, and to have the actual output from 2024. He said that in all four of those areas the city needs to ramp up activity levels and the Council needs to understand the amount of increase to know how to match that with the money.

Ms. Blauer stated that it is important to look at that data up against the baselines; for example, show the numbers of properties to be demolished and how many have been demolished to show if the city is achieving its goals month over month.

Mr. Gallagher stated that the Council needs to have a longer conversation about VBNs, including the level of inspections and if inspections have gone up or down.

Mr. Rolley encouraged the city to be comfortable with providing and discussing information and materials that are still works in progress so Council members can provide input into the drafts.

CAO Leach stated that the Council needs to define and communicate what a VBN is and how the city determines what a VBN is.

Ms. McMillan asked that vacant lots be added to the dashboard.

AAG Torres stated that she wants to understand the total number of vacant buildings and vacant lots in the city in relation to the 37,500 included in the vacancy reduction geography.

Chair Day stated that it would be valuable for the Council to know the total figure of vacant lots now, knowing that there's a lot of work yet to be done.

7. Working Group Formation

Chair Day introduced the concept of working groups to include Council members and members of the community. Working groups will recommend strategies to the Council. Chair Day asked the Council members to be prepared to initiate and formulate these groups at the January meeting. He shared some initial concepts for working groups, including capacity building, philanthropic and private fundraising, delivery chain, and economic opportunity. He stated that we need to dive deeper into legal and judicial tools and get down to the constraints, the tools and the barriers.

8. Closing

Commissioner Kennedy provided the data point requested earlier in the meeting: 70.5% of VBNs are captured in the vacancy reduction geography. Vice Chair Kennedy also stated that the dashboard site is live and was included with the materials that Secretary Day shared with the Council. She also stated that Council members can share questions about the dashboard with Mr. Waldron and the data team directly.

Ms. Blauer asked if there are some feature updates to the dashboard to include those in the communications to Council members.

Mr. Rolley asked if Secretary Day could consider moving the meeting time 90 to 120 minutes for the first six months of 2025. Secretary Day agreed to extend the meeting times.

Ms. Roth asked to receive meeting materials earlier.

Chair Day noted that the meetings have all been scheduled for 2025 and that the February and March meetings were moved.

CAO Leach stated that the city can commit to providing materials at least 72 hours in advance.

Chair Day adjourned the meeting.