Toward a New Baltimore

This coming fall, Baltimore voters will choose a new Mayor. It will be a decision that will go a long way toward defining the next chapter in the city’s decades-long struggle to stem its decline and ultimately reverse its fortunes.

Above all, the most significant immediate challengers are the persistence of crime and its accompanying violence. Right now, they are the subjects where virtually every conversation begins and ends, and it will be nearly impossible for the city to move forward economically or socially while they remain topic number one. Making Baltimore’s homes, businesses, schools and public spaces safe will be the first and arguably most difficult task facing the new administration. It will also severely test the creativity and will of the entire community.

Nationally, crime is at historic lows, despite a small spike in homicides this past year. In 2015, however, Baltimore’s 344 homicides threatened record levels and essentially equaled New York City’s, though Baltimore’s population is twelve times smaller. By comparison, Milwaukee and Cleveland each experienced roughly 100 homicides last year.

Whatever else, Baltimore cannot continue to be a national poster child for unrestrained, violent crime and hope to remain a viable urban center. New Orleans, of similar size and also plagued by unacceptable crime levels, has adopted a homicide reduction strategy called “NOLA For Life,” which may have applicability here.

Although that is where the work to move Baltimore forward begins, in the broader context the greatest challenge to a fully realized economic and social renaissance remains the combination of bad schools, crushing poverty and the serious mismatch between available jobs and the number of city residents able to fill them. The all too familiar litany of problems follows from these.

In this, Baltimore’s long-term challenges are not very different than those facing urban leaders elsewhere: achieving economic and population growth, social equity,
environmental sustainability and the resiliency to protect capital and human infrastructure from unexpected shocks.

Moving Baltimore forward in the face of these significant challenges will be difficult enough under the best of circumstances. It will be doubly so in the wake of last spring’s unrest. Yet, Baltimore’s Mayor will be asked—and expected—to chart a realistic long-term strategy for physical and human renewal. Ironically, last spring’s uprising presents a new Mayor with a strong mandate to change the ways Baltimore does its civic business and to articulate a new vision of what the city could and should become.

As Baltimore’s most visible leader, the Mayor-to-be needs to inspire hope, confidence and, most important, point the way to a better future. There is a communitywide sense of urgency and agreement that new ideas, new approaches must be tried. Identifying a realistic set of priorities, relentlessly promoting them and pulling together the necessary resources are assets unique to the office of Mayor. Cities can be turned around with inspired, persistent mayoral leadership, as we have seen in recent years in cities as different as Boston, Charleston and Pittsburgh.

A Way Forward

Organizing and helping orchestrate an entirely new civic vision is where Mayoral leadership is absolutely essential. It will require a plan to finally complete Baltimore’s transformation from an exhausted 20th century industrial center to a widely recognized example of what a mid-sized 21st century community can become. The next Mayor will inherit a once in a lifetime opportunity to bring the pieces together to make that happen.

The first condition for establishing credible Mayoral leadership is recognition that for Baltimore to succeed requires a broadly shared, communitywide agenda. Loss of jobs and population have been going on for more than half a century, leaving the city with dramatically diminished financial resources in the face of increasing demand for services and capital improvements. Dependence on state and, especially, federal subsidy is an outdated model and is not in any case a recipe for fiscal health. A new vision, a new agenda for Baltimore cannot be defined and driven solely by the political
establishment. With even the best of ideas and motivation, it simply wouldn’t have the money.

A very early order of business for the new Mayor should be broad and aggressive outreach to every sector of the community. Invite them to join a genuine collaboration, to establish both immediate and longer term priorities and agree about shared goals, responsibilities, timetables and financial plans. As we saw in the spontaneous outpouring of volunteer energy, money, concern and goodwill in the days following April’s violence, the civic spirit in Baltimore is very strong and cuts across economic, religious and racial lines. There is deep affection for this town. The people who live and work here love this place and will respond if asked.

The second imperative for a successful civic vision is that it be both ambitious and attainable. It is very difficult to be inspired by goals that are either too modest or too unrealistic. This is where there is no real substitute for Mayoral leadership: describing with clear-eyed honesty what kind of place Baltimore should be.

Baltimore was once a city of national stature, and it remains an important regional hub. What often is not appreciated fully, however, is the combined intellectual power of John Hopkins, University of Maryland, their medical systems and the National Institutes of Health facilities located here. Each is a significant member of the global economy and an institutional network that is driven by the generation of knowledge.

Taken together, they make Baltimore a formidable center of ideas and innovation. A Mayor who understands and capitalizes on the collaborative potential of these institutions can move Baltimore significantly forward toward becoming a place the world’s most talented want to live and work—precisely because it is Baltimore, not despite the fact that it is Baltimore.

**Setting Priorities**

Daunting though the city’s many and pressing challenges are for Baltimore’s political and civic leaders, they are the reality of both the community’s present and future. And additional, competing realities—limited financial resources, conflicting public and private interests and ambitions and the need to move forward on many fronts at the
same time—add layers of complexity. What gets done and in what order will require a flexible decision structure and strong Mayoral direction.

Precisely because there are so many ideas being put forth and debated across the city, I have tried to combine suggestions about priorities with those adopted by a few other urban areas into several themes. My hope is to contribute a bit of clarity to the conversation and, possibly, direction.

**Growth and Prosperity**

Begin with an economic development strategy that takes advantage of the city’s and region’s well recognized strengths, and train the next generation’s workforce in the skills it will need to work in those and emerging economic sectors. Aspire to continue attracting the best talent from around the world, but remember also that investing in strong and improving neighborhood leadership and infrastructure will help retain city residents. Net population growth includes enticing residents who have already shown a preference for city living to stay. As one example, row houses admittedly hold nostalgic charm, but a more creative mix of housing types speaks more to the present century than to the two preceding it.

Although the majority of Baltimore City residents do not presently have a child at home, a growing, prosperous community should think seriously about amenities for families, especially if we hope to attract and hold onto younger, well-educated residents. Decent public schools are critical to achieving that. Multiple layers of local, state and federal bureaucracy make comprehensive public education reform an especially difficult chore. Realistically, not every school will succeed. But greater school variety and greater administrative transparency and control, along with university, business and community partnerships greatly improve their chances.

**Economic Opportunity**

Although there are other barriers to greater opportunity for poorer residents of Baltimore - notably criminal records, drug use and inadequate education - arguably the
two most pressing deficits are the number of lower skill job opportunities and the inability of those who could fill them to get to where the jobs are.

Since the operation of public transit rests with the State of Maryland, the redesign of existing bus routes and enhancement of their commuting destinations and frequency, as proposed in the Governor’s Bus Improvement Program, are beyond city government’s control. Improving the reliability and reach of the very popular Charm City circulator, however, is doable in local hands.

There are legitimate arguments to be made about the overall cost of the east-west Red Line, the disruption of business and vehicular traffic during construction and the accuracy of ridership projections. But the decision to leave $900 million federal dollars on the table makes absolutely no sense. This is a project that would have finally connected other transportation modes and created a large number of city-based jobs. An added negative was that unlike DC’s Purple Line, the Red Line’s economics did not lend themselves to attracting private investment. If a simpler, less expensive alternative were created, particularly in a way that produced private financial partners, wouldn’t that create major employment opportunities especially for residents of East and West Baltimore?

The same is true of the long-delayed and economically critical reconstruction of the Baltimore & Potomac Tunnel, a large, albeit expensive undertaking, but one with huge regional economic payoffs. Here again, an all-hands local, state and federal private sector initiative would eliminate what the press regularly refers to as the major choke point in east coast freight and passenger rail, and create employment at the same time.

A third possibility would be a Mayor-led initiative to create a large scale, architecturally striking development project somewhere in the city other than the waterfront. Cities are not only about people, they are also about aesthetics, about how they look. A well-designed building or group of buildings where there is now a large tract of vacant land would be a great accomplishment for any Mayor, would be an antidote to the bland existing skyline and could become Baltimore’s iconic signature. One very obvious location is the Amtrak property adjacent to Penn Station, the city’s principal transportation gateway.
Accelerating this long-stalled project would also require aggressive all-hands collaboration, but getting it done would give the city an enormous economic boost. It would create jobs, and, not incidentally, ensure the future of the regenerating commercial and residential neighborhoods to the Station’s north and south.

Finally, balancing the need for affordable housing for low and moderate income residents with that for encouraging development of market rate housing suggests revisiting the idea of an independent, City-created land bank. Philadelphia has done this recently, to aggregate public and privately owned and abandoned real estate and simplifying its availability for redevelopment. While not a new idea, it has never gained sufficient traction in Baltimore for it to be tried. Because of its potential as an economic development tool and potential job creator, it should at least be reconsidered.

**Sustainability**

There are two basic elements to creating an environmentally responsible and sustainable city: creating the capital assets necessary for environmental stewardship and preparing to recover the city’s essential systems following a major shock, whether natural or manmade.

Preparedness in the latter instance requires a comprehensive regional strategy, in which Baltimore City is only one of many players. But city government enjoys crucial leadership opportunities in its day-to-day operations.

Rising water levels in the near future are certainties. One needs only to observe the streets and basements of Fell’s Point after relatively little rainfall or remember the effect of the last major hurricane on harbor area businesses and institutions to imagine future crises. In Chicago, city government was an early adapter of green roof technology, and New Orleans for the most obvious reasons has become a pioneer in flood preparation. And after the devastation of Hurricane Sandy, New York City has been investing extensively in disaster preparedness.

Especially as solar technology becomes increasingly less expensive, Baltimore City has the opportunity to greatly reduce its carbon footprint by outfitting its own buildings with solar devices and providing incentives to property owners to do the same.
Baltimore has had an office of sustainability for some time, but given greater resources and prominence could make a more definitive statement about how seriously the government is taking environmental stewardship.

The same with public parks. The transformation over the past decade and a half of Patterson Park from dangerous and unkempt eyesore to being named one of the country’s best and “coolest” urban parks shows what persistence and resident energy can accomplish, along with private investment and public funding, though unfortunately the latter has been stagnant in recent years.

Baltimore is blessed with parkland disproportionate to its area, but large parks are very expensive to restore and maintain, and difficult to light and police. Not so with smaller neighborhood parks, of which there are far too few in the city. Their upkeep is much the opposite of large tracts of land and, additionally, present opportunities for private sponsorships and partnerships in creation and maintenance with community associations, which embrace them as the important assets they are.

Another interesting idea, suggested by University of Pennsylvania Emeritus Professor Witold Rybcznski years ago in this widely read “Downsizing Cites” in The Atlantic (October, 1995), is divestiture of abandoned city-owned land. The idea is to package large tracts of contiguous real estate and office for sale, on condition that the land would no longer be part of the city. Sale would provide an immediate infusion of revenue and, the theory goes, by being near the city but relieved of taxes and the need to provide public services, might well prove attractive to private developers.

As a footnote, we should also keep in mind that the emergent green economy is a source of less skilled employment for those who most need it.

**Getting Started**

There are many forms a 21st Century Baltimore Initiative could take. As examples, New York has “ONE NYC” and New Orleans “Resilient New Orleans.” Smaller and closer to home, Norfolk has adopted a civic strategy called “NFK Resilient City.”

But deciding as a community to indeed act as one and move aggressively and optimistically toward a fairer and more prosperous future suggests:
• The Mayor must define the initiative, recruit the key actors and act as the leading presence throughout the process.
• The plan must embrace the entire community, with outreach and ongoing communication with every constituency. New York’s two-year planning process sought the ideas and advice of thousands of residents, city and regional leaders and a special Mayor’s Advisory Council.
• Allow form to follow function; that is, start with a very small planning group and build out from there, but only as necessary. A dedicated senior staff position, reporting directly to the Mayor should be appointed early on to direct the project day to day.
• Establish formal indicators of progress: goals, interim targets, completion status, accountability, funding sources and their status.
• Report progress publically, clearly and often.

In setting priorities, what gets done and in what order will require a flexible decision structure and strong Mayoral direction throughout. It’s about creating a growing, prosperous, safe, and sustainable city that provides broad economic opportunity.

As we continue to see, there is a sense of urgency and rare agreement on the need to recreate Baltimore. A candidate who seizes this moment and provides leadership, rather than simply moderating among competing interests, will enjoy a great and welcome legacy.

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