

RESERVOIR HILL IMPROVEMENT COUNCIL
People Powered Change - Educate, Organize, Mobilize

A Review of 2006

RHIC's work advanced in five major arenas in 2006

City Wide Solutions to Local Issues

- RHIC developed more relationships with varied associations and organizations than in any previous year, through venues such as Healthy Neighborhoods, the inclusionary housing campaign, coordinated comments on the Comprehensive Master Plan, the SCOPE Task Force, the Maryland Association of Housing Counselors, the organization's work and reputation around greening projects, the Better Schools Initiative that drew RHIC into the city-wide school facilities planning process, and discussions fostering coordination between communities.
- Close working relationships were established with public officials on education.

Improving Housing

- Developed a comprehensive vacant house strategy; 61 use & occupancy permits were issued at formerly vacant houses in 2006.
- Increased code enforcement legal action on privately-owned vacant buildings.
- Partnered with Rebuilding Together to complete home repairs for 40 low-income homeowners, exceeding \$850,000 in investment.
- Partnered with Pennrose Properties to redevelop 44 houses formerly owned by the Housing Authority; 64 units are now leased to low and moderate income families.
- Promoted low-interest Healthy Neighborhoods home rehab loans.
- Improved the implementation and effectiveness of Project SCOPE.
- Assisted 150 people with housing counseling or financial management.

Public Education

- Highlighted the importance of neighborhood schools in urban revitalization, and helped to prevent John Eager Howard from closing.

Mobilizing Residents & Building Leadership

- Coordinated with 14 organizations and 11 member groups to turn out more than 700 volunteers on 32 projects and events. This was a very big year for resident involvement and the recognition of RHIC's capacity for effective projects.
- Created new resident leadership structures through the formation of a Development Monitoring Team and Advocates Circle.
- Engaged more than 250 residents in the Better Schools Initiative.
- Preserved Bus Route 5 service for elderly residents of Lakeview Towers and other bus riders, and created new relationships with active Lakeview Towers residents.

Uplifting the People

- Re-designed RHIC's housing counseling services to create a new set of services to better assist the majority of Reservoir Hill residents in building wealth.
- Started a new tenant organizing initiative aimed to re-establish tenant organization, better address tenant issues, and increase the role that tenants play in community leadership.

A LITTLE MORE DETAIL

The following expands on the five major areas of advances outlined on page one.

City Wide Solutions to Local Problems

2006 was an important year in RHIC's emergence in city-wide venues. The organization has played a strong voice in advancing the debate on affordable housing, is playing a prominent role in the inclusionary housing campaign, took a seat on the Project SCOPE Task Force and has been fostering improvements in the program for its future implementation around the city, has built a broader discussion around the problem of vacant houses, and has created an important relationship with the Public Justice Center around tenant issues. In addition, RHIC's advocacy for greater coordination among community associations has started to bear fruit in newly established dialogues among a set of associations.

Several important steps were taken toward fostering better city-wide information sharing and coordination among community associations. The first meeting of groups from Baltimore's west side was held in the Community Room on Callow Avenue, with six groups from the Gwynns Falls Parkway area represented. There was strong interest in working together in some form of alliance, and a decision was made to collectively sponsor a briefing of public officials on collective issues of these westside communities. In addition, contact was started among a set of groups from different parts of the city to re-initiate a dialogue toward fostering better coordination. Earlier in the year, dialogues in which RHIC participated led to coordination around comments on the City Master Plan and then fed into the work on inclusionary housing being guided through the City's Task Force on Inclusionary Housing.

The *Sun* printed letters to the editor written by an RHIC Board Member and a staff member in response to an article on Project SCOPE by Eric Siegel. The letters asserted the importance of community organization in fostering community development, and on the positive developments of the last years in Reservoir Hill.

Improving Housing

Rebuilding Together completed the second year of a partnership with RHIC, resulting in 40 low-income homeowners receiving significant home repairs worth \$850,000, and more than 800 volunteers engaged in house repair and beautification projects. This partnership has not only enabled long term community members to receive needed repairs but also allowed many of those residents to upgrade their living conditions and remain in community.

RHIC secured a seat on the Project SCOPE Task Force and has been influential in improving City tracking of vacant buildings sold through SCOPE to ensure their renovation, and in prompting action on items such as the lack of a substantive requirement for owner occupancy.

Code enforcement has been stepped up on privately-owned vacant houses, with receivership emerging as an important tool. Of the 124 privately-owned vacant houses in Reservoir Hill, 40 properties are at close of 2006 under some form of code enforcement legal activity. RHIC monitors code violations, identifies the most egregious cases, and forwards them to Code Enforcement for prosecution.

RHIC developed a marketing plan to promote the Healthy Neighborhoods loan program and encourage continued movement in the real estate market. Success as measured by loan originations was limited in 2006. However, 2007 promises to see much greater loan volume due to the new marketing plan, improved relationships with realtors, and the collective sale of eight vacant properties on Linden Avenue by the city to homeowner rehabbers.

RHIC submitted grant proposals to fund a community-driven market study and design specifications for the Whitelock Street Corridor. RHIC had earlier coordinated a community critique of what was widely perceived as a weak RFP for the vacant lots along the Whitelock Street Corridor. This project should begin in spring 2007.

The critical importance of RHIC's monitoring and tracking capacity developed over the last two years was highlighted in several ways in 2006. A prime example was the discovery in May 2006 that 51 Vacant Building Notices (VBN) had been removed from vacant properties, yet only 10 of those buildings had been issued Use & Occupancy permits. As late as August, RHIC learned that VBNs were continuing to be canceled despite Use & Occupancy permits not being issued. As a result of RHIC's monitoring capacity and ability to advocate, numerous VBNs were reinstated, and by the end of 2006 the problem had been resolved. The City also took steps to correct its own database and tracking system to ensure the cancellation errors were not repeated.

Public Education

The Better Schools Initiative engaged more 250 residents locally and in the citywide facilities planning process, highlighting the importance of neighborhood schools, and resulting in stopping consideration of closing John Eager Howard Elementary School, getting funds designated for renovations, and establishing a Parent-Teacher-Community Organization (PTCO) at the school. The campaign to save John Eager Howard was the most extensive engagement of residents in a large scale campaign RHIC had undertaken. Those who participated got a taste of fighting a local battle at the city level.

Mobilizing Residents & Building Leadership

The Route 5 bus line through Reservoir Hill was saved from being routed around the community, preserving the service for residents of Lakeview Towers and other bus riders. RHIC's public comments were part of a larger public outcry against bus line changes resulting in a halt state-wide of bus route changes. The Reservoir Hill campaign was another example of the positive impacts of participating in a larger public arena to create wider public solutions to local problems. Without the state-wide decision we might not have been able to preserve the # 5 line in Reservoir Hill. Without local campaigns, the state-wide pressure may not have been adequate to succeed. The campaign brought together homeowners and renters to move the bus line off streets being damaged by the

high traffic without eliminating the line from running through Reservoir Hill as planned by the MTA. Nearly 100 residents participated in some aspect of this planning process. The issue was crucial for elderly and disabled residents of Lakeview Towers who need access to public transportation that services areas where they shop, go for medical appointments, and have other business, but the issue of public transportation was also critical as an aspect of urban revitalization. Residents must have access to a variety of public transportation options to connect with employment and other opportunities.

The first Green Fair was held highlighting the importance of greening in urban revitalization. RHIC was joined by Parks & People Foundation, Community Greens, Department of Recreation & Parks, Rebuilding Together, and Councilman Jim Kraft, at the Green Fair press conference.

Word of RHIC's ability to teach volunteers and engage in substantive greening efforts reached a height in 2006. SPARK, Civic Leadership Institute, and the Jewish Volunteer Connection collectively sent 200 volunteers to Reservoir Hill, engaging in 11 projects under RHIC's guidance.

Thirteen resident driven neighborhood projects involved more than 100 residents in nine neighborhoods of Reservoir Hill.

Seventy volunteers worked over two days with RHIC and Lakeside Neighbors Coalition (LNC) to completely restore or enhance 16 front lawns. Five additional Member Organizations and a local church participated as well as the Master Gardeners Association, and students from Johns Hopkins University. It was the biggest example of the year of cross-neighborhood work, and the most extensive greening effort undertaken by a Member Organization in concert with RHIC.

RHIC initiated the community's first Green Master Plan. The Green Master Plan provides a general framework to guide community greening activities. In addition to restoring parks and vacant lots, and planting trees, the plan analyzes the condition and functionality of pedestrian walkways, streets, signage, lighting, proposed bike routes, public transportation routes, bus stops, and historic features such as brick pavers and notable monuments and buildings. By analyzing the physical layout of the community, strategies can be developed to improve public safety, sanitation conditions, and other common community concerns.

Ninety iron tree well fences are being installed in the southeast quadrant of Reservoir Hill following up on a resident-inspired idea for beautifying the streets.

The Reservoir Street Park will be completely redesigned by 2008 after residents and RHIC developed a new plan for the park and successfully advocated for City funding for the rehab of the park.

A group of mostly long-term residents was formed into a Development Monitoring Team coordinated by RHIC's Housing Coordinator. The team stays in contact with key developers at least once per month to get project updates. The Team is a response to the challenge of having to track multiple development projects, and ensure that developers know they have to be responsive to the communities in which they are working.

The Leadership Assembly established in 2005 continues to meet and be regarded as a leadership center for the community. The Assembly has been important in forging community opinion. For example, the Assembly reached consensus in favor of inclusionary housing legislation. The Assembly's biggest challenge is having consistent representation from a majority of RHIC Member Organizations. At present, 11 of 21 official Member Organizations have attended a majority of Assembly Meetings. Only six have attended all Assembly meetings.

The Advocates Circle was created at the end of 2006 to begin operations in 2007 as the first formal organization of RHIC supporters to advocate on a wide array of policy and program issues. The group will get its start with inclusionary housing legislation.

Uplifting the People

One of the most significant steps taken in 2006 was the transformation of RHIC's well-established housing counseling program to a Family Asset Building Program. RHIC has since 2004 offered housing counseling for first-time home buyers. The intent of the program was to help residents prepare for home purchase. Despite more than 140 people receiving housing counseling in 2006, enabling many to purchase homes elsewhere in the city, soaring house prices in Reservoir Hill have meant that a strictly homeownership program is not benefiting the majority of Reservoir Hill residents. Over the last two years this program expanded by necessity to include credit counseling, advocating increases in affordable housing, and addressing the increase in exotic mortgages that take advantage of low-income families. In 2006 we determined that a deeper change was needed.

RHIC entered into a contract with Penrose Management to provide supportive services to the residents of the former Housing Authority of Baltimore City scattered site housing in Reservoir Hill – some 60 families. The arrangement allows RHIC to extend service provision past those immediate residents to initiate a program focused on increasing family stability and social cohesion of low-income families throughout Reservoir Hill.

Building on RHIC's capacity to provide effective workshops and counseling, RHIC restructured the monthly workshops into three components: housing counseling, credit counseling, and financial literacy or money management partnering with with Maryland Consumer Rights Coalition for the credit counseling portion.

The housing counseling component includes homebuyer education and one-on-one counseling to first-time homebuyers, educating clients about budgeting, credit repair, real estate contracts, and mortgage products. Housing counseling also raises awareness among homeowners and prospective homeowners of the risks involved in some loan and re-financing programs.

In addition, RHIC has established a relationship with Seedco to assist residents with securing and keeping public services that strengthen their economic base.

Key Issues for 2007 and Beyond

The Mixed-Income Vision

RHIC's mixed-income community strategy rests upon the neighborhood's ability to offer quality housing (both rental and homeownership) to a wide range of income levels, including low and moderate income households, particularly for long-term residents.

The challenge of last year remains the challenge for this year. The market as it stands is not producing such housing. Four of the homeownership units being produced in 2007 through the partnership with Pennrose Properties will be for families earning less than \$75,000 a year. Two homes being renovated by HRS Homes on Callow Avenue will be sold to families earning about \$60,000 a year and two more to families earning less approximately \$75,000 a year. When built, the buildings intended for construction on the Druid Park Lake Drive vacant lots are to include 20% of the units available to families earning less than \$75,000 per year. Two years ago, Beth Am Synagogue spearheaded a small development project producing two renovated houses available to families earning a similar income. Those numbers are a handful by comparison to the much higher market sales, and even most of those are beyond the reach of truly moderate-income households.

RHIC is exploring a partnership that would re-develop the remaining publicly owned vacant houses, perhaps 10 houses, with half of the units available to families earning \$45,000 a year and half to families earning up to \$60,000 a year. Still, are those numbers sufficient to create a truly mixed-income community?

Further, a functioning mixed-income community implies that all sectors of the community have an equitable voice in community affairs. Creating that capacity is as big a challenge as producing the housing.

The Importance of Community Organization

With a staff, following City planning and actions on big projects as outlined in this report are difficult. *Without* staff, *without* organization, it would be impossible. **Creating long-term organizing centers for all communities is important if neighborhoods really are going to be first, and if people really are to have an effective voice.**

Monitoring and the ability to take action are critical for any community. Without the capacity to track and understand housing and policy issues, and the capacity to organize and advocate, communities are very vulnerable. More trained organizers are needed.

Communities need to address local needs while becoming a force in City-wide and regional solutions. This requires greater coordination among communities, cross-community information sharing, and organizer training. **Solving the political problem of the isolation and weakness of communities is the key issue of the day.**

Expanding What We Think of as Community Development

Neighborhood schools are crucial to community well-being. They promote the simple philosophy that school, community, and family are bound together and must work

together to help children learn and succeed. **Integration of school improvement into community development, and connecting the school community and the broader community is essential.**

Better Access to the City

City processes for disposition of publicly owned property need to be more open to community involvement and more straightforward. The public has a right to comment upon and influence the use of publicly owned property, with a clear, simple, and direct way to exercise that right.

Priorities for 2007

Housing & Development

- Progress on development awards; most importantly resolution of the Druid Park Lake drive lots issue (more than two years since the award of exclusive negotiating rights to CIMG there is still no agreed upon sales price)
- A community driven plan for the Whitelock Street Corridor
- Progress on reducing the number of vacants
- Continue concerted action by the city to address code violations, including use of receivership to deal with the extensive problem of privately-owned vacant buildings
- Acquisition, by RHIC and a partner, of the remaining publicly owned vacant buildings for development as affordable homes
- Landlords taking more responsibility for their properties

Public Schools

- An answer from the City and the State on school funding promised as a result of the school facilities planning process
- Completion of all projects slated for John Eager Howard Elementary as directed by the BCPSS Facilities Master Plan

Greening Reservoir Hill

- Funding for complete restoration of the park located at 751 Reservoir Street
- Complete the Green Master Plan

Legislation

- Passage of strong inclusionary housing legislation
- A larger and better funded Affordable Housing Trust
- Progress on legislation eliminating the practice of dumping possessions from evictions on public areas

Organizing & Uplifting the People

- Establishing the Family Asset Building Program and seeing more families moving toward stability
- A stronger and organized voice for Reservoir Hill tenants
- Better organization across the city between communities
- More activists in more places
- A strong political voice for urban communities