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From the Baltimore Sun

Sun Special Report

Building on fragile hope

A tenant for the American Brewery building offers reason for optimism, but experts say reviving the adjacent East Baltimore community will require major public investment

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Sun Reporter

June 26, 2006



A Neighborhood Abandoned Part 2

Eric Booker was asleep in his grandparents' house in East Baltimore when his grandfather, Frederick Booker, came to him in a dream. "I need you to take care of Granny," the dying old man told him.

The next day, Eric visited Fred at Johns Hopkins Hospital. "I touched him on the forehead, grabbed his right wrist with my right hand and said, 'You don't have to worry about Granny.'"

Twenty-four hours later, his grandfather was dead. That was in 1993. Three years later, Booker left Northern Virginia to move into 1705 N. Washington St., where his grandmother, Leola, still lived and where he had grown up, just around the corner from the neighborhood's most prodigious structure, the vacant, city-owned American Brewery.

Over the next several years, Booker bought nine properties in their block and the one just to the south. He paid prices ranging from \$6,000 to \$25,000 and set about fixing them up. He took one as his own residence and rented out most of the others, including a former drug stash house.

"Part of me taking care of Granny was to get the neighborhood right again," said Booker, 43, who had held a series of corporate and nonprofit jobs before taking a position heading Baltimore's housing inspection division two years ago.

Booker undertook the renovations during the period of the greatest decline in the area around the brewery. During the 1990s, the population fell at four times the rate of the city as a whole, and the number of vacant properties in the blocks around the brewery tripled. Decades of abandonment by residents, landlords and businesses had left the area almost in ruins.

For Booker to realize his larger dream of improving not just a couple of blocks but the neighborhood at large, it will take much more than the efforts of a few individuals. Many of the streets in the area are worse than his was when he started, with more vacancies and more crumbling buildings.

"How," he asks, "do you bring the neighborhood back if you don't have public and private investments?"

It is a fundamental problem facing many older Rust Belt cities beset by older housing stock, weak local economies and large concentrations of poor people. Like Baltimore, many of those cities have managed to save some neighborhoods, but limited funding and attention have also left them with acres of blight, such as the brewery area.

The abandonment of the blocks around the shuttered brewery illustrates the difficulties of drawing private investment to decayed urban neighborhoods - as well as the Solomonic choice facing public officials. With limited public and private resources, which areas do you invest in and what happens to those left out?

The experience of Baltimore and other cities demonstrates that such areas can be turned around - but at a steep price. At a minimum, urban experts say, it will take an investment of \$20 million or more to revitalize the brewery area, a sum that is far beyond anything that is currently being contemplated.

Successive city administrations in Baltimore have largely agreed with Booker that the area will not improve without public intervention, although they have been reluctant to expend substantial resources there. For the most part, the city has taken a beachhead approach to the neighborhood, repeatedly proposing renovation of the American Brewery as a catalyst for revitalization of the whole area.

All such efforts in the past have foundered. The American Brewery has remained empty since 1973, and the process of decay around it has deepened, ensuring that the task of any future revival will be that much more daunting, that much more expensive.

Meanwhile, the city's attentions, and the limited available funds, were shifted to other needy areas of Baltimore, of which there were no shortage.

Now, the city is once again trying to spur the revival of the blocks around the brewery. And once again, it is counting on the American Brewery property to lead the way.

Last fall, Baltimore officials selected a group to redevelop the property as the headquarters of a nonprofit social services agency. It is unquestionably a positive step, but one that residents, urban experts and even city officials agree will not be nearly enough to revitalize the area. Without a more extensive renewal plan, the redevelopment and occupancy of one building - even an enormous one - will not address the deterioration that surrounds it.

"I cannot think of a single example of a neighborhood that turned around because of the rehabilitation of a single property," said Sandra J. Newman, director of the [Johns Hopkins University's](#) Institute for Policy Studies. "More wide-sweeping revitalization that affects multiple properties or blocks instead of just one property appears to be a prerequisite for successful neighborhood turnarounds, though even when this is done, success is not guaranteed."

Once-vibrant area

The area didn't need revitalization when Booker's grandparents and their three daughters moved there in 1952. Or when famed boxing trainer Mack Lewis, 87, and his wife, Pearl, arrived on East Lanvale Street in 1954. Or in 1960 when Lucy Curbeam and her husband and twin daughters settled a few houses down on North Washington Street.

On the back of a piece of flowered stationery, Curbeam, an 83-year-old retired laundry worker who lives with a granddaughter and a great-granddaughter, scrawls a diagram of the 1600 block of N. Washington St. as she remembers it when she first moved there. The map shows a movie theater and a grocery store across the street and a lunchroom on the corner amid clusters of rowhouses. The notepaper isn't big enough to show the drug stores on the streets that cross both ends of her block, or the bakery 1 1/2 blocks away - all of which are long

gone.

"You could go across the street and get your food, go around the corner and get your medicine," Curbeam recalls. "Every house had people in it."

But even then, big changes were under way, not only near the brewery but across the city. Suburbanization was accelerating. In the 1950s, Baltimore lost people for the first time since the initial count by the U.S. Census Bureau in 1790. By the time Curbeam's family arrived in the neighborhood, a racial makeover was in progress.

A white, multi-ethnic neighborhood dating back to the early 20th century, and once populated by people with surnames such as Muscilino, Szamborski and Oettel, was becoming a solid, working class black neighborhood. Curbeam and her husband, Ulysses, a laborer at Bethlehem Steel, were typical of the families moving from apartments on the east side into their first houses.

Another trend was less obvious: By the end of the 1950s, an increasing number of properties were owned by real estate companies. It was the first inkling that the neighborhood would be dominated not by homeowners but by landlords and speculators - a pattern that often corresponds to the decline of a city neighborhood. It did here.

Still, the area retained most of its residents - and much of its vitality - through the 1960s, even after the riots that wracked nearby streets in the wake of the 1968 assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Despite sporadic looting and burning, the blocks around the beer plant emerged better off than many other inner-city neighborhoods.

"It was a relatively solid neighborhood," said Thomas J. D'Alesandro III, the mayor from 1967 to 1971. "I always remembered it wasn't one to worry about."

Free fall

In 1973, two events occurred at the American Brewery that would have a long-term impact on the surrounding neighborhood.

The first was the closing of the plant. Beer had been produced at the site since the Civil War, when John Frederick Wiessner, a Bavarian immigrant, built a brewery on what was then the northern edge of the city. The brew house's closing was part of a wider trend of vanishing manufacturing jobs around the city. Also, it left empty the grandest structure in the neighborhood.

The second occurrence was the brewery's addition to the National Register of Historic Places. While commemorating the building's eclectic industrial design and making it eligible for federal preservation grants and tax credits, the designation prohibited razing or significantly altering the structure, which limited the options for redevelopment of the property.

Whatever renewal might happen to the neighborhood, the one immutable factor was the presence of the American Brewery. Given to the city in 1977, it would continue to tower over the neighborhood as it would loom over the planning by one city administration and then another. Officials could not help but regard the brewery as a puzzle that, if solved, would trigger a rebirth in the vicinity.

But they couldn't solve it, not William Donald Schaefer and not Kurt L. Schmoke, who at least conceived of a larger renewal plan for the area around the building. Both mayors tried to lure investors and tenants into the brewery. Neither succeeded. During the Schaefer administration, an electronics firm occupied a bottling plant that is part of the brewery complex, but it went bankrupt. During the Schmoke administration, a Rite Aid opened on vacant land behind the brewery but closed after failing to generate enough business.

The one lasting success has been a senior citizens center and low-income apartment complex that opened in 2002 across from the brewery on what was once the brewmaster's house and stables.

"The brewery became a real drag on development," Schmoke recalled. "In order to do anything significant there,

you needed a partnership. Local government didn't have enough money on its own. We needed a partner. When we didn't get that, we moved to other areas of the city. There were so many other areas that had pressing needs."

Without a substantial renewal effort, the blocks around the brewery went from decline to free fall. In the 1990s, the area lost nearly 45 percent of its population. The median price of a property sale, which was \$30,000 in 1989, never rose beyond that level; last year, it was barely half that amount, even as prices in many other parts of the city soared.

Crime and decay pushed out some residents.

In 1993, after three people were shot on his block within one year, James Redd gave up on the neighborhood. He moved his family out of the house that his mother had owned at 1710 N. Castle St., even though he had just renovated it. "I couldn't see raising my kids right there," said Redd, 53, an Army veteran and hospital worker.

Others, including Lucy Curbeam's twin daughters, left for more attractive areas of the city's outer ring and its suburbs. "Everybody at that time wanted to go for bigger and better things," said one of the twins, Ernestine Gause, a clerk for Verizon.

Aside from Booker and a few others, not many saw much chance for a turnaround. As Carl Stokes, who represented the brewery area on the City Council from 1987 to 1995, recently put it, "Nothing grabbed it from going down."

Models for success

Just as the abandonment of the blocks around the brewery is not unique within the city, neither is the problem limited to Baltimore.

It's a growing issue in close-in suburbs as well as pockets of urban areas of the South and the West in the United States. But abandonment is most pronounced in older Rust Belt cities of the Northeast and the Midwest. Besides Baltimore, cities with 10,000 or more abandoned properties include Detroit, Cleveland and Philadelphia.

Despite the persistence of the problem, experts point to several successful revitalization efforts in various stages of completion here and around the country.

One is - coincidentally - Brewerytown in North Philadelphia, an abandoned industrial area that was once the center of that city's beer-making industry and is now part of a citywide effort to reclaim abandoned areas.

Through a combination of conversion and new construction, the \$100 million project that borders a park not far from downtown will create 700 units of mostly market-rate townhouses and loft apartments on 14 acres.

Philadelphia contributed more than \$1 million for acquisition and demolition expenses, provided a \$700,000 loan to the developer and set up a \$250,000 fund for grants to nearby homeowners for improvements. In addition, the project is benefiting from \$1 million in federal Low Income Housing Tax Credits to help finance 61 affordable apartments.

Perhaps more instructive is Fall Creek Place in Indianapolis, an acclaimed development in a 26-square-block community just north of downtown, where three-quarters of the properties were abandoned and violence was so pervasive that the area was dubbed "Dodge City."

The last of the project's planned 400 homes are scheduled to be completed by the end of the year, eight years after the city began acquiring land. Following a blueprint produced by Urban Design Associates, the Pittsburgh firm that did the master plan for the East Baltimore biotech project, the city used \$10 million in federal funds to acquire properties and provide forgivable loans to homebuyers. It also supplied an equal amount in city bond money to pay for neighborhood improvements ranging from new sidewalks and streetlights to new parks and a trail along Fall Creek.

The project, which attracted \$55 million in private investment, has been so successful that the city has extended it to include several more blocks and another 100 houses, funded by a smaller city bond.

"We have a viable, safe neighborhood that wasn't there five years ago," said Maury Plambeck, director of the city's Department of Metropolitan Development.

Many experts also point to Richmond's seven-year-old Neighborhoods in Bloom program, in which the city singled out a half-dozen neighborhoods to receive the bulk of its redevelopment funds.

Although no single strategy works for all neighborhoods, concentrating resources as part of a well-conceived vision is necessary for success, according to Alan Mallach, the author of a new book, *Bringing Buildings Back: From Abandoned Properties to Community Assets*.

"You can't do everything everywhere simultaneously. There aren't enough resources in terms of dollars and talented people to do that," said Mallach, research director of the National Housing Institute, a Montclair, N.J., nonprofit.

"The clearer the strategy, the better your planning, the more likely you are to succeed," he added.

Money is an object

If funds were unlimited, revitalizing the brewery area in Baltimore would be easy. Salvageable buildings could be rehabilitated. Compromised structures could be razed and replaced by spanking new rowhouses or apartment complexes that would attract renters and owners - some subsidized, some not - followed by retailers eager for their patronage. If money were no object, there might be other flourishes as well: a park, flower gardens, a recreation center, a medical clinic, a community swimming pool. Social services could be included as well - day care, job training and remedial education.

Mallach estimates that up to \$20 million in public funds would have to be spent just to begin to turn around the neighborhood. Those funds would be used to acquire property, demolish derelict buildings and make up the difference between construction costs and the market prices that new homes would fetch.

"In trying to create a market, the first houses inevitably have to be subsidized," he said.

But funds for inner-city redevelopment are limited, and distressed areas such as the brewery area must compete for the relatively scant public and private dollars available for urban renewal projects. Politics, logic and chance all play a part in the decision on who gets what - and when. None of that has worked in the brewery's favor in the past, or figures to in the near future. City officials acknowledge that any major expenditure of public resources in the brewery area will have to await progress on a lengthy list of continuing renewal initiatives.

"I have a responsibility to the city to bite off what I can chew and to do it really well," said Christopher Shea, the city's deputy housing commissioner for development. "If I extend too far, I do everyone a disservice."

Compounding the problem is that costs of development have gone up, while federal funding for neighborhood revival has gone down. Since 2001, Baltimore's annual share of federal Community Development Block Grants has dropped from \$30.9 million to \$22.8 million.

It's not that the city didn't take on big redevelopment projects. Money and attention went to places other than the brewery area.

In the early 1990s, Sandtown-Winchester, then a desolate pocket of West Baltimore, became the beneficiary of a \$25 million redevelopment project of 300 new and rehabilitated homes - a large-scale effort at one time considered for the east side. A few years later, as part of the federal HOPE VI program, the city began demolishing dilapidated public housing high-rises and replacing them with mixed-income rowhouse communities, but none was near the brewery.

The federal \$100 million empowerment zone program, awarded to the city in late 1994 to revive decayed neighborhoods, did encompass parts of East Baltimore, but not the brewery area. Neither does the continuing \$1 billion east-side redevelopment plan that will replace rundown blocks with life sciences buildings and hundreds of units of new and renovated houses. Renewal projects are also under way in Barclay in North Baltimore and Poppleton in West Baltimore.

Despite less federal funding, city officials contend - and some urban experts agree - that in some ways this is an opportune time to redevelop distressed areas.

One reason is that the city's decades-long population decline has leveled off, meaning new pockets of abandonment are no longer being created. Also, the price of land and limits on growth are making suburban development more difficult and more expensive.

The recent projects that Baltimore has undertaken all have one thing in common: proximity to thriving neighborhoods or healthy major institutions - part of the city's strategy of building on strength.

Barclay, for example, is just south of the bustling [Charles Village](#) community. Poppleton is next-door to the University of Maryland biotech park and near two of the attractive new HOPE VI developments. The east-side project adjoins the Johns Hopkins Hospital complex.

Those and other distressed areas in earlier stages of redevelopment - such as Park Heights in Northwest Baltimore and Uplands in Southwest - also benefited from having comprehensive plans that identified space for different kinds of housing, parks and reconfigured streets.

In contrast, the blocks around the brewery have neither vibrant nearby communities nor major institutions to help attract private investment.

"It's not an area where the market forces of [Patterson Park](#) are at work," said Robert C. Embry Jr., head of the Abell Foundation and a former city housing commissioner and federal housing official, referring to the resurgent Southeast Baltimore neighborhood. "It doesn't have any natural amenity, like a park or water or a lot of leafy areas, or being next to Hopkins."

Still, Mayor Martin O'Malley envisions a sort of domino effect that one day will reach the brewery area, beginning at the harbor in [Fells Point](#) and Canton and sweeping through the east-side development project and finally reaching the brewery area.

"It's in a natural flight path of redevelopment that's sweeping up from the water," O'Malley said, "and then Johns Hopkins pushes that wave still further north."

That is many years away. By then, without major government intervention, there might be little of the brewery area worth saving.

'Talking ... grows old'

With no nearby strengths to build upon, the city intends to manufacture one, again pinning hopes on a revitalized brewery.

"I really don't see a lot happening until the American Brewery project takes off and announces to the market, 'This is the place to be,'" said Shea.

In May 2005, the O'Malley administration asked for proposals to redevelop the property. Only one came in. In November, the city selected a proposal from a group led by Struever Bros., Eccles & Rouse to turn the brewery into the Baltimore headquarters of Humanim Inc., a social services agency. Final details of the contract with the city are still not worked out.

This marks a milestone, the first time since the brewery's closing in 1973 that an occupant stands committed to

move in. The developers are among the biggest cheerleaders for the \$21 million project - both for what it can do for the brewery and, more importantly, for the surrounding area. But even they warn that time is running out. The project, they say, will give "what may be the American Brewery campus its best and last chance at new life."

C. William Struever, the chief executive officer of Struever Bros., said the American Brewery redevelopment could be a "terrific icon for that whole neighborhood" and a "catalyst to fix up that entire area."

"Large-scale investments in edge neighborhoods create economic energy," said Struever, who has a record of turning vacant industrial buildings into thriving apartment, office and commercial projects. His past projects include Tide Point in Locust Point and Tindeco Wharf and the American Can Company in Canton.

Humanim promises to provide on-site services. The nonprofit, which will own the brewery building, says it will relocate 250 workers to the brewery and hire 60 more, most of them from the neighborhood. It also says it will offer its expertise in grant-writing to churches and community groups.

"We're meeting with as many people as we can, seeing if we can coalesce to make sure that the neighborhood is vibrant and successful," said President and CEO Henry E. Posko Jr.

Indeed, some urban experts contend that a project such as the brewery revitalization could energize residents in the area.

"If you lived in a neighborhood like this, it's hard to get motivated and excited about change," said Joseph Schilling, a professor at Virginia Tech's Metropolitan Institute and co-founder of the National Vacant Properties Campaign, which provides assistance to Baltimore and six other cities. "If people can galvanize around a project, that in itself can be a tremendous benefit."

Yet some neighborhood leaders, conditioned to disappointment, are skeptical that a brewery-centric approach will spark the kind of renaissance city officials seem to predict.

Ornat Erby, a longtime resident and community activist, questions the extent of the spillover effect of a renovated building filled mostly with office workers.

"What does that do for the community? Nothing," said Erby, who lives in a rowhouse near the brewery. His parents bought the house in the 1950s. What residents need, Erby says, are more services and retail shopping.

The city is taking other steps in the neighborhood.

It has acquired the right to foreclose on about 300 abandoned and tax-delinquent properties in the area, as part of its anti-blight initiative. Also, the city, which owns about 100 properties in the area, has identified four blocks around the brewery as priorities for acquisition.

Still lacking is an overall plan. Broad as well as block-by-block decisions need to be made. How many people can be expected to live in the area? Should blocks of empty lots, such as the 1800 block of N. Castle St., be preserved as open space or offered for redevelopment? Should blocks with mostly vacant houses be torn down or rehabbed? As the city takes title to abandoned properties - a process that could take several months - which ones should it bundle for redevelopment?

Arnold Williams, chairman of the Baltimore Development Corp., the city's economic development agency, said, "I think it's clear that the city has neglected [the area]. The city ... has to step up and make this area a priority."

Williams, also a member and adviser to the Southern Baptist Church, which helped develop senior housing across from the brewery, suggests that the city initiate a "conversation of interested parties, led by the religious community, because they stayed."

While many complain about the lack of a comprehensive plan, in some ways that is a red herring. A plan with no

money to see it realized is just a bundle of paper sitting on a bureaucrat's shelf.

The Rev. Milton E. Williams, pastor of New Life Evangelical Baptist Church, said he has yet to see a financial commitment to accomplish real change beyond the boundaries of the brewery campus. "Until you're able to know where the dollars are going to come from, the talking after a while grows old," he said.

Visions of progress

Amid the misery, poverty and violence, there are people who, like Eric Booker, refuse to give up on the neighborhood.

Every summer, Hopeton Davis, owner of a neighborhood bar, the Dream Tavern, hosts a neighborhood party for kids. He drags a couple of portable pools onto the sidewalk in front of his bar, grills up hot dogs, and serves juice and soft drinks.

A Jamaican immigrant, Davis came to the United States as a young man to pick fruit and later worked as a cement finisher.

"I'm here every day, so I see these people," he said. "They go to work and make minimum wage and have two or three kids."

Some churches are making plans on their own. St. Paul Community Baptist Church has its eye on a vacant lot across from the church as the site of a future Head Start center and wants to work with a community group to buy and renovate vacant houses for first-time homebuyers

The Rev. Williams led the effort to open the Turning Point methadone treatment clinic in 2003, adjacent to the New Life sanctuary on East North Avenue.

He says the clinic provides treatment to 600 people. Other than that, Williams makes no grand claims about its positive impact on the area. "I can't say it's improved the community as it relates to housing - we continue to deteriorate," he said. "I would say this place represents hope, which you can't quantify."

Last fall, Jeremy Nowak, head of the Reinvestment Fund, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit that finances revitalization in low-income communities, toured the area around the brewery at the invitation of The Sun to assess its needs.

He called the number of abandoned buildings in the blocks around the brewery "extraordinary," a reflection of the fundamental decision of people with options to live somewhere else.

"How do you change the trajectory of demand?" he asked. "Not easily, and not quickly. This is not a place where people with money are going to go because of the location and the vacants.

"The question is, 'What do you have to build from?' You look for a remaining cluster of strong blocks and figure out how you could map out from there."

Nowak, however, cautions against expecting a quick turnaround. "In any case, it's going to take 10 to 15 years," he said. "It's a hard message. It sounds cruel, it sounds cynical. But it's being realistic."

Others hope for faster action.

In the 1700 block of N. Washington St., Eric Booker and his neighbors are convinced that his efforts have discouraged drug trafficking and stabilized the street. Even with a half-dozen vacant houses on the block, there are homes with decorative metal storm doors and sidewalk planters filled with small shrubs. Still, Booker has visions that go beyond the corner.

In fact, he has a new dream involving his grandmother, who turned 86 in November, around the time the city was

selecting a developer for the American Brewery.

"I hope," he said, "that she is here long enough to see a supermarket reopen down the street."

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