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From the Baltimore Sun

City woes cry out for regional solutions

Dan Rodricks

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The story I heard the other day has become familiar: A professor moving his family to Baltimore can't afford to live anywhere near the college that hired him. Over the last five years, I've been asked to provide housing tips for relocating families, both white- and blue-collar. Two families ended up buying homes in southern Pennsylvania, one gave up trying to find a house here and a fourth rented a place in White Marsh for a year before going back to Oregon.



Experts say the Maryland economy is strong and our unemployment rate low, but further job growth appears to be limited by the lack of affordable, desirable housing for workers.

There are similar problems at many levels. A lot of low-income Baltimoreans are unable to take suburban jobs because they're far from bus lines or far from housing they can afford.

Speakers at a March conference on "work force housing" declared home prices at "crisis" levels. Since 2000, the rise in the price of the average Maryland home was four times the rise in the wage of the average Maryland worker, according to an analysis by The Sun.

Meanwhile, those who can afford them buy houses in remote places, accepting long, increasingly costly commutes to work. Open space disappears as developers turn farm fields into cul-de-sacs. Roads become more congested, schools more crowded.

What's wrong with this picture?

Take a look from Sky Eye Chopper 13: Within the borders of Baltimore, we have acres and acres of land screaming for redevelopment - the west side, the east side. The area around the American Brewery, described in Sun reporter Eric Siegel's recent series, provides just one example.

Baltimore has lost about 300,000 residents since World War II. We have miles of decrepit and abandoned housing. We have the highest concentration of poverty in the state. We have neighborhoods infested with drug addiction and crime. It's all bundled together, a thicket of problems.

And yet, as bleak as it looks, the potential is rich.

Much of the old, abandoned city could be torn down and replaced with new, smart, sweeping neighborhoods of

detached homes with small yards. Urban planners believe that, accounting for the trend toward smaller families and the desire for more space, the city could take another 175,000 new residents.

But that kind of growth will never happen without Marylanders electing politicians with courage to do something daring: Give a few thousand of the city's poorest families the chance to move to where they can improve their lives - to the suburbs and healthier sections of the city - while setting the stage for the rebirth of those old, broken neighborhoods.

Believe it or not, some of this "social engineering" has already begun.

In January 2005, U.S. District Court Judge Marvin Garbis found that federal officials had violated fair-housing laws by continuing to concentrate the region's poor within the city limits.

The remedy, the judge said, should be a regional approach that would give the city's poorest families an opportunity to move - with housing vouchers, for instance - to better neighborhoods with better schools and more jobs. In fact, in recent years, more than 500 city public-housing families have done just that, using vouchers that made higher suburban rents affordable.

It has been done in other metropolitan areas during the past 30 years, and it has worked.

David Rusk, the brilliant urban thinker who has kept an eye on Baltimore for many years, has another remedy. He says the city and counties should just do what Montgomery County did 30 years ago - establish "inclusionary zoning" that sets aside up to 15 percent of newly constructed housing units for low-income households. Montgomery has become more racially diverse while remaining one of the nation's wealthiest jurisdictions.

"Look, folks," Rusk once said about the Baltimore region, "you've got a problem you don't have to have."

Unfortunately, we haven't seen much leadership in this realm.

The Democratic mayor of Baltimore, who wants to be governor, has said he finds the regional remedy "antithetical" to his administration's efforts to reverse the city's population decline. Martin O'Malley's reaction to Garbis' ruling was a wink to potential voters in the suburbs. "I want to move jobs and opportunity to our people, not move our people out to jobs and opportunities in the counties," O'Malley said, cleverly distancing himself from any plan to scatter the poor beyond Baltimore.

A decade earlier, before this racially charged issue went to federal court, there were limited efforts to provide some public housing residents a chance to move to the counties using vouchers. But one program was killed, with the assistance of [Sen. Barbara Mikulski](#), the courageous Democrat, and, two years later, one of the most vocal critics of a similar remedy was a certain Republican congressman, now the incumbent governor of Maryland, Robert Ehrlich.

Good thing we have courts. Politicians are too unwilling to take personal risks to solve problems. The acutely ambitious spend a lot of time dancing around problems instead of embracing them as challenges.

It's 2006, and I don't know about anyone else around here, but I am sick of regarding Baltimore as the Greatest Half-City in America. We have long, wide swaths of the city begging for redevelopment while new development keeps creeping farther into Maryland's rural areas. We have working poor looking for more opportunity they can't reach. We have a professional class that needs more housing closer to jobs.

It would be nice, in the Maryland gubernatorial campaign, to hear a candidate describe how he's impatient for change, how he's going to work with the mayor of Baltimore and the executives of each metropolitan county to finally break the cycle of Baltimore poverty, fix the schools, repopulate the city and expand its tax base, save Maryland's diminishing open spaces, and direct job growth and new, mixed-income housing in and near the city.

Reclaiming abandoned Baltimore and making most of it livable again is our biggest challenge. It takes a whole

region to save a city.

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To hear Dan Rodricks on the radio, tune in to WBAL (1090 AM) from 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays.

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