Advocates Push the Pace of Planning to Strengthen the Baltimore Region

New Coalition Convenes to Sharpen Focus on Regional Plans

Baltimore, MD (February 15, 2016) – Impatient with the pace of change following last spring’s turmoil in Baltimore, a grassroots organization has formed to push for implementation of the federal Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI). Called the Opportunity Coalition, the new group will educate, organize and push for positive changes in regional planning and cooperation in the City of Baltimore and the greater Baltimore region.

“After initial attention to the release of the Regional Plan for Sustainable Development last June, little notice was taken of this planning effort, despite the desperate conditions in Baltimore revealed by the demonstrations and unrest following Freddie Gray’s death in police custody,” said Patrick Maier, the Executive Director of the Innovative Housing Institute, the lead organization that developed the Regional Housing Plan. “With the Opportunity Coalition we will combine the expertise of talented professionals and academics with community leaders, dedicated to regional change and pushing for racial justice, economic justice and opportunities for all in our region. This will require advocacy for necessary improvements in housing, transportation, workforce development, and social and environmental conditions so vital to a healthy Baltimore region.”

(The Opportunity Coalition will officially launch on Wednesday, February 17, at 5:30 p.m. at the University of Baltimore’s Law School. The media are welcome to attend).

The Opportunity Coalition is an outgrowth of the Sustainable Communities Initiative, which in 2011 provided a $3.5 million grant to the Baltimore Metropolitan Council to carry out regional planning activities in the Baltimore Metropolitan area. The program represented a recognition by the federal government that better integration of planning activities at a regional level would result in a more efficient use of government resources, more equitable expenditures of federal funds, and perhaps, better economic outcomes for regions that work together.

Maier said that one part of the work of the Opportunity Collaborative was community engagement, an effort to inform and engage the general public in the planning process, and to obtain the buy-in that might lead to community and social change.
“This portion of the work was inadequately funded and widespread knowledge and understanding of the Plans’ importance was not achieved.” Maier said. “Change has to come from outside the government, so that elected officials recognize the expectations of their citizens, and are responsive. Often, civic action is focused on stopping things. Sometimes it is about improving deplorable and intolerable local problems. We aim to support positive change across the region.”

Members of the Opportunity Coalition are coming from the University of Maryland and Morgan State, nonprofits and other non-governmental organizations. Established non-profit organizations are joining, such as Central Maryland Transportation Alliance, 1000 Friends of Maryland, Citizens Planning and Housing Association, BRIDGE Maryland, Beyond the Boundaries, National Center for Smart Growth, Greater Baltimore Committee, Equity Matters, Baltimore Neighborhoods Inc, Enterprise Community Partners and the Opportunity Collaborative Fellows. The Innovative Housing Institute leads the organizing effort.

Gerrit Knaap, Executive Director of the National Center for Smart Growth at the University of Maryland said, “Most successful regional planning exercises around the country have been buttressed by a strong coalition of private sector organizations and interests groups. I am really pleased to see that the Opportunity Coalition has formed and taken up this critically important role.”

In late May, a subgroup of the Opportunity Collaborative, the Opportunity Fellows released the report on their work as a Capstone Project entitled, “Community Leaders for a Sustainable Baltimore Region.”

One of the summary conclusions was this: The expectation is that Fellows will leverage this fellowship experience and the RPSD framework to build regional alliances from the grassroots level, and to secure our shared vision for a more sustainable and equitable Baltimore region.

The Fellows have provided much of the organizing energy. The Coalition has been meeting since last summer, with the first sessions convened in Maier’s Baltimore home. “The transformation of communities in the Baltimore region will require the collective efforts of not only organizations, but individuals to leverage real change,” said Tafadzwa Gwitira an Opportunity Collaborative Fellow.

The meetings have continued and grown in attendance and animation – discussing the regional plans, how to organize this effort, and how to capitalize on the energy, research, and positive working relationships that led to the development of the Regional Plans. A recognition of the necessity of organizing and advocacy to the achievement of plan implementation was quickly reached.

About the Opportunity Coalition
Formed by steering committee members and fellows of the Opportunity Collaborative, the Opportunity Coalition is working to uphold the goals of the Regional Plan for Sustainable Development and the Regional Plans that underpin it. The Opportunity Coalition intends to help educate, organize and push for positive change, guided by the plans of the Opportunity Collaborative. Individuals and groups that are similarly inspired and believe that a better future for the Baltimore region is possible and desirable are welcome to join. WWW.TheOpportunityCoalition.org
About the Opportunity Collaborative
Under the aegis of the Baltimore Metropolitan Council, the Opportunity Collaborative was formed as a partnership of local governments, universities, state agencies, foundations and nonprofit organizations. This partnership was tasked with the development of regional plans that addressed housing, transportation, and workforce development. Thousands of hours of research, drafting and deliberation went into the creation of the plans.

The plans were then incorporated into the Regional Plan for Sustainable Development, a document to coordinate regional investments for a more prosperous future for the Baltimore region. That final planning document was released in early June of 2015, completing the work under the federal grant.

www.opportunitycollaborative.org/assets/RPSD

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