Equitable Transit-Oriented Development in Diverse Suburbs: Promise and Challenge

Willow Lung-Amam, Rolf Pendall, Molly Scott, and Eli Knaap

In 2015, the Purple Line is expected to break ground in suburban Maryland. This 16-mile light rail line will extend from Bethesda in Montgomery County to New Carrollton in Prince George’s County. In doing so, it will connect some of the state’s highest income and most impoverished communities. And while new light rail is likely to produce thousands of jobs and reconnect communities to new opportunities around the state and region, there is also widespread concern that it will displace many vulnerable residents and small businesses along the corridor. As land prices around the new transit hubs increase, many low-income communities fear they will not reap the benefits of the state’s investments, but will instead suffer disproportionately its impacts.

Langley Park, a neighborhood largely made up of low-income, recently arrived immigrants, is among the communities that have voiced such concerns, as two Purple Line stops will be built there. County and state officials and planners are grappling with their dire predictions on the eve of the groundbreaking. This moment of uncertainty and active debate offers a lens into a growing national movement for equitable transit-oriented development (TOD). It highlights critical questions for the movement, important goals, strategies, and considerations, and the rapidly changing landscape in which it is taking shape. While fierce battles over displacement because of new transit have been well-documented in many inner city neighborhoods, the battle being waged over the Purple Line is occurring exclusively on suburban turf.

Across the country, many suburbs are confronted with similar challenges. Rapidly rising levels of poverty and immigration are producing more socially and economically vulnerable communities on the urban periphery. In 2010, suburbia, once considered the privileged home of the white, middle and upper classes, was home to the majority of minorities, immigrants, and the poor (Frey, 2011; Kneebone and Berube, 2012). Over the last decade, diverse, non-white, and poor suburban areas experienced far greater population gains than either central cities or predominantly white suburbs (Orfield and Luce, 2012; Kneebone and Berube, 2012). Scholarship has shown how this new geography is exacerbating the distressed conditions that already burden many disadvantaged communities. Low homeownership, high crime rates, scarce social and community resources, joblessness, and other issues that have long disproportionately saddled these communities may be less visible and more difficult to address poverty grows in the suburbs (Orfield 1997; Lucy and Phillips 2000; Briggs 2005; Vicino 2008, Hanlon 2010, Kneebone and Garr 2010, Kneebone and Berube 2012). What has often gone under the radar, however, is how policies designed to address suburban sprawl interact with the changing geography of low-income households. Amidst many admirable efforts to retrofit and redevelop suburbs to make them more compact, walkable, mixed-use, and transit-oriented, many disadvantaged communities are faced with the challenge of simply remaining in place.

The intersection of these two trends—the rising suburbanization of poverty and immigration, and the suburban retrofit and redevelopment movement—raises serious questions about TOD in an increasingly
diverse and shifting metropolitan context. How can low-income suburban communities balance their needs for economic growth and opportunities with these new threats to their vitality and sustenance? Is it possible for TOD to mitigate the impact on disadvantaged groups through pro-active development and land use policies? And if so, what mechanisms need to be put into place before, during, and after construction to ensure more equitable and just outcomes?

Through an in-depth analysis of the challenges and opportunities facing Langley Park, this paper hopes to shed light on these questions. This case highlights four critical issues for equitable suburban TOD. First, it highlights the complexity of planning in suburbia within places that lack municipal governance, and are subject to inter-jurisdictional authority and multi-leveled planning bureaucracies. Secondly, as a community comprised of largely market rate rental housing, it raises important considerations about the preservation of affordable housing in communities lacking significant public land, home ownership, and federally subsidized housing options. The Langley Park case also highlights the critical importance of considerations around commercial affordability to the preservation of small businesses, many of whom are just as vulnerable as residents to rising land values. And it underscores the particularly important role played by social connections and community institutions—the “social seams” that ensure that vulnerable communities not only survive redevelopment, but continue to thrive well beyond it. We argue, however, that addressing these issues alone will not result in equitable suburban TOD. Equitable TOD is a process that requires residents to have the opportunity to come up with their own visions of their desired communities, and be heard. It is a collaborative, and often messy, process of coming to terms with the wants and needs of communities, and ensuring that development helps them to achieve their goals. This paper intends to expand the current scholarly discourse on equitable TOD to include more holistic approaches that deal not only with places and built products, but also people and planning processes. It also hopes to bring attention to the changing context of such considerations within a rapidly reorganizing metropolitan geography of opportunity.

The insights for this paper have been drawn from our collective work in and on Langley Park and the Purple Line over the last two years. This includes research into the discussions that have taken place about Langley Park in Purple Line debates, as documented in local and regional newspapers, city planning and County Council discussions, and Maryland Transit Authority (MTA) meetings. These also includes 9 in-depth interviews with various community and political leaders and MTA officials. This paper also makes use of extensive Census and other secondary data on demographics, housing, businesses, and institutions, including mapping conducted by and for the University of Maryland’s National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education (NCSG) in their role as conveners of the Purple Line Corridor Coalition (PLCC), a group that is fighting for equity and active planning along the Purple Line. Our insights also come from data collected by the Urban Institute in coordination with the report they jointly released with Prince George’s County Public Schools and CASA de Maryland entitled “From Cradle to Career: The Multiple Challenges Facing Immigrant Families in Langley Park Promise Neighborhood.” The report was the result of a year-long community assessment process that engaged dozens of community organizations, government agencies, schools, and residents in examining the conditions impacting the educational achievements of Langley Park youth.
The Movement for and Challenges of Equitable TOD

Transit-oriented development, an urban form that unites fixed-route mass transportation with mixed-use, walkable, and moderate- to high-density neighborhoods, has been in vogue in planning and smart growth circles for many years (Dittmar and Ohland 2003; CTOD 2007). Proponents contend that TOD can make metropolitan areas more sustainable in terms of the “three E’s”—economics, environment, and equity. It can make metropolitan areas more economically efficient by providing more neighborhood amenities, increasing access to a range of destinations, and reducing spending on public services in higher density places (Carruthers and Úlfarsson 2008). It can improve the environment by reinforcing compact metropolitan development and reducing greenhouse gas emissions (Transportation Research Board 2009, Pendall et al. 2013). But the connection between transit and the third “E,” equity, seems far less clear—as TOD clearly presents both new opportunities and challenges for low-income communities.

Pendall et al. (2013) have argued that equitable TOD is contingent upon the inclusion of diverse residents and jobs into affected communities and on the indirect impacts on equity achieved through higher-density urban form. In other words, equitable TOD is the outcome of policies designed to encourage more diverse populations, opportunities for economic mobility, and mixed-income housing and businesses within dense walkable nodes. Here, however, we hope to extend this idea through the recognition that equitable TOD is also a process that requires many different voices to be at the planning and policy table as the vision for redevelopment is negotiated. As has been long-recognized in community planning, participation is the key to not only coming up plans that meet the needs and desires of communities, but also to their long-term viability and implementation (Arnstein 1969, Koontz 2005, Steelman and Hess 2009). Rather than having “good” plans sit on the shelf or be “imposed” upon communities, participation create stake-holders and caretakers of plans that have a real interest in seeing them realized.

For equitable TOD to be given life in practice, it must overcome multiple challenges. The first and most significant is the assurance of income mixing in station areas. When fixed-route transit arrives in established low-income neighborhoods, it often raises property values, rents, and taxes, increasing overpayment, overcrowding, and involuntary displacement (Bartholomew and Ewing 2011). If low-cost neighborhoods are hard to find in a city or metropolitan area like Washington DC, the improvement in transit service may reduce the overall supply of affordable locations or make life more inconvenient for low-income households and small business operators. Equitable TOD therefore requires strategies to secure and deepen the range of housing available to low- and moderate-income residents and business owners, including for example inclusionary zoning, deeper subsidies for tenants, rent stabilization programs, preservation of existing affordable housing units, and other mechanisms (Pendall 2008; Schuetz, Meltzer, and Been 2009; Harrell, Brooks, and Nedick 2009; PolicyLink 2014).

A second challenge is that new rail and TOD investments may foreclose other transit choices upon which low-income populations rely. Fixed mass transit is exceptionally expensive and involves construction periods of decades or longer (Rubin, Moore, and Lee 1999). Investment in rail systems and TOD may crowd out spending on buses, on which low-income riders rely. Such a conflict sparked the Bus Riders’ Union case against the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority and other civil-rights lawsuits against agencies whose rail investments served mainly white middle- and upper-class riders (Grengs 2002, 2004; TCRP 2008). A requisite of equitable TOD is therefore to align routes and site stations to benefit low-income riders (Reardon 2003).
Third, TOD can be disruptive during the development process. It often requires infill construction in areas where property ownership is fragmented and lots are small (Hess and Lombardi 2004). Development sometimes closes streets and parking lots, making neighborhoods and small businesses hard to access. The noise and dust of construction can also reduce quality of life, and the congestion generated by temporary or long-term lane closures can increase auto emissions. In some cases properties may even be taken via eminent domain to provide right-of-way for lines or land for station sites. Equitable TOD therefore requires appropriate mitigation measures and fair compensation for residents and businesses that are inconvenienced or directly displaced by construction.

In recent years, several communities have become leaders in the equitable TOD movement. In the Twin Cities, Central Corridor Funders Collaborative, a cross-sector and cross-jurisdictional partnership was formed to plan and implement projects focused on affordable housing, coordination and collaboration, and building strong places and local economies along the Central Corridor Light Rail Line connecting Minneapolis to St. Paul. They used a collective impact approach to focus on those areas most affected and develop coordinated affordable housing plans. They also set up an affordable housing and TOD loan fund that, among other things, has been used to provide small business forgivable loans to help them weather construction and adjust to a new business climate. As testament to their successes, 95 percent of the small businesses in the Neighborhood Development Center support program in St. Paul, survived construction and post-construction challenges. In Denver, the Mile High Connect partnership has committed to developing inclusive, affordable, and livable communities within walking distance of transit with the Regional Transportation District, especially as the FasTracks light rail system was expanding into various vulnerable communities in the region’s poor suburbs. The partnership has worked to improve and preserve existing and build new affordable housing, encourage retail opportunities and support small businesses, foster strong community assets such as public spaces and libraries, increase resident engagement in the planning process, and make public transit more accessible and affordable to low-income populations.  

The Washington, DC region is beginning to make strides in its own progress toward more equitable TOD. For years, the region has been a leader in TOD as well as regulatory approaches to affordable housing (Brown 2001). In the face of rising home values across the region that have made it one of the most expensive metro areas in the world to live, equitable TOD discourses are now coming to the fore. In Baltimore, a community benefits agreement (CBA) or “Compact” was negotiated for the Red Line, a light rail system proposed to run over 14 miles through the heart of the city’s most depressed neighborhoods into some of the area’s wealthiest suburbs. Initiated by Baltimore Mayor Shield Dixon, the Red Line Compact is a list of goals and strategies designed to generate jobs, develop economic opportunities, maintain affordable housing, and otherwise invest in low-income communities impacted by the new line. Adopted in 2009, it has been signed by about 70 businesses and organizations, including state agencies like the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation. While not legally binding, many of its elements have been made a part of various state contracts and it has been widely hailed a success. In the District, planners and housing advocates worked to preserve affordable housing in Columbia Heights as the Metro Yellow and Green Lines arrived and in the face of massive state-sponsored redevelopment of the area (Howell 2013). But the region’s widespread suburbanization of minorities, immigrants, and the poor is changing the context of these movements. As residents have been pushed by high land prices in central city neighborhoods like Columbia Heights and Mt. Pleasant
into suburbs of Prince George's and Montgomery County, the problem of equitable TOD is now no longer an “inner city” problem.

**The Langley Park Community and the Fight for Equity along the Purple Line**

Langley Park is located less than three miles from the District of Columbia’s northeast border. By most accounts, it is a 0.8 square-mile census designated place in Prince George’s County. But in reality, the community straddles a deep political divide between Prince George’s and its wealthier neighbor, Montgomery County, with a significant portion of the community also contained within the city of Takoma Park (a jurisdiction in Montgomery County). Residents, businesses, vital social connections, and community institutions that define the character of the community exist on all sides of these many borders.

Before World War II, Langley Park was part of a 566-acre estate owned by the McCormick-Goodhart family. The community was named in homage to the Goodhart family’s ancestral property in England. A Georgian Revival mansion sat at the center of its lush grounds, surrounded by a bucolic landscape that included a lake, stables, carriage house, and polo grounds.

After the war, Langley Park quickly transformed into a dense, middle-class suburb along with much of the rest of the county. In 1940, only 78,000 people lived in Prince’s George’s, largely in comfortable, walkable neighborhoods. But from 1940 to 1970, the county grew by over a half-million as Washington’s white residents suburbanized en mass. In Langley Park, the McCormick-Goodhart heirs sold the land to private developers, who built it out as a planned community in different phases. Given the demand for post-war housing, most of the estate was developed into low-rise apartments. In the late 1940s, more than 1,900 apartments were constructed. Another 500 units were started two years later, and finally in 1963, the last major segment of the estate opened for development and 590 more units were completed at the site of the old mansion grounds. Langley Park initially proved popular among the waves of white, and especially Jewish, veterans, young couples, and families looking for affordable housing outside of the rapidly deteriorating social and physical conditions in the District, including its increasingly tense race relations.

Beginning in the 1960s, however, Prince George’s County’s population took a dramatic turn. It became a particularly popular destination for African Americans who had long been denied access to suburban housing because of racial restrictions and various discriminatory practices and policies. This stream turned into a flood in the 1970s, when the county’s black population grew by over 150,000. During the same period, whites fled in large numbers. In only 10 years, between 1970 and 1980, the white population in the county plummeted from around 561,000 to 391,000, while the African American population increased nearly three times to over 247,000. While African Americans moving into the county were, on the whole, middle-class, Langley Park’s vast supply of low-cost apartments, attracted some of the poorest among them. By the 1980s, when the crack epidemic hit the Washington area by storm, Langley Park was among the few suburban communities to be hit as hard as many inner city neighborhoods.

The community’s position just beyond the DC line with good access to transit, jobs, and affordable housing, also made it a hot-spot for new immigrants arriving after 1970. The area was particularly
popular among new émigrés the Caribbean, Central America, Africa, and Asia. By 1980, the vast majority of these immigrants were from Central America, including El Salvador, Mexico, and Guatemala that fled their home countries to escape harsh economic and political conditions, violence, poverty, and civil wars. Many arrived with no legal proof of citizenship in hand.

Today, the community lies at the heart of the greater DC area’s “International Corridor” and is widely considered the center of the Latino community in both Prince George’s and Montgomery County. According to the 2010 U.S Census, of its approximately 18,000 residents, 77 percent were Latino. Another 19 percent were other racial and ethnic minorities. Roughly 70 percent of residents are first-generation immigrants and about two-thirds have come to the U.S. since 2000. Though the vast majority of residents are recently-arrived from Central America, Langley Park’s residents hail from more than 50 countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia. As one Washington Post reporter once wrote, it is a community where “people from all over the world cross paths to make a go of life in America. It is a singular community created from a multitude of cultures, languages and stories of hope.” About one in five households in Langley Park live in poverty, nearly twice the U.S. national average.

The community suffers many conditions common to underprivileged neighborhoods that are compounded by its large immigrant population. Adults are, on the whole, poorly educated, and many struggle with English proficiency. Over half have never even been to high school and about three of every four people speak a language other than English at home. Working adults tend be employed as low-skilled laborers or participate in the informal market as day laborers. More than half work in construction, earning only about $18,000 annually, and neighborhood unemployment stands over 10 percent, roughly twice the U.S. average. Community health is poor, with many residents lacking access to primary health care or health insurance. Nearly 64 percent are uninsured (the highest rate of any area in the state), and residents have remarkably high rates of potential fatally conditions often linked to poverty like heart disease, diabetes, asthma, homicide, HIV/AIDS, and obesity. Teen pregnancy, already high, is rising and many women lack access to prenatal care, resulting in high rates of infant mortality and low birth-weight. Crime is a major community issue with overall crime rates that are 44 percent higher than the statewide average in Maryland, and frequent complaints about issues related to gang activity, domestic violence, and police harassment.

The neighborhood contains a dense mix of multi-family housing and small, commercial establishments. According to the 2010 Census, about three-fourths of the neighborhood’s overall housing stock are apartment units whose rents are affordable to low-income households, roughly 4,000 units, with a smattering of modest single-family homes. About 4 of every 5 households are renters, and over half of pay upwards of 30 percent of their income on rent. Many apartments are in substandard condition, with common tenant reports of bedbug and vermin infestations, mold, code violations, and safety problems Langley Park also has high rates of foreclosure. In 2010, a State of Maryland report identified the neighborhood’s principal zip code (20783) as a “foreclosure hot spot,” with local families losing their homes at a rate that was 135 times the state average. Many small, family-owned and operated businesses line University Avenue, the neighborhood’s major arterial and unofficial main street. Its sidewalks and parking lots are abuzz with activity as locals frequent the many ethnic groceries, eateries, and retailers. The neighborhood also hosts a large number of check-cashing businesses, pawn shops, and liquor stores that tend to prey on low-income communities.
Even though Langley Park residents are highly transit-dependent, the neighborhood is not well connected to public transit nor particularly pedestrian friendly. Many residents of Langley Park do not own cars. Bikes and buses are common means of transportation, as there are currently no nearby Metrorail stations. One of the needs that the Purple Line hopes to correct is the lack of east-west connectivity, as most busses and other transit tends to head south towards the downtown, rather than to the Maryland and Virginia suburbs, where many residents work. And although Langley Park residents have been found to walk more than twice as often as those in the rest of the region, the neighborhood lacks connectivity. Large surface parking lots serve as informal public spaces and state roads with high traffic volumes divide the neighborhood, with few opportunities for safe pedestrian crossways. Several major pedestrian and cyclist fatalities have occurred in Langley Park over the past several years. The community also lacks adequate open space, community facilities, and recreational spaces.

Despite these challenges, Langley Park remains a strongly connected neighborhood. Various social and community institutions like Centro Nia, Latin American Youth Center, and the Community Clinic have offices in the area that help to service residents needs for childcare, nutrition, health and wellness, immigration, and education. In 2014, Prince George’s County opened up the Langley Park multi-service center, the first of its kind in the county, to direct various health and human services in a one-stop-shop to residents. Many regularly attend the faith institutions, particularly Catholic churches, located throughout the area. CASA de Maryland, the state’s largest Latino and immigrant organization and a leading national organization advocating for immigrant rights, is one of the community’s most vital assets. With its state headquarters located in the heart of the community at the old McCormick-Goodhart mansion, CASA has helped to open up a day labor center in Langley Park; they run a service center out of their headquarters that provides programs on health, legal aid, social services, and employment; and they regularly sponsor community events and organize residents around various neighborhood campaigns. Residents’ interdependence and tight social networks are characteristic of Langley Park as they are in many low-income and immigrant communities, and help to sustain its vitality and functionality as an “Arrival City” (Saunders 2012)—a place that helps immigrants integrate into the larger society and regional economy.

Civic and Community Actions for Equitable Development along the Purple Line

The Purple Line has been the locus of political struggle for decades. Discussions about an east-west running trolley or light rail in Montgomery and Prince George’s County have been under discussion since at least the 1980s. In these early days, the backlash to various proposals came mainly from the residents of Chevy Chase, a small neighborhood with well organized, financed, and connected residents that were most upset that the route was set to run through a popular golf course. As these discussions evolved, Parris Glendening, who had served for three terms (1982-1994) as Prince George’s County’s highest elected official, became Governor. During his two terms as Governor (1998-2002), the Purple Line became a cornerstone of his highly-touted planning agenda that made Maryland known throughout the country as a leader in smart growth. While the Purple Line plans lay dormant during the administration of Republican Robert Ehrlich, who succeeded Glendening, it emerged at the forefront yet again during the 2006 gubernatorial campaign of Martin O’Malley. O’Malley’s sound defeat of Ehrlich has been, in part, credited to the strong backing he received from supporters of the Purple Line.
The line is now proposed to slice through a broad cross section of Maryland communities. On the west, the line is anchored by Bethesda, a predominantly white, upper-class area with high incomes and property values, home to one of the state’s highest performing and fastest growing employment centers (Knaap et al, forthcoming) (Table 1). Moving eastward, the Purple Line’s next stop is Silver Spring, a diverse community that is not as wealthy as Bethesda, but one that still maintains a strong housing market and high employment densities. Continuing eastward, the line then winds along the International Corridor through Long Branch, Langley Park’s sister city in Montgomery County, with similar housing, business, and demographic characteristics before reaching into Langley Park at the Prince George’s County line. Property values in Langley Park are less than half of those found in Silver Spring and nearly a quarter of those in Bethesda. Finally, the Purple Line will reach its east anchor in New Carrollton, a predominantly black, working- and middle-class community reflective of the broader Prince George’s County population. There is a rapid change as the Purple Line moves from west to east—property values and incomes decrease, and minority populations and transit dependency increases, peaking in Langley Park.

Table 1. Community Characteristics, Places on the Purple Line, 2008-12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bethesda</th>
<th>Silver Spring</th>
<th>Langley Park</th>
<th>New Carrollton</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Land Area (Sqmi)</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>9.42</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>60,858</td>
<td>71,452</td>
<td>18,755</td>
<td>12,514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population Density</td>
<td>4,630</td>
<td>7,584</td>
<td>22,763</td>
<td>7,937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Age</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White alone</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black alone</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian alone</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Household Income</td>
<td>$138,863</td>
<td>$71,797</td>
<td>$50,361</td>
<td>58,835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Housing Value</td>
<td>$779,025</td>
<td>$455,000</td>
<td>$194,725</td>
<td>$254,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households w/ No Vehicle</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2008-12 average.

Given the diversity of communities the Purple Line cuts through, it was perhaps then not surprising that so many different voices surfaced as its plans were resurrected, this time with a clearer path to implementation. These came after several key moments. During the 90-day comment period following the 2008 release of MTA’s Alternatives Analysis and Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), nearly 3,300 comments were received from public agencies, civic and community organizations, elected officials, and everyday citizens. Then, after the 2013 release of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), another 968 comments responded to the proposal. Various community meetings were arranged to discuss the Purple Line in both Prince George’s and Montgomery County and in the City of Takoma Park, especially as comprehensive and sector plans were passed that supported TOD. Takoma/Langley Park Sector Plans were passed in Prince George’s County in 2009 and 2012 in Montgomery County, respectively. During these many conversations, Langley Park residents, businesses, and community organizations voiced their hopes and fears about the Purple Line and what it would mean for the future of their community.

Compared to people from neighborhoods in the wealthy western suburbs of Chevy Chase and Bethesda, Langley Park residents were relatively slow to surface, disorganized, and quiet during the initial Purple Line discussions. While residents in the western suburbs came out in large numbers on a regular basis to share their concerns over walking trails, the golf course, and endangered species, among other things, in
Langley Park and throughout much of Prince George’s County, residents were, at least initially, quite quiet. Non-profits and advocacy groups stepped in to fill the void. In Langley Park, CASA de Maryland led the charge. They quickly proved effective at not only expressing the community’s needs, desires, and fears for the Purple Line, but also organizing residents to speak out.

The central concern of residents and businesses was displacement. The Purple Line was set to traverse directly through the heart of Langley Park, with all housing and the vast majority of its small businesses located within one to two blocks of its two proposed stops. Guy Johnson, attorney for CASA, warned in 2008 that unless protections were put in place, residential and commercial property values could double or triple when the line began operating, creating incentives for landlords to displace poor residents in favor of those willing to pay a premium to be close to the transit line. At a 2011 Montgomery County hearing on the proposed sector plan, Jorge Sactic, a local small business owner, argued that the affordable housing and small business preservation was inherently linked— if affordable housing was not maintained, customers of local businesses would move out and businesses like his would die. While no one could say with much certainty the rate or the extent of change, most projected a significant loss to affordable housing and business space, and a changed character of the community. Others worried that the months or years of construction would cause significant disruptions to small businesses that would force many cash-strapped, pedestrian-dependent establishments to close.

Many also feared the voices and concerns of Langley Park residents were getting shut out of the conversation. Purple Line meetings tended focus on the concerns of highly vocal west-side communities, with low participation among Langley Park residents or those of other affected east-side communities. For instance, out of the 218 community organizations that spoke out about the Draft Environmental Impact Assessment, only one, CASA de Maryland, represented the interests of Langley Park.

Despite these concerns, the overall reaction to Purple Line proposals in Langley Park was fairly positive. Many were hopeful that new investments in transit in the area would bring much-needed improvements to the community. They welcomed the idea of a more mixed-use, transit-friendly, walkable area, and potential improvements in the neighborhood’s transportation network, infrastructure, neighborhood amenities, traffic safety, road congestion, and perhaps most critically, accessibility to job opportunities around the region. Some were hopeful that the new line would strengthen Langley Park’s economic capacity and provide new clients for struggling, small businesses. In his testimony before the Montgomery County Council about the Takoma/Langley Sector Plan, Erwin Mack of the Takoma/Langley Crossroads Development Authority, a nonprofit group representing 158 local businesses, put the case succinctly, “Gentrification isn’t always bad. The area does need to be upgraded.” Speaking at a 2009 DEIS hearing, Guy Johnson explained in spite of CASA’s many concerns about the process, they supported the Purple Line because of the opportunities it provided for greater economic development and job creation, reduced commute times for residents, and expanded transit service for a highly transit-dependent community. As a 116-signature CASA-led petition stated, however, even though residents felt they “deserve the Purple Line” to help them get move around the region faster and more reliably, they also demanded that Langley Park remain an affordable place to live that offers small business opportunities to residents.

Responding to both the concerns as well as hopes of Langley Park residents, and other disadvantaged communities likely to be impacted by the Purple Line, an array of neighborhood, county-wide, and regional organizations lined up to advocate for stronger and clearer inclusionary policies. At the regional
level, the Coalition for Smarter Growth (CSG) organized to raise awareness campaign about opportunities for affordable housing and small business protections on along the line. The Purple Line Corridor Coalition (PLCC), a group of over 25 members that include community officials, nonprofit groups and businesses across the line was organized with the aim of, among other things, fighting for affordable housing, small business incubation, and inclusion of historically under-represented communities in the process of planning.\textsuperscript{33} The PLCC has organized research into equity issues along the line as well as sponsored a workshop that brought together 260 community stakeholders to discuss these issues in 2014.

Among the largest victories to date in the efforts for equitable TOD in the region was the recent efforts of PLCC, CASA, and other partners in the Fair Development Coalition to successfully push through a tentative agreement on the Purple Line Compact, similar that negotiated for Baltimore’s Red Line. This non-binding “statement of intent” defines and supports key goals for the corridor, which include the preservation of affordable housing, supporting small businesses and connecting workers to jobs. The Compact is expected to be signed by the end of 2014 by state and county officials, and cities, towns, and community organizations along the route are also being asked to sign.\textsuperscript{34} If achieved, the Compact will be a major win for Langley Park that will set the terms of what equitable development will look like for years to come.

In large part because of the advocacy efforts of CASA and others, there are also many on-the-ground planning and policy efforts underway. Among these has been Langley Park’s designation by the State of Maryland as a “Sustainable Community” and its 2012 selection as one of the six communities in Prince George’s County to participate in the Transforming Neighborhoods Initiative (TNI). The TNI program focuses on improving key indicators of community well-being, including addressing significant economic, health, public safety, and educational challenges in disadvantaged areas of the County by utilizing cross-governmental resources and improving service delivery.\textsuperscript{35}

In 2013, Langley Park was also selected for a Department of Education Promise Neighborhood Planning Grant. The planning grant and the other organized efforts around Langley Park’s Promise Neighborhood designation have resulted in various efforts to improve its public school system and outcomes for children. Under this umbrella, CASA has led efforts to create a new bilingual high school and launch Somos Langley Park, a community development organization committed to improving the conditions in the neighborhood by increasing and maintaining, among other things, access to affordable housing, jobs that pay a living wage, and thriving locally-owned businesses.\textsuperscript{36} CASA and the Maryland Small Business Centers also recently received funding from the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation to help small businesses adjust during the construction period by providing “Purple Line Skills Training.” In 2012, Prince’s George’s County Planning completed a “Preliminary Affordable Housing Strategies,” for the Takoma/Langley Crossroads section area.\textsuperscript{37} The University of Maryland’s National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education (NCSG) and CASA were jointly awarded a Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) grant to build upon the report to develop their own “Langley Park Affordable Housing Strategies: Preparing for the Purple Line.” And NCSG and other contractors were awarded an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Sustainable Communities grant to undergo a year-long planning and strategic policy program to help Langley Park prepare for the Purple Line. Despite all these efforts and successes in the push for equitable TOD in Langley Park, however, it is not yet clear that the community will achieve what it wants—a vibrant, affordable, mixed-use and mixed income, walkable community with access to small business opportunities and jobs both in the
community and around the region. One that maintains a strong sense of community upon which Langley Park residents have come to rely. Many challenges lie ahead.

**Challenges for Equitable TOD in Langley Park**

Given the many efforts underway in Langley Park, how prepared is the community to address the challenges and take advantage of the new opportunities created by the Purple Line? In other words, what are the prospects and potential for the Langley Park community to realize their particular version of equitable TOD? In the following sections, we assess some of the central challenges that the community continues to face in realizing their visions in the process. We highlight five central challenges—its complex policy-making environment; maintaining affordable housing with a lack of public land, ownership, and subsidized housing units; maintaining affordability for small businesses and helping them to adjust; building community assets and institutions that will to strengthen the social seams of the neighborhood to withstand displacement; and finally, finding creative ways to meaningfully engage diverse constituencies and their interests in the process. We argue that these challenges are made all the more complicated by the community’s location in suburbia.

Interjurisdictional Issues and the Complex Suburban Policy-Making Context

Langley Park’s complex decision-making environment begins with its location within the unincorporated area at the intersection of two counties and the city of Takoma Park. This condition is made even more complex by the politics between the counties on issues such as affordable housing and small business protections.

While the state of Maryland is often described as the birthplace of smart growth and a pioneer in affordable housing policy, the contrasts in how this has taken shape across the state are striking. In 1973, Montgomery County adopted an inclusive zoning ordinance called the Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit (MPDU) program. The program is the nation’s oldest continuously operating inclusionary zoning ordinance and a leading example at the county level (Burchell 2000). The policies require housing developers to provide a portion of new units for residents with incomes between 50 and 80 percent of the area’s median. Studies of the MPDU program have demonstrated an important impact on spatial equity, including its effectiveness in facilitating racial and economic integration (Orfield 2005). They have also shown that children living in MPDUs attend lower poverty schools and have better school performance than peers from similar backgrounds (Schwartz 2010; Hickey et al. 2014). Since the program was implemented, it has provided about 14,000 moderate- and low-income units (Hickey et al. 2014).

Compared to the highly touted programs in Montgomery County, Prince George’s County has few policies directed at increasing its affordable housing stock. The county adopted inclusionary zoning in 1991 but repealed it in 1996, reportedly because elected officials felt that the county already accommodated more than its fair share of affordable housing in the region (Brown 2001). This position has some support. Prince George’s has a higher population of low-income families than other suburban DC counties. While its black population earns much higher incomes than the national average for African Americans, making it the wealthiest majority-black county in the U.S., black incomes and wealth are generally low enough that this status still leaves it only comfortably middle class, especially in a region as affluent as Washington. In 2012, roughly 10.2 percent of its residents (and 14.8 percent of its
children) lived in poverty, compared with 6.4 percent for Montgomery County (7.0 percent of children). The county’s foreclosure rate during the housing crisis also far exceeded that in almost any other DC suburb. And, in fact, its housing is very affordable compared to other parts of metropolitan Washington, with a median home value in 2014 of $231,600, compared with $417,700 in Montgomery County, and a median rent of $1,650 compared with $1,930.\(^3\)

The same general contrast holds true for small businesses, though not nearly to the same extent. Montgomery County, with its much richer supply of vibrant businesses, retail chains, and dense commerce nodes, has also been more proactive in adopting protections for small businesses. Following fierce opposition from small business owners faced with the threat of displacement in downtown Wheaton, Councilmember Nancy Navarro led the effort and effectively passed Bill 6-12 into county law. The bill establishes a program to assist small businesses located in either a county-designated enterprise zone or urban renewal area that are adversely impacted by county redevelopment projects or a redevelopment project located on county property to seek grant or loan funds, technical assistance, and training. Prince George’s County has no such protections, but has also not faced redevelopment pressures in the same way. Instead, the county has often complained of getting bypassed by high-end retailers and entertainment venues in favor of other parts of the region. The county government is still actively trying to grow interest in these sectors.

More generally, Prince George’s County has lagged in population and job growth in the region. This holds true despite the fact that county has excellent highway access, 15 Metro stations, is adjacency to the District, has easy access to Thurgood Marshall Airport (BWI), and is home the state’s largest institution of higher education and significant federal government research facilities. Many observers attribute the county’s slow growth to racial bias among institutions and individuals. Others cite the county government’s historic reputation for corruption, especially “pay to play” for development approvals.\(^4\)

These factors contribute to division and uncertainly in Langley Park’s planning environment. Elected officials and planners disagree about whether and how to secure an inclusive future for Langley Park. Some charge that elected officials in Prince George’s County have very little interest in seeing affordable housing or small business preservation in the neighborhood. Others suspect that the predominantly African American elected officials do not support measures that would consolidate Latinos’ presence in the county. There are also concerns, as in any weak-market community, that demanding more from state and federal agencies and landowners will threaten the completion of the Purple Line and reduce the potential for any new development. And even those who agree that protections for affordable housing and small businesses are important, have different perspectives about tactics. Some have stressed the need to maintain the existing housing stock and assure its affordability via rent stabilization, while others favor redevelopment at higher densities with set-asides for new affordable housing. Even the precise boundaries of the community are in question; neighborhoods just west of the crossroads in the Long Branch area have much in common with Langley Park but are not included in the core planning efforts for TOD. What TOD ought to look like, and even what equitable or inclusive TOD would look like, are still actively being debated across vast political divides.

Ironically, however, Langley Park’s awkward position on the border between the two counties with such vivid contrasts may serve it well. Advocacy efforts for the Purple Line Compact and planning has forced conversations about equity between the two counties that might have otherwise not taken place.
Maryland-National Capital Parks and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC), a regional organization that encompasses both counties, provides an established framework in which such regionally collaborative planning solutions and strategies might emerge. In addition, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOG), which does not approve development but helps channel federal transportation funds to major projects, may also play an important role. In 2010, MWCOG submitted a grant application to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that would have funded “Equity through Transit,” a multi-stakeholder initiative to plan and carry out a comprehensive program of equitable TOD throughout the region. While the proposal was not funded, MWCOG is building on this application and its Region Forward 2040 long-range transportation plan to continue to encourage mixed-income development around transit and boost economic development in Prince George’s County, especially near fixed-route transit.

Maintaining Affordable Housing Where Commitment is Low

Langley Park’s housing and land also present challenges for securing affordability. Very little of the land or housing in the neighborhood is publicly held, owned by residents, or subsidized. According to the Prince George’s County Department of Housing and Community Development, only 52 residents in the three zip codes that make up Langley Park received housing choice vouchers from July 1, 2009 to June 30, 2010. The area has no subsidized housing complexes or permanently affordable units. It also has one of the lowest percentages of seniors in the county and no designated senior facilities. Since so many parcels of land are privately held and the Purple Line now seems eminent, property owners have already begun to make decisions about buying or holding property with the expectation that they will be able to pursue more intense, market-rate development. Housing rents, already unaffordable for many Langley Park families, appear to be increasing.

The priority strategies recommended by the Prince’s George’s County “Preliminary Affordable Housing Strategies,” for the area stress the implementation of a comprehensive housing policy. The plan suggests the county establish public-private partnerships to achieve affordable housing retention, improvements and production strategies. It also calls for a housing strategy specifically for Langley Park that will enforce code compliance in existing buildings, create a TOD affordable housing trust fund, and target new market, low-income housing and tax credits to TOD. The plan also recommends a sectional zoning map amendment based on the approved sector plan and a density incentive provision as part of the county’s zoning code. Another recommended zoning change would define studio units as a permitted use.

These housing strategies are unlikely to prevent displacement. Many of them rely heavily on long-term planning, even though the threats facing the community are already present. Others rely on scarce statewide or federal investment and tax credits, and would require participation from scarce non-profit developers and coordination from multiple parties from inside and outside the county. The policies also assume that the County Executive and County Council support would support such measures, even though their overall support for affordable housing has been tepid at best. Some strategies could even undermine the preservation of quality, affordable units. Code enforcement, for example, would likely raise tenants’ anxiety and result in higher levels of eviction, since so many families have mixed immigration status or have doubled up to afford their housing. Absent significant county-owned land, existing subsidized units, active political mobilization, and inter-jurisdictional coordination on the issue,
it seems highly unlikely that any mix of these strategies will produce a significant number of affordable units in the short term, and possibly not in time for the expected Purple Line completion date of 2020.

Maintaining Affordability for Small Businesses and Helping Them to Adjust

In 2011, CASA published a report summarizing findings from interview surveys conducted with 49 small business owners in the International Corridor. The study suggested a number of significant challenges that small businesses are likely to face with the Purple Line. Many lack ownership of their real estate, making them highly vulnerable to rent increases. Nearly 90 percent of the stores had leases that were set to terminate in 10 years, at or near the projected time of construction. Many also paid a high cost for their leases, and some were locked into highly predatory triple-net leases that require them to make significant capital improvements. The businesses also depend on local residents who may be displaced by rising rent, with 89 percent reporting that local residents were critical for their survival. It is unclear whether these small businesses will be able to attract a broader clientele if higher-income, non-immigrant residents begin to move into Langley Park in large numbers. Finally, a large share of businesses responded that they had not been informed about the Purple Line and were concerned about displacement.

The CASA report lays out various options for creating and promoting affordable small businesses in Langley Park, some of which seem likely or relatively easy to implement in the counties and others more difficult. Direct assistance to existing small businesses through the creation of a rent subsidy program, for example, appears unrealistic, as there has been little county-led momentum or history of having done so. On the other hand, a county- and state-capitalized direct impact assistance fund, with financing and technical assistance to affected businesses, may have better prospects as there is already precedent for such programs in Montgomery County. However, many Langley Park businesses would likely face challenges qualifying for such funds if they do not regularly file taxes, a problem that has been found to already limit the impact Montgomery County’s program for small, immigrant-owned businesses. Finding ways to target such funds to affected businesses in Langley Park and reaching out to them to ensure they are able to take advantage of such opportunities could also limit the effectiveness of this strategy. The “Purple Line Training Skills” currently being delivered by CASA appear promising, but will reach only a small number of businesses in the corridor without broader and sustained county or state-level support.

Perhaps one of the largest challenges will be to organize business owners into an organizational structure that would better represent their interests and needs. CASA recommends state and county-funded commitments toward the creation of business cooperatives. Such organization will be challenging to muster in Langley Park. While recent efforts were made to begin a Langley Park Business Association, the group has not yet coalesced or received official recognition. Tapping into existing organizations runs back into the interjurisdictional issues with groups like the Takoma/Langley Crossroads Development Authority, a group partially funded by the City of Takoma Park, only acting on behalf of a small portion of businesses located within city’s boundaries. No matter what policies are put into place to protect and promote small business in Langley Park, such organizations will be necessary for the continued voices of business owners to be vital and coordinate on-the-ground any potential funding, planning, or programs that may be made available.
These may include those CASA has recommended, including extending existing policies in both counties to prioritize small businesses through overlay zones to insure smaller rental space, restrict large retail establishments, implement restrictions on chain stores, and fund “buy local” marketing and promotions focusing on minority-owned businesses. These policies would be more successful if they were cross-jurisdictional and coordinated with significant on-the-ground efforts from local partners. So far, however, the partnership and political will for these efforts to succeed are not forthcoming.

Strengthening Community Institutions and Assets to Withstand Displacement

As mentioned previously, Langley Park is a strongly connected neighborhood, supported by vital social and community institutions like CASA. But it remains exceptionally vulnerable, with fragile social connections and ties that have been solidified not only from residents’ common connections to people and places abroad, but the ongoing struggles they face in trying to maintain their livelihood in an area constantly under threat, not only from the Purple Line, but the everyday challenges of living amidst poverty. Even small disruptions to vital connections can be devastating. When one resident is displaced, it upsets the stability of others who might have relied on them as a neighbor or friend to watch their kids, drive them to their doctor’s office only accessible by car, pick up groceries, or simply to talk with them in hard times. It reduces the amount in the collection plates on Sunday, customers for local businesses, and the social capital and sense of community that keep so many Latino residents in place, despite Langley Park’s already high cost of living.

While community organizations exist in Langley Park, their network is not particularly robust. Only a handful of non-profits serve the extensive needs of this community. With the exception of CASA and a few others, they generally work on slim margins and the good will of the community and private donors. As such, they are also, in many ways, as vulnerable as residents and local businesses to displacement. Regardless of whether they are priced out, however, social service organizations many times follow the populations they serve, rather than anchor them in place. Many Latino-serving institutions in Langley Park already know this quite well. Centro Nia, for instance, opened up their first Maryland offices after they saw a significant loss of the populations they were serving in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of Washington, where the organization was founded. Following the same trends, the Latin American Youth Center, founded in the late 1960s in Columbia Heights, opened their Langley Park office in 2005. While these organizations provide an effective place to mobilize and voice the concerns of communities, there are currently no plans on the table, or even serious discussions happening about how to keep these institutions vibrant in Langley Park.

While CASA has served a particularly active and effective role organizing residents in Langley Park, furthermore, its dominant role has sometimes been seen as a detriment. Langley Park also includes residents and business owners from South Asia and Africa who may feel inadequately represented by their focus on Latino immigrants. As a large statewide organization with a special mission to serve the local community, it must also balance its commitments to Langley Park with other pressing national issues, like immigration reform. Its heft might also be squelching out other voices and players that believe that CASA has Langley Park covered, so to speak. But the reality remains that they need vital local partners to do their work. While CASA has been effective at seeing the Compact through and getting commitments, it will need on-the-ground partners to see that its terms and other planning and
policy programs are effectively implemented and done so with the needs and interests of the community in mind.

One of the benefits that the Purple Line has generated for Langley Park is critical networks with outside organizations. The natural partnerships created by the corridor and its deep connections to struggles over the Red Line have generated collaborations like the Fair Development Coalition. The Coalition is a statewide group of over 25 organizations dedicated to issues of equity on the Red and Purple Lines, which includes CASA and other major state and regional partners like the Baltimore Regional Developing Guide Equality (BRIDGE), Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) and the Coalition for Smart Growth. It also benefits from its partnership with advocacy work on similar issues in nearby communities, like Montgomery Housing Partnership who is fighting for affordable housing in Long Branch. The Purple Line Corridor Coalition is probably the best reflection of this strength. Had Langley Park been a lone community in the fight for equitable TOD, it would undoubtedly have a steeper battle ahead. But consolidating the momentum generated from such broad state-wide and regional activism into effective policies and plans that can be implemented on the ground is a challenge yet to be tested in Langley Park.

Meaningfully Engaging Diverse Constituents in the Process

Finally, although CASA has been extremely effective at leveraging its deep roots in the community to mobilize the voices of Langley Park residents and businesses, increasing and even maintaining such momentum is difficult work. Participation is low in Langley Park, as it is in many low-income minority and immigrant communities. Many Langley Park residents do not speak English as their first language. This coupled with very low levels of education means that awareness about the Purple Line and its potential impact on the community is low and that levels of misinformation and speculations can be high. Many residents come from countries that do not have democratic governments or institutions that legitimize participatory processes, and in some cases, actively work against them. Therefore many residents may not understand the value of their participation and fear speaking out against local authorities. For undocumented residents that constantly live under a state of uncertainty and fear, this is even more so the case. CASA often has difficulty organizing residents, even around issues that directly affect them in the local apartments because of fear that their involvement will put them or people in their household at risk of immigration detention and deportation. In a fight as long as the Purple Line has been, the early momentum that they were able to muster, has waned over the years.

Mobility rates are also high in Langley Park. Nearly a quarter of the population moves every year, sometimes between apartments in Langley Park, but also out of the community altogether. Given the need for sustained activism and involvement, the neighborhoods’ dynamic populations often works to its detriment. Even with a desire to participate, however, residents often lack the time and resources to do so. In most families, both parents work and in many cases, teenagers leave high school before graduating so that they can support their families. Parents often work multiple jobs, sometimes in distant locations. Even small business are generally family-run, and owners can rarely afford the cost of closing their stores to engage in broader civic issues. Child care and other economic constraints also temper participation on immediate challenges facing the community, let alone on complex land-use planning issues.
The various public forums that have been held about the Purple Line are also not particularly conducive to the participation of Langley Park residents. Oftentimes they used standard public forums, held in government offices that were uncomfortable and inconvenient venues for Langley Park residents. Language barriers also prevented residents' voices from being clearly heard. In one Montgomery County Council meeting about the sector plan, when a few residents gave their testimonies in Spanish, the only translation available was one council member that happened to speak Spanish. In another meeting, a Langley Park resident brought her own translator, but was cut off because her testimony (which included the time to translate between Spanish and English) exceeded the 3-minute timeframe allowed for public comment. And while CASA’s Laura Pinto submitted comment cards at a 2009 DEIS hearing from 11 residents expressing their concerns over the rising costs of residential and commercial property in the nearby area in Spanish, these comments were not translated before being submitted to MTA. Challenges of creating more open formats, inclusive and participatory processes, and different venues and means for residents to voice their concerns will continue to challenge the ability of Langley Park to forward and actualize its vision of equitable TOD.

Discussion and Conclusions: Equitable TOD in Langley Park and Beyond

Langley Park provides an interesting case study, but one that has barely begun to unfold. The stage is set for increasing neighborhood improvement, but how much will low-income residents and business owners suffer in the process, and how much will they benefit from the end result? Rather than forecast an answer to that question, we close with two scenarios for the next 15 years that may offer broader lessons for practitioners and scholars of urban development that highlight the challenges that communities like Langley Park will continue to face.

Scenario 1: Displacement

Looking back from 2030, it seems inevitable that Langley Park turned so quickly from an immigrant enclave into expensive housing for students and young professionals, national chain stores and restaurants, and newly constructed high-rise office buildings. With its position at the intersection of the now 10-year-old Purple Line and the Petworth-White Oak BRT (opened in 2025), and after improvements to University Boulevard that turned a state highway into a “complete street,” it seems only natural that Langley Park is emerging as Prince George’s County’s counterpoint to downtown Silver Spring.

Encouraged by budget projections suggesting that Prince George’s County’s tax base would quickly rise in the wake of this development, the County Council approved landowners’ plans to redevelop their land in a four-phase process that quickly replaced over 1,000 80-year-old low-rise apartments with six- to 15-story buildings with ground-floor retail space. Negotiations in the 2021 state legislative session shifted the boundaries of Prince George’s County to encompass the entirety of the neighborhood, allowing the County Council to plan the area comprehensively as a new downtown. Success followed success, as a new Whole Foods, Ace Hardware, and Trader Joe’s arrived at the intersection of University Boulevard and New Hampshire Avenue with help from county tax abatements. The crowning achievement for local economic development planners, however, will undoubtedly come as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) vacates its Southwest Washington headquarters for a newly built tower in a complex built on the grounds and in the air rights of the historic McCormick-
Goodhart mansion. The former owners of the site, CASA of Maryland, sold the property to the federal government for $200 million in 2023 as it became evident that the many residents whom it had served from that location would soon be dispersed to other parts of Prince George’s County and even as far away as Prince William County, Virginia. CASA has since established new multi-service centers in four communities in Montgomery and Prince George’s Counties and has become a major actor in the redevelopment of Baltimore’s Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood, which has become the state’s most recent “Arrival City.”

Scenario 2: Equitable Development

The struggles of the last 20 years are inscribed in the face of Gustavo Torres, founder of CASA of Maryland, who at 69 only smiles when asked whether he’s planning on retirement. “There’s still a lot of work to be done,” he says. CASA continues to occupy its long-time home, but is now joined by a host of other community partners who occupy space in some of the rehabbed apartments open to a mix of uses, including space for small business incubators, artists, and non-profits, like the Latino Economic Development Corporation, Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and many others that continue to move to the area and service the needs of the community. The complex also hosts the now vibrant “Somos Langley Park,” a community development corporation that works closely with M-NCPPC and Takoma Park City planning offices located in the adjacent center.

Looking out over a landscape once filled with dilapidated apartment buildings, the picture no longer looks so dreary or desperate. Many at CASA can still remember the dates that the wrecking balls came to demolish each of the worst of these buildings, which fell like Pruitt Igoe, the notorious symbol of urban poverty. But unlike in Chicago, the wrecking balls were preceded by initial rounds of new construction that allowed sitting tenants to move to new homes before their old ones were demolished. And the demolition was quickly followed by construction cranes. As each phase of development was completed, established residents in old apartments were given the option to move into new units or relocation assistance to find housing outside Langley Park. All these options were made possible by a combination of federal, state, and county subsidies and land-use programs, including a new multi-jurisdictional inclusionary zoning ordinance and the Northeast Corridor Housing Trust Fund, capitalized by the 2019 wind-down of the GSEs. Townhouses, micro-units, garage apartments, and single-room occupancy (SROs) buildings dot the landscape in a far more diverse mix of housing types. The affordable rents and the range of housing choices appear to have allowed many families to keep their kids in school until they graduated. The area is also the popular staging ground for many county press conferences, where the new County Executive frequently touts the benefits of equitable TOD and what can be accomplished when communities work together to reach their common goals. Gustavo laughs as he recounts the new Executive’s favorite line, “No amount of displacement of residents in our county is ever acceptable. I will fight for residents of this county to have the opportunity to stay here, while continuing the fight for more equitable development in the region.”

Across the street, Jorge Sactic’s bakery, still a thriving staple in the neighborhood, is now even more so, with various Yelp! ratings, Washington Post reviews, and blog posts on the now popular InternationalCorridorBusinesses.com, founded by the local business association. University Boulevard is bustling as always, but now with a far more diverse mix of people including University of Maryland students, GenZ blipsters, Prince George’s County natives, and new waves of immigrants continuing to
migrate to and around the region. While some residents moved out of the neighborhood after the Purple Line arrived, it was mostly because the new transit gave them opportunities they never had before to new jobs, schools, and housing options. Many of the old-timers remained and gather in the central park around the transit center. They casually remembered when the park was just a fenced in parking lot that used to herd day laborers like cattle, but now the only fences they can see are keeping the kids contained in a popular playground and separating them from the nearby soccer field.

These old-timers fan out in the evenings along the now paved brick sidewalks and street-lined boulevards to frequent their favorite casitas, pupuserías, and food trucks, but also enjoy the sights and sounds of some of the new small businesses offering exotic goods and services from places that they have never been, local farmers markets, weekend swap meets, and the regular neighborhood festivals celebrating the diversity of the neighborhood. “It was a struggle,” Gustavo remembers, “but community change always is—whether for the good or the bad.” And when he looked back from the now memorialized site of the first Purple Line protest to take place in Langley Park, he concluded that the struggle had been worth it. Langley Park was now a stronger, more diverse community pregnant with possibility.

***

While these scenarios describe potential scenes from Langley Park as if equitable TOD were some particular product or outcome, what is critical to understand from this review is just the opposite. It was the choice, opportunity, and voice that residents were given that made the difference. It was choice they had to stay in their homes, to better their lives and those of their children, to strength their communities and multiple attachments to places and people in the neighborhood, the region and beyond. It was the opportunities they were given to fulfill their dreams and passions, to chart new paths, go beyond what was expected of them, and to see the ability to move up in their communities without moving out. It was their voices that were heard, their participation that was actively sought, and their struggles and perspectives that were honored that gave them a sense that people cared what they thought, and spurred them to become engaged in new ways and to create new realities.

This is, of course, a hope for Langley Park, not a certainty. The devil still lies in the details yet to come. But what is certain here is that Langley Park is not alone. The problems, patterns and the possibilities that came with the Purple Line and even before it are becoming more and more the norm. They attend the vast changes in our global metropolitan landscape and the ever more prevalent ways in which we as planners, policy-makers and every day citizens are trying to re-shape our communities—urban, suburban, and otherwise—into more vibrant, healthy, and exciting places to live.
Notes


4 Langley Park, National Register for Historic Places.

5 Ibid.

6 Langley Park, National Register for Historic Places.


10 In 2000, about one in five Langley Park residents identified as being of Salvadoran heritage, the largest percentage of Salvadoran Americans of any place in the United States (see http://www.epodunk.com/ancestry/Salvadoran.html. Accessed September 30, 2014.

11 Cradle to Career.

12 In the community statistics used throughout this paper, only the Prince George’s County data from the census-designated place is used, unless otherwise noted.


14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Federal and local standards define a unit as affordable if its rent and utilities require no more than 30 percent of a family’s income; low income households earn less than 80 percent of area median. Since most Langley Park families earn much less than 80 percent of area median income, these “market-affordable” apartments still aren’t affordable to their occupants.

19 Cradle to Career.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.


26 For a richer account of the Purple Line’s history and political context, see http://www.actfortransit.org/purple_history.html. Accessed September 30, 2014.


31 Montgomery County Planning Board, January 8, 2009.


See “Transforming Neighborhoods Initiative (TNI).”

http://www.somoslangleypark.org/

Prince George’s County Planning Department, “Preliminary Affordable Housing Strategies: Takoma/Langley Crossroads Sector Plan Implementation.” April 2012.

But while this is an accomplishment, in a county with over one million people, the MPDU program fails to supply even a modest portion of the total demand for moderately priced housing. Even more troubling, approximately 9,400 (about two thirds) of the 14,000 units have lost their affordability status and reverted back to market rates.

Estimates from zillow.com as of September 4, 2014.

This contention is supported by the arrest and subsequent guilty plea of former County Executive Jack B. Johnson in 2010 on charges of extortion and witness- and evidence-tampering; current county officials are working hard to address the challenge.


As reported in Prince George’s County Planning Department, “Preliminary Affordable Housing Strategies.”


American Community Survey 2007-2011, 5-year estimates.
References


