

Community Action Against Transit-Oriented Displacement: Recommendations for the Long Branch Neighbourhood of Montgomery County, Maryland

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Bio

I had the opportunity to volunteer with the Montgomery Housing Partnership in 2019, an organisation that works closely with the Long Branch community, which sparked my interest in issues of equity and inclusion in the quest for sustainability in my own backyard. Thus having grown up in the Washington, DC Metropolitan Area, I was delighted by the opportunity to delve into an issue facing a community at home during my final semester of my undergraduate degree at the University of St. Andrews.

Abstract

In the pursuit of sustainable development and the search for low-carbon solutions there has been a recent push toward creating urban systems that accommodate mobility and accessibility with greater energy efficiency (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris 2019, 1). Transit Oriented Development approaches this objective through increased density and mobility via public transit. In spite of best intentions, these new urban systems can remain entrenched in existing systems that favour capital accumulation and economic growth above human needs, often exacerbating inequalities and pushing people further into the margins of society physically and socioeconomically.

This paper evaluates this emerging challenge and proposes two main recommendations for the Long Branch neighbourhood in Maryland, USA to maintain a vibrant, inclusive, and accessible community with the introduction of two light rail stops. Despite federal and local attempts to expand access to affordable housing, the lack of affordable housing is an epidemic that consistently excludes people from opportunity. Long Branch is a relatively low-income, multi-ethnic community in north of Washington, DC, making many members of the community vulnerable to displacement from TOD. To mitigate these effects, I propose the People of Long Branch Project and a community land trust to empower community ownership and foster social sustainability in tandem with environmental sustainability.

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Introduction

In the pursuit of sustainable development and the search for solutions to the climate crisis, there has been a recent push toward creating urban systems that accommodate mobility and accessibility with greater energy efficiency (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris 2019, 1). In recent decades this objective has become evident in the ‘smart growth’ and new urbanism approaches to development, which seek to prevent sprawl through compact urban centres that are mixed-use, walkable and accessible by public transit (Padeiro, Louro, da Costa 2019, 734). However, despite the best intentions of such approaches to planning, they often favour the production of capital above all else and exclude those who have been pushed to the margins of society due to racism and classism.

This briefing seeks to refocus the recipients of growth, questioning the equity implications of planning and proposing solutions for the community that prioritise the community’s social capital. It is my hope that in looking at the challenges and opportunities for the Long Branch neighbourhood in Montgomery County, Maryland as the Purple Line light rail is developed and proposing attainable solutions for the community, the residents of Long Branch will be empowered to shape the community’s future. With this briefing I hope to contribute to the development of community-led initiatives towards sustainable, equitable urban development. Therefore, I recommend the People of Long Branch Project (PLBP), a project for primary school-aged children to develop their civic identities and to contribute to the community’s bonding networks. I also recommend that the community start a Community Land Trust to develop permanent affordable housing and commercial spaces for members of the Long Branch community who are at risk of being priced out of the neighbourhood.

Challenge

The approaches addressed in the introduction seek to address the environmental externalities of transportation as planners design to limit sprawl and increase density to move away from automobile-oriented development that contributes to emissions and impacts the short- and long-term health of humans and the environment. Thus, planners have increasingly pursued transit-oriented development (TOD) strategies that entail high-density, mixed-use zoning revolving around a central transit stop, emphasising walkability and improved accessibility of public transportation. Advocates highlight that they create public and private revenues from development, increase property values, and help businesses while also making neighbourhoods more desirable (Thaden and Perlman 2015, 1). However, critics have raised concerns that TOD could contribute processes of displacement and gentrification, as transportation determines the form of places and how it is developed contributes to outcomes for the neighbourhood (Dorsey and Mudler 2013, 66). The fear is that outcomes will not be equally distributed and that low-income residents, who are often in marginalised groups, will be negatively impacted (Lung Amam, Pendall, and Knaap 2019, 442).

As property values and taxes go up, there is the risk that residents and businesses will be displaced from neighbourhoods due to a lack of affordable residential or commercial spaces. This adds on to the existing housing affordability crisis experienced in the United States, as there is no state or county where a renter working full-time at minimum wage can afford to rent a two-bedroom apartment. The US Department for Housing and Urban Development (HUD) emphasises that households should not spend more than 30% of their incomes on housing costs, otherwise they are considered cost-burdened. In 2017, nearly half of renter households were cost-burdened, indicating a serious affordability problem (Schuetz 2020). This potentially places critical parts of the workforce farther away from their jobs and removes them from their communities (Larrimore and Schuetz 2017). The need to produce and preserve affordable housing is only expected to grow, especially as further investments in

public transit potentially drive land values up (Thaden and Perlman 2015, 2). While displacement resulting from infrastructure and real estate development is nothing new, the need to consider equity in emerging systems is more important than ever with the looming climate crisis and increasing urbanisation (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris 2019, 1).

There is still little understood about what happens to communities as neighbourhoods transform with TOD and emerging settlement patterns, such as reversals of post-WWII white flight and suburbanisation (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris 2019, 2). Thus, there is a need to question who benefits from investments in TOD and who gets left behind. Further, if TOD is the future of sustainable, compact urban development, how can we ensure it is inclusive and provides equitable access to the city and to the benefits of growth?

Regional Context and the Community

The community in question is the Long Branch neighbourhood, situated between Silver Spring, MD and Takoma Park, MD. The neighbourhood is located north of Washington, DC's northern border and is in District 5 of Montgomery County, which is the state's largest county and is part of the Washington metropolitan region, northwest of DC. The county was agrarian until the government sought to bring white collar workers to the capital area during the Great Depression, eventually creating white- and blue-collar employment opportunities despite the lack of industry in the DC metropolitan area. Montgomery County has a nationally ranked public school system, a community college, excellent community services, and affordable housing programmes, all of which have attracted in-migration that caused a population surge in the 1980s (Cheney and Cheney 1997, 41-42).



Map of Long Branch in Montgomery County. (Montgomery Planning 2020)

This population growth has diversified the county's economic, ethnic and cultural composition, with the foreign-born population making up 20% of the county's population in 1990 and 33% in 2016 (Montgomery Planning 2019, 4). While urban space is typically thought of as being relatively low income and densely populated, surrounded by more affluent, low-density suburbs, this line is becoming blurred in the DC area as we see changes in demographics, distribution of wealth, and the built environment through the expansion of rail and the creation of commercial centres in suburbs (McKenzie 2015, 5).

The DC Metropolitan area continues to experience economic and population growth, creating a high demand for housing and a tight housing market with a vacancy rate of 3% in 2000 (Vicino et al. 2004, 115). Further, incomes have not risen with housing costs and low- and very low-income populations in the county are growing faster than the supply of housing affordable to them (Montgomery Planning 2019, 65). Black and Hispanic people in District 5 have the lowest average incomes in the county and the countywide renters of these

demographics are cost burdened at rates 122% and 139% higher than White residents respectively (Calma 2019, 16). Black and Hispanic residents in District 5 are among the least likely to own homes, which places them at a higher risk of being priced out of their communities (Calma 2019, 13).

The Long Branch neighbourhood is a site that has witnessed many of these trends and dynamics, but on a micro level. It was a part of the post-WWII boom of DC's transformation into a metropolitan area with suburbs (MC Planning 2013). It saw an influx of Central American immigrants in the 1980s who continue to reside there alongside immigrants from Asia, West Africa, and the Caribbean. It is a distinct, multi-ethnic community with modest single-family homes and an urban place with densely populated multi-family dwellings and shopping centres (Montgomery Planning 2013, 1). The neighbourhood has not seen significant reinvestment or physical improvements in its built environment despite its relatively high population densities, lacking desired amenities (Montgomery Planning 2013, 7). Crucially, the neighbourhood has been selected as the site for two rail stops of the Purple Line, which is a light rail line intended to link metro lines in Maryland suburbs so that riders can avoid central DC. The Long Branch Sector Plan indicates that the neighbourhood should be developed with TOD in mind.

Policy Response

The affordable housing policy response in the US is fragmented, with different levels of government implementing housing policies that target different audiences with different goals (Vicino et al. 2004, 10). The federal government devolved authority to local jurisdictions in 1974, creating block grants such as the Community Development Block Grant programme and other programmes and tools such as the Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC), the HOME Investment Partnerships programme, and the National Housing Trust

Fund. However, there has been no significant new investment in making housing affordable to the lowest income people in the US in more than 30 years (aside from the National Housing Trust Fund), with federal investment in housing not increasing at the same rate as the overall federal budget and even seeing significant cuts (JCHS 2020, 38).

A barrier to the preservation of affordable housing is the lifting of affordability restrictions on subsidised units, as many are due to expire, incentivising for-profit owners to price units at the market rate (JCHS 2020, 37). The LIHTC is the predominant source of government investment in rental housing development for low-income households, helping to leverage private capital to finance housing units, as states can award the credit to non-profit and for-profit sponsors of housing projects (Weiss 2016, 524). However, Weiss argues that the reliance on for-profit developers and the incentives to capture residual value from the program when the thirty years of rent restrictions expires means the government spent billions on subsidies only to lose that affordable housing stock, possibly displacing tens of thousands of households (Weiss 2016, 525).

Montgomery County responded to calls from citizens for fair housing in the 1970s was met with legislation in 1973 easing zoning and density restrictions as well as the passing of the Moderately Priced Housing Law in 1974 that established the Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit (MPDU) programme (Cheney and Cheney 1997, 44). The law was one of the country's first mandatory inclusionary zoning laws, requiring that 12.5% to 15% of units in every subdivision or high-rise development of 20 or more units are made affordable to households earning 65%-70% area median income (AMI). The law has been amended since, incorporating payments to the Housing Initiative Fund and lengthening the control period governing for sale units. The Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) and other non-profits are required to purchase at least 25% of the MPDUs (Vicino et al. 2004, 118).

The HOC was created in 1974 as a response to the call for affordable housing, aiming to provide affordable housing and supportive services that enhance the lives of low- and moderate-income households in the county. Its main tool is the Housing Choice Voucher programme, administering vouchers that provide rent subsidies to relieve households of cost burdens (Vicino et al. 2004, 120). The county utilises federal financing tools as well as county-level financing tools such as the Housing Initiative Fund, which is a local housing trust fund that is funded mainly through the county's property taxes and provides loans and grants to developers, non-profits, and the HOC to create and preserve affordable units (Vicino et al. 2004, 120). Despite these policies and programmes, Montgomery County has a significant affordable housing shortage that is likely to worsen as the county faces job growth and an ageing and growing population. Further, zoning remains an issue for the county as the majority of the county has single family zoning, pricing many out of high opportunity neighbourhoods and restricting density (English 2021).

A more holistic approach is taken in the Long Branch Sector Plan, which was adopted in 2013 and provides recommendations of guidelines for the use of public and private land. The plan accounts for the construction of the two Purple Line stations and seeks to pursue TOD around them. It outlines a vision of Long Branch that is multi-cultural, pedestrian-friendly, transit-oriented, and mixed-use (Montgomery Planning 2013, 1). There is an acknowledgement that the Purple Line may increase property values and drive rents up, which the plan addresses through a strategy that combines the MPDU programme, increased funding and programming for affordable housing, and introducing housing in historically commercial properties. The plan includes recommendations for changing the zoning to Commercial/Residential Town zoning, which is mixed use and provides incentives to developers to concentrate density, enabling housing and commercial redevelopment. However, there is the risk the developers will forgo incentives to operate at lower density.

Community Recommendations

In this section I will outline my recommendations for the Long Branch community that I hope will add on to the existing government and civil society initiatives seeking to protect affordability and the preservation of Long Branch's cultural and socioeconomic diversity. In order to mitigate the potential risks of TOD, such as increases in property values and thus the pricing out of the people that have defined Long Branch's character for nearly half a century, I have two main recommendations that take different approaches and work on different levels within the community, but I believe they both will contribute to the long-term social sustainability of the community.

I must iterate my positionality relative to the Long Branch neighbourhood, as I have grown up in Washington, DC and Montgomery County, but as a white woman in a predominantly white part of the county. My integration with low- and moderate- income communities has been limited and thus my understanding of the experiences of Long Branch residents is limited to the research I have conducted for the purposes of this briefing. Any recommendations made here are ideas contributing to the conversation about Long Branch's future, but come second to the voices for change within the community. The knowledge produced by residents of Long Branch must be considered first and foremost.

First, however, I would like to list some initiatives that members of the Long Branch community should seek involvement in, as they provide opportunities for participation in planning and community development:

- [Purple Line Corridor Coalition](#)
- [Discover Long Branch](#)/Long Branch Business League
- [Silver Spring Connect: People and Places on the Purple Line](#)
- [Montgomery Housing Partnership \(MHP\)](#)

People of Long Branch Project

The first recommendation seeks to contribute to the community's social sustainability by investing in its social capital through the fostering of civic engagement and social development of the children in Long Branch. Social capital involves social organisation through networks, norms, and trust, facilitating coordination and cooperation for the mutual benefit of the community (Kamruzzaman et al. 2014, 146). Proponents of TOD highlight that it fosters the development of social sustainability, but there is little empirical evidence of such outcomes (Kamruzzaman et al. 2014, 146). Further, given the social and economic risks of pursuing TOD, there is a need to invest in the social capital of a community before its composition changes, rather than relying on TOD to deliver social sustainability outcomes.

By fostering civic engagement in young children, the community would be investing in the social development of its young people and in the development of their civic identities, which entail participation, acquisition of knowledge about the community, and the adoption of fundamental democratic principles that would enable toleration of views that is necessary in a multicultural community such as Long Branch (Nicotera 2008, 222). PLBP focuses on the acquisition of knowledge about the community in young children. I propose that primary-school-age students at Rolling Terrace Elementary School be assigned and guided through a project in which they interview a member of the local community (local business owner, teacher, clergyman/woman, etc.) who lives or works in Long Branch. I chose this school because of its physical proximity to Long Branch and the fact that many of the students in attendance live in the neighbourhood. Students should produce a visual component as well as a written component, telling the story of this person and their role in the community.

While I believe integrating the project into the curriculum at the school would be beneficial so as to include as many students as possible in the project, this might not be

feasible and could be better suited for an after-care programme such as [Horizon Childcare](#) at Rolling Terrace Elementary, through one of [MHP's Homework Club](#) at Greenwood Terrace Apartments or Glenville Road, or even through a summer camp. The project would be an excellent opportunity for collaboration with the University of Maryland's National Center for Smart Growth and its Partnership for Action Learning in Sustainability (PALS) initiative that seeks to 'provide innovative, low-cost assistance to local governments while creating real-world problem-solving experiences for University of Maryland (UMD) graduate and undergraduate students' (Anderson-Watters et al. 2019, preface). Graduate students in the center recently produced a report for the Montgomery County Planning Department on tools to preserve the ethnically diverse, independent businesses of Long Branch, so there is an interest in the preservation of the Long Branch community. UMD students can assist the project's execution by assisting the children with their interviews and organising the project's presentation through a medium deemed appropriate, which could be a booklet collating the stories and images or an online format if a wider audience is the goal.

Community Land Trust

My second recommendation in response to potential displacements from the Purple's Line introduction is the development of a Community Land Trust (CLT), which are non-profit corporations that retain ownership of land, that develop and steward it to serve the community's needs. Thus, instead of private owners who are heavily influenced by market pricing and would potentially increase rents with land value enhancements, ownership is in the hands of the community (Anderson-Watters et al. 2019, 40). A CLT can sell or rent units on the land to individuals, non-profits, or small businesses on an affordable ground lease (typically 99 years), which makes the CLT a tool in preserving affordable housing, civic buildings or commercial spaces (Hickey 2013, 2). Homeowners receive a significant subsidy when buying the property and are contractually obligated to resell their homes below market-

rate prices to income-qualified households, foregoing some of the financial value of the appreciating value of the property (Kelly 2010, 348).

The creation of a CLT would enable the Long Branch community to create permanently affordable housing and commercial properties, avoiding the displacement of the people and businesses that are essential to the character of the community. CLTs are a flexible tool that develop to fit the needs and goals of the community, enabling the pursuit of community interests as well as broader challenges of distribution, affordability, and sustainability (Engelsman, Rowe, and Southern 2018, 105).

If the community is interested in the idea, it should first gauge interest from the community at large and identify the scope of its inclusion. Once parties express interest, the community should create a steering group of individuals to spearhead the process and develop a shared vision of the goals of the CLT. At this stage it can consider collaboration with non-profits, Community Development Corporations, Community Development Financing Institutions, etc. to gain advice and assistance for redevelopment efforts and any capacities outside of the community's expertise (Anderson-Watters et al. 2019, 41). Further, the CLT board should source funding mechanisms, which can come from non-profits, individual or institutional sponsors, government financing tools such as HOME or the Housing Initiative Fund, and local businesses or banks. It must also identify a suitable governance structure that enables inclusive and accountable management of the CLT once it is established. One option for the CLT's board composition is one third elected by leaseholders, one third elected by non-leaseholders, and the final third is elected by the two thirds already elected, enabling the balancing of the short-term interests of the current CLT leaseholders and the wider community's interests (Engelsman, Rowe, and Southern 2018, 106).

Conclusion

In this briefing I outlined challenges that the Long Branch neighbourhood in Montgomery County, MD faces and offered actions that the community can take to mitigate potential negative effects of the Purple Line's development in the neighbourhood. The public sector has failed to make housing affordable for the people who most need it, indicating a need for different approaches to the housing problem. On top of this, the government's expansion of public transit, while delivering benefits for communities and contributing to sustainable development, risks driving up property value in ways that could price out people and businesses that are essential to the character and vibrancy of the community. Thus, I suggest that Long Branch and other communities focus on the attributes of the community that make it unique and worth protecting; Long Branch is part of Montgomery County's 'international corridor,' with a multi-cultural and multi-generational population and a plethora of small businesses. However, many of Long Branch's residents are low-income and cost-burdened, making them vulnerable to displacement if affordability is not preserved.

I offer an approach that fosters Long Branch's social sustainability and permanent affordable housing/commercial spaces through the PLBP and the creation of a CLT. The goal of the PLBP is to foster the civic engagement of children and bonding in the community to create connectedness within the community that contributes to its social capital. The CLT would act as a mechanism to create permanently affordable housing in the community, insulating it from market influences by creating collective ownership of land. While these recommendations may not solve the affordable housing shortage or displacement of low-income peoples, they have the potential to contribute to the creation of sustainable, equitable urban development.

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