

Commerce At The Crossroads

Report of the
Community Charette

Sponsored by
The Belvedere Square Action Group
on
November 6, 1999

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In May 1999, the York Road Partnership, an umbrella organization of neighborhood associations, businesses and churches along York Road, formed the Belvedere Square Action Group in response to a redevelopment proposal for the Belvedere Square area. The mission of the Action Group is to develop an action plan for residential and commercial development at the York and Belvedere crossroads.

On November 6, 1999, the Belvedere Square Action Group sponsored a charette to explore the future direction of commercial development at the crossroads of York and Belvedere, including Belvedere Square. Charette participants came from both the residential and business communities as well as from local institutions, churches, non-profit organizations, and state and local government agencies. Additionally, the Action Group invited local architects, planners, developers, and real estate experts to volunteer to participate in the charette. The following report summarizes the outcomes from the charette.

The charette was divided into two sessions: a morning work session where nine small groups explored possible development strategies and an afternoon session where each group presented its ideas to the public. Several common themes developed out of the charette, and are summarized below:

USES

- Build a tenant mix that is compatible with the surrounding residential neighborhood and complements existing businesses, and builds on existing anchors: possible new uses include a market, restaurants, a bookstore, and upscale gourmet or ethnic foods. Other suggested uses include community and social service agencies, professional offices, and service oriented businesses;
- Build on and expand the area's entertainment/retail strengths with a mix of day and night uses that promote an active street life.

DESIGN AND LAYOUT

- Maintain the existing scale of the commercial area;
- Create a unified architectural and streetscape design throughout the corridor, redirecting under-utilized space into more productive uses, and integrating green space with Main Street-type retail to complement the area's identity as a neighborhood retail district and an urban village;
- Reinforce an urban edge through integrated rather than stand-alone buildings, with public spaces used to strengthen the sense of community.

ACCESS

- Conduct a formal study of the transportation and parking problems in order to provide better access and to balance pedestrian and vehicular needs.

MANAGEMENT AND OPERATION

- Improve the management and operation of the business, including adequate attention to the maintenance and security of the area;
- Create a community/business group to monitor the retail district, assure quality management, and consider ongoing community and business needs.

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INTRODUCTION

When Belvedere Square was developed in the 1980's, it presented a new concept in urban retailing by providing a variety of upscale retail goods and services normally found only in a more suburban setting. During its early years, Belvedere Square provided a stable commercial anchor to both residential and business communities in north Baltimore and drew patrons from a large part of the metropolitan area. In recent years, however, the center has suffered from increasing vacancies.

The Belvedere Square Action Group was created last May following the developer's initial presentation of a proposal to redevelop the entire area around Belvedere Square into a mixed-use retail and entertainment complex. Members of the community expressed a number of concerns over the proposed development and felt that further discussions were necessary prior to making any decisions regarding the center's future.

Throughout the spring and summer the Belvedere Square Action Group planned and sponsored two public meetings attended by about four hundred community members covering the topics of urban retailing trends and planned unit developments. The meeting about urban retailing trends in June 1999 featured Roy Adams of the Baltimore City Business Assistance Group and Andrea Van Arsdale of the Baltimore County Department of Economic Development. The meeting about planned unit developments in July 1999 featured Adrienne Bell, the Northern District City Planner from the Baltimore City Planning Department.

In the fall, the Belvedere Square Action Group planned and sponsored a community charette focusing on the commercial zone from Northern Parkway along York Road south to Orkney Road. The Greater Homewood Community Corporation, the City Planning Department, and the Neighborhood Design Center provided the necessary technical support and resources for a substantive and successful charette. Financial assistance was provided by the Greater Homewood Community Corporation, the Govanstowne Business Association, Govans Ecumenical Development Corporation, York Road Partnership and Ward Development Company. The City Planning Department and the Neighborhood Design Center, along with members of the Action Group were instrumental in identifying and enlisting design, marketing, and real estate professionals who were essential to the charette's success. Representatives of Lake Evesham, Chinquapin Park, Belvedere, Cedarcroft, Lake Walker, Bellona Gittings, Mid-Govans, Homeland, Guilford, and Roland Park provided "sweat equity" assistance.

The charette was designed to examine the direction of commercial development at the crossroads, including the commercially zoned properties from Northern Parkway south to Orkney Road. The charette represents a new kind of collaboration between the business and residential communities of the area, both in identifying existing problems and in planning for the future development of the crossroads commercial district. The charette represents a first step in the emerging collaboration of local communities to foster sustainable and sensitive commercial enterprise at the crossroads, suitable to the surrounding residential neighborhoods and in turn capable of being successfully supported by them.

MARKET RESEARCH

To prepare for the charette, members of the Belvedere Square Action Group developed and conducted three market surveys: 1) a survey of former tenants, 2) a survey of existing businesses, and 3) a consumer intercept survey. The purpose of each survey was to explore the forces that drive the success and failure of the business district at the York and Belvedere crossroads.

Former Tenant Survey

In the first survey, the Action Group surveyed former tenants of Belvedere Square to understand why they left. Action Group members conducted telephone interviews with 14 business owners who operated in Belvedere Square between 1986 and 1999. Of the 14 businesses, 13 continue to operate in another location. Interviews were conducted between October 14 and 30, 1999.

Business owners cited a number of reasons for leaving Belvedere Square, such as rent and fees that were too high, leases that were not renewed by management, poor maintenance of the buildings and surrounding areas, and poor management of the center. As businesses left, the customer base eroded, which made it more difficult for remaining merchants to survive. According to those surveyed, management decisions and practices contributed to the decline and had a detrimental effect on businesses in Belvedere Square. When questioned about the location and customer base, business owners stated that they liked the location of Belvedere Square, they had a good business there, and that their clientele had been excellent and well suited to their businesses.

Existing Business Survey

The second survey questioned existing merchants located in Belvedere Square or along York Road between Orkney and Northern Parkway. During the week of November 1, 1999, ten business owners were questioned about their perceptions of the business district and their concerns. Businesses that participated in the survey included retailers, restaurants, and financial institutions.

The businesses surveyed expressed a strong commitment to the area, reported that sales were good, and stated that they had a strong customer base. This survey found that a strong customer allegiance and the area's location are what hold these merchants to the York and Belvedere business district.

Nonetheless, these businesses expressed a concern about increased store vacancies. Store vacancies significantly impact the operation of remaining businesses, since businesses within one shopping district tend to depend upon one another. Also impacting business was the perception that crime is a problem in the area. Businesses most affected by these phenomena are located within Belvedere Square. The merchants that reported increased sales attributed the increase to individual efforts rather than district promotions. However, the perception that existing businesses are eager to leave the Belvedere business district proved to be only a perception.

Consumer Survey

The third survey was an intercept survey targeting shoppers in the business district. Over a one-week period between October 23 and 30, 1999, 187 consumers were questioned about their use and perceptions of the Belvedere business district. The results of this survey found that the perception of the business district is favorable. For the business district in general, many highly

rated the district's convenience to home, safety during the day, and many said parking was convenient (see Table 1). Respondents rated as poor the variety of goods sold, street traffic flow, and special sales or events. Of the 187 respondents, 147 usually frequent the district during the day, 62 come to the district in the evening, and only 23 of those surveyed visit the district at night.

Table 1: Customer Intercept Survey Ratings for the Business District

Numbers are shown as percentages

	Good	Fair	Poor	Don't Know
a. convenience to home	86%	9%	5%	0%
b. quality of eating places	51	36	21	2
c. cleanliness of streets and sidewalks	34	51	15	1
d. public transportation access	53	13	2	32
e. convenience of parking	64	30	6	0
f. convenience of shopping hours	52	31	8	10
g. friendliness of sales people	77	18	1	4
h. safety during the day	79	15	5	2
i. safety during the evening	27	32	30	11
j. variety of goods sold	16	32	46	6
k. cost of goods sold	42	47	5	7
l. quality of goods sold	50	36	9	5
m. street traffic flow	16	34	45	5
n. special sales or events	11	18	27	43
o. the look of store exteriors	37	41	21	0
p. the look of store interiors	43	45	12	0

When asked what other kinds of businesses they would like to patronize, many respondents cited restaurants and bookstores most often (34 times and 37 times, respectively). Other repeated suggestions include a coffee shop, bakery, café, fresh food and produce market, specialty grocery and specialty retail. In other words, the majority of respondents indicated a desire for specialty stores that are destination-oriented.

Conclusion

The three surveys together indicate that the Belvedere business district has a number of strengths, including the location of the business district, a strong customer base, and committed business owners. The surveys also indicate that the consumers that were surveyed prefer specialty businesses that are destination-oriented. Nonetheless, store vacancies and the deteriorating conditions of Belvedere Square significantly impact the operation of businesses in the area. A concerted effort to revitalize the area should benefit existing businesses, the surrounding community, and the property owners of the Square.

CHARETTE OVERVIEW

The purpose of the charette was to provide a forum for the business and residential communities of North Baltimore to consider the future direction of commercial enterprise at the crossroads of York Road and Belvedere Avenue.

The event was divided into two components: a morning session at which design concepts were developed by nine small working groups of about 12-14 people, and an afternoon session at which each group presented the results of its deliberations and received input from members of the public. Working groups included members of surrounding residential and business communities, local volunteer architects, landscape architects, business consultants, and real estate professionals, and representatives from city and state agencies. Community residents came from Lake Evesham, Chinquapin Park, Cedarcroft, Belvedere, Bellona-Gittings, Lake Walker, Rosebank-Breckinridge-Bellona, Homeland, Mid-Govans, Roland Park, and Guilford. Local business participants included the Framin' Place, Van Dyke & Bacon Shoes, Lynne Brick's Women's Health Center, and Belvedere Exxon; commercial property owners included Frederick Real Estate, Andrew and Lisa Marani, and Ward Development Company. Non-profit organizations that participated included Greater Homewood Community Corporation, Govanstowne Business Association, Neighborhood Design Center, Govans Ecumenical Development Corporation, Govans Presbyterian Church, and Pleasant Hope Baptist Church. City planners from the Baltimore City Planning Department facilitated the discussions and deliberations of each group.

As a way to focus the discussion of each working group, the Action Group developed the following statement challenging each group to:

- (1) Define desired commercial uses which can be supported by the surrounding neighborhoods;
- (2) Identify the scale and pattern of commercial development which is possible and desirable;
- (3) Create an environment for attracting and maintaining commercial enterprises desired by the surrounding neighborhoods;
- (3) Examine the past, present and future economic viability of commercial uses at the crossroads, given the present infrastructure, market rentals, and commercial usages, and examined in the light of any practicable and acceptable modifications to that infrastructure; and
- (5) Identify needed public investment in services and infrastructure.

SUMMARY OF COMMON THEMES

Each of the nine groups worked independently to develop responses to the challenge statement. However, each group reiterated several common themes, which are summarized as follows:

BUSINESS DISTRICT IDENTITY, IMAGE AND PROMOTION: The working groups concluded that the crossroads business district should do more to manage and capitalize on its identity as a neighborhood commercial zone. A common theme was that the district could and should promote itself as a natural portal or gateway to Baltimore City, building on the existing geography formed by Northern Parkway and York Road. Better promotion of the area's unique identity and image was considered essential to its future economic vitality. Cooperative community-business marketing strategies and special, seasonal marketing events were offered as under-utilized tools for reaching target consumers.

USES: There was agreement that the mix of tenants should be compatible with the surrounding residential neighborhood. Attracting tenants that complement existing businesses was a priority as was building on and strengthening existing anchors, especially the Senator Theater. Businesses identified by some groups include a market, restaurants, a bookstore, and upscale gourmet or ethnic foods. Other suggested uses include community and social service agencies, professional offices, and service oriented business (MVA express, mini-Post Office, day-care facilities). There was support for building on and expanding the area's entertainment/retail mix, and day and night uses that promote an active street life and pedestrian linkages to existing anchors, especially the Senator Theater.

DESIGN AND LAYOUT: The working groups identified maintaining the existing scale of the commercial area as a priority, while allowing for expansion of the Senator Theater. The area could be enhanced with a unified streetscape that defines the crossroad's neighborhood-scale retail image, a unified architectural design throughout the corridor, and redirection of under-utilized space into more productive uses. Suggested streetscape designs incorporated pedestrian-scale lighting, banners, street furniture, benches, bicycle racks, and street trees and planters to project an "urban village." Integrating green space with Main Street-type retail was considered an enhancement that would complement the area's identity. The common view was that architecture should reinforce an urban edge through integrated rather than stand-alone buildings, with public spaces used to strengthen the sense of community and community-based retail.

ACCESS: Many groups suggested that access to the crossroads retail area suffered from congestion at major intersections. There was also a perception that parking could resurface as a problem with renewed commercial activity. Some groups proposed reworking existing traffic patterns through various street closures and/or creating better connections to the business district. A formal study of the transportation and parking problems was recommended in order to provide better access and to balance pedestrian and vehicular needs.

MANAGEMENT AND OPERATION: The successful management and operation of the business district was identified as a priority and a necessary condition to the future viability of the area, including adequate attention to the maintenance and security of the area. Several groups proposed creating a community/business group to monitor the retail district, assure quality management, and consider ongoing community and business needs.

OTHER INTERESTING IDEAS: The following is a compilation of innovative ideas that were proposed by individual small groups:

- Create a commercial benefits district to fund security and trash collection;
- Implement a “Main Street” program, incorporating streetscape facade easements like Montgomery County’s;
- Establish a local farmer’s market;
- Incorporate a transportation hub for buses and an intercollegiate shuttle;
- Consider a traffic circle and alternative traffic patterns to relieve congestion at the intersection of York and Belvedere;
- Explore other uses such as an after-school, youth recreation, and community resource center, a day care center, satellite emergency care center, child-centered retail, and bed and breakfast or hotel.

NEXT STEPS

- The Belvedere Square Action Group is working with volunteers from the Neighborhood Design Center to begin incorporating the ideas from the charette into a conceptual master plan for the York and Belvedere crossroads commercial area. As part of the planning process, the Action Group will begin identifying short and long term goals and strategies for the area’s revitalization. The Action Group is also exploring ideas that developed out of the charette, such as using a Main Street model.
- The Action Group will continue to work with Ward Development Company on plans for Belvedere Square. The Action Group and the developer will use the ideas from the charette as a guide for the new plan.

CHARETTE IDEAS

After the morning session, each group prepared a presentation of its ideas at an open public forum. The following are the verbal and graphic ideas presented by each group.

Group One

- Streetscape – unified appearance, create identity, sidewalks, bike racks, banners, planters, trees
- Traffic and Pedestrian Improvements – crosswalks at Northern Parkway, better signal coordination
- Parking Issues – coordinate sharing of existing spaces, area parking study
- Senator Theater Expansion – complimentary businesses (Vaccaro's Coffee Café, late hour eatery), limited expansion
- Community Resource Center – info, meeting place, after-school program, community services
- Management Issues – ongoing community oversight, appropriate leasing strategy to encourage and maintain viable businesses
- Research viability of suggestions from BIA survey: open market, deli, gourmet food store, cheese and wine shop, news stand, bookstore, ice cream/candy store, small ethnic restaurants, non-chain family restaurants, . . .
- Combined Business Efforts – coordinated marketing of entire business district, potential commercial benefits district to fund security, maintenance, streetscape

