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Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy Recommendations (with summaries) **[draft]**

April 2019

Summary

This draft list of strategy recommendations are a menu of tools and initiatives the City of Cambridge could explore using to help revitalize the Pine Street Neighborhood. The strategies have been identified through the lens of the mission/goals of the Cambridge Neighborhood Revitalization Plan (CNRP) and align with feedback received during the community visioning session and other engagement channels. Key findings from the Housing Market Analysis and Needs Assessment also informed the tool selection and strategy focus. Many of the tools also represent best practices from other communities facing similar challenges. Neighborhood revitalization can be a long journey, and an incremental process. Some milestones need to occur first, to pave the way to other successes. In other cases, many strategies can be carried out in tandem; pushing the plan forward, creating change, and building momentum.

These draft recommendations are a step in the “Strategy Toolkit & Implementation Framework” phase of the project. Following input and feedback from City Council, the CNRP Core Group, and the community, the list of recommendations, tools, and strategies will be firmed up and implementation steps, goals, and time-frames will be identified in consultation with staff. The strategy tools and implementation framework will then be included in the final Neighborhood Revitalization Plan, which will be the final phase of the planning process.

Cambridge Neighborhood Revitalization Program Mission Statement:

The mission of the Cambridge Neighborhood Revitalization Program is to improve neighborhoods, land use and quality of life through comprehensive strategies and partnerships; including engagement of residents and businesses around permanent and temporary repurposing of vacant land, beautification, blight mitigation, improvement and marketing of new & existing housing, social cohesion strategies, and enhanced human services.

The draft recommendations and strategies are organized into five key focus areas:

- Reduce and Mitigate Housing Vacancy
- Improve Housing Quality and Safety
- Maintain and Expand Housing Affordability
- Enhance and Activate Public Spaces
- Facilitate Social Cohesion



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Reduce and Mitigate Housing Vacancy

Abandoned homes are taking a toll on the Cambridge community. Data suggests more than one out of every five housing units in Cambridge are vacant. This vacant housing stock represents both a critical opportunity and a significant liability for the City's future. If unaddressed it is likely the abandonment will continue to increase, erode the quality of life in the community, and suppress property values and the economic potential of the City. The vacant housing stock also presents a valuable opportunity for the City to bring new life to the historic core of Cambridge. It can represent more housing options for current and future residents, increased home-ownership opportunities, and new investments in the neighborhood.

Land Banking is a tool that municipalities can use to actively manage, contain, and reduce property abandonment and blight. Land Banks serve a critical role of a receivership mechanism for municipalities. It enables control of substandard properties so decisions can be made on the best course of action to return the properties back to productive uses that are consistent with community priorities.

There is no one-size-fits all recipe for structuring and funding a land bank. It is critical for a land bank to seek funding from a wide variety of sources such as federal, state, and local dollars, foundation grants, land sales revenue, and rental income among others. It is also imperative for a land bank to not work in a vacuum. Partnerships at varying scales can help the land bank entity tap into resources outside of the immediate community and help to increase operational capacity. For a Land Bank to be successful, it needs to be nimble, entrepreneurial, and agile to changes in the housing market, property-related legislation, and fluctuating funding sources.

Dorchester County is currently operating a program similar to a land bank known as the Tax Lien Property Repurpose Program (TLPRP). Through the TLPRP, the County is able to obtain the deed on tax-delinquent properties. Properties that are not purchased at the tax certificate auction qualify to be received by the County. In order for the County to receive the deed, the property must be taken through the foreclosure process which can take approximately four months, though recent State legislation in 2018 has shortened this time period. The program has successfully taken control of many vacant and deteriorating properties in Cambridge since its inception in 2014. Once the properties are under control of the TLPRP, the County then sells or grants the property to a new owner with requirements of rehabilitation and occupancy within a defined period of time.

The City of Cambridge should consider the following actions to help reduce and mitigate housing vacancy in the Pine Street neighborhood and the City more broadly:

- 1. Establish a land bank entity for Cambridge.** Creating a land bank in Cambridge will allow the City to proactively address the substandard housing stock. In 2017, the State of Maryland passed legislation granting authority for Cities in the state to establish land banks. A land bank entity in Cambridge can serve a similar function as the County's TLPRP program but the efforts and resources can be applied specifically in Cambridge. In addition, the City has granular knowledge of the housing stock, and which properties and blocks are most in need of intervention. A land



bank provides a critical control mechanism for the City, which is the first step in bringing new life and/or use to a deteriorated building. Once the land bank owns the property, the City can be strategic with how it is used. The homes can be sold on the private market with conditions requiring renovation and occupancy. In addition, affordability measures can be included to align with the goals of the City. Priority can be given to first-time homebuyers to generate more home ownership opportunities in the neighborhood. In some cases, it could make the most sense for the properties to be demolished and replaced with a pocket park or community garden/open space element. A significant benefit of the land banking model is it allows for a lot of flexibility for the City which can be applied on a case by case basis depending on the context of the property.

- 2. Adopt a vacant structure/lot receivership ordinance.** Maryland State law provides jurisdictions the authority to take control of vacant and abandoned properties through receivership. A receivership ordinance in Cambridge would allow the City to receive the deed on vacant and abandoned building and lots that are contributing to the substandard housing stock in the City. Cities often use a land bank or other non-profit as the receiving entity. The receiver then determines whether to sell, renovate, or demolish the property. Similar to TLPRP process, municipal receivership programs typically work with local developers and individuals in the community to rehabilitate the homes within a pre-determined period of time with the ultimate goal of re-occupancy. Vacant housing receivership can be a powerful first step in taking control of areas with substandard housing and initiating the process of rehabilitation or reuse of abandoned properties.

Improve Housing Quality and Safety

There are many deteriorating homes in the Pine Street neighborhood. Many of these homes are vacant, but many are also occupied, which can create life/safety concerns and jeopardize the well-being of residents. Expansion of building code enforcement authority and scope must be critical priority for the City. It is also important that communication channels between tenants, landlords, and the City are established and expanded. These mechanisms can ensure landlords know the penalties of neglecting proper maintenance of rental units, tenant understand how to voice concerns about the condition of their rental units, and that the City continues to be informed of the location of problematic and substandard housing units. The following items could help improve housing quality and safety in the City:

- 1. Expand the rental registration process to include mandatory interior unit inspections.** The current rental unit registration process as defined by City Ordinance 995 and 1006 requires rental units to be registered with the City, however unit inspections are not a step in the registration process. Currently interior rental unit inspections are complaint-driven only. If a tenant has concerns about the safety of their unit, they can contact the City for an inspection. Much of the



housing stock in the Pine Street neighborhood is old and many units are in poor condition and occupied by renters. Mandatory interior inspections for rental units is a best-practice used in communities around the country facing similar conditions. These inspections serve as a powerful tool to ensure living conditions are safe, up to building code standards, and proactively facilitates rehabilitation of properties before their condition deteriorates beyond repair.

2. **Establish a joint-program with Code Enforcement and the Police Department to notify landlords of potential criminal/civil penalties of unaddressed code violations.** In addition to municipal fines and property liens, repeat and unaddressed building code violations in rental properties can also lead to criminal and civil penalties by law. For extreme cases of landlord negligence law enforcement could also intervene in tandem with the Building Safety Services Division. These two agencies could coordinate notification efforts to problematic landlords to include both the code violation related fines/liens and also the legal and criminal implications of inaction on unsafe properties. Expanding the scope of notification to repeat violators could help to increase the pace of remediation.
3. **Launch a landlord training/education program.** The City could require a landlord training/education class as part of the rental registration process. There can often be an information gap with the myriad of regulations and risks associated with renting a property. A landlord training class can facilitate this information exchange and help to proactively mitigate issues with rental units.
4. **Hire two additional Building Code Inspectors.** In wake of the financial crisis and recession of 2008 the City's code enforcement staff was reduced by several FTEs to its current staff of two. If the City decides to move forward with proactive building code enforcement strategies, additional staff resources will likely be required to implement the programs successfully. These staffing resources could be funded through increasing rental registration/permitting fees and also through federal grants like CDBG to help supplement local funds. As the pool of registered rentals increases over time with the program, fees collected can help sustain the inspector positions on a long-term basis.
5. **Adopt a mandatory "crime-free" lease addendum to be used in all rental units in the City.** A crime-free lease addendum is a tool used in many communities to reduce criminal activity, increase neighborhood safety, and hold tenants and landlords responsible. The addendums can take many forms and include a ranging scope depending on the goals of the community. Many of these programs in other communities include a provision that repeat violations can lead to a revoking of a rental unit license. The addendums incentivize landlords to keep their units free to criminal activity and also promote a safe environment for tenants by risk of lease termination for criminal activity on the premises.
6. **Adopt a mandatory "tenant-rights" lease addendum to be used in all rental units in the City.** The intent of this type of program is to educate tenants about their rights and options when confronted with a problematic living situation. It also can provide valuable information for tenants



regarding who to contact in cases of threatening or retaliatory landlords. A mandatory “tenant-rights” lease addendum will help open the communication channel between tenants and the City and help empower tenants to voice their concerns when living conditions become unsafe.

7. **Establish a fund for emergency home repairs and a fee-waiver program for low-income homeowners.** As catalogued and reported in the Ward Three Substandard Study, structural issues are the most common and problematic characteristic in properties that were deemed to be substandard. Issues such as deteriorating windows and doors contributed the most to the substandard status. These types of structural components are often costly to repair and/or replace. The City could explore establishing an emergency home repair fund to use when structural elements of homes need immediate repair for low-income homeowners in the City. As part of this program, permit fee-waivers could be used to help lower the overall cost of these critical and often time-sensitive emergency repairs.
8. **Continue to monitor the condition of the neighborhood housing stock.** As efforts more forward to improve the quality of the housing in the neighborhood, it will be critical to monitor and document the changes. The City is planning to conduct 3-year evaluations similar in scope to the Substandard Housing Study that was released in February 2017. The data will be collected using the same applications/technology and tracked for progress. It will be important for these monitoring efforts to continue to occur on a regular basis in the Pine Street Neighborhood to assess how the strategies are working and to make changes if needed.

Maintain and Expand Housing Affordability

High-quality, affordable housing is important to ensuring physical health and safety and supporting individual and family physical and mental health. Housing is also the bedrock for positive educational outcomes—children living in stable and affordable housing do better in school and school districts overall perform better. In addition, housing availability and affordability is critically important to Cambridge’s economic vitality and shared prosperity. If there is an insufficient supply of housing affordable to workers and residents at all income levels, the City’s economic well-being will suffer. If the City does not plan for housing options that will meet the needs of current and future residents, it will become increasingly difficult for the City to attract and retain a diverse workforce and grow towards a strong, sustainable local economy in the future.

The data suggest Cambridge is largely a City of renters now, a trend that has been increasing over the past decade. Nearly two out of every three households in the City rent their home. In addition, rent-levels and home prices have been rising such that more than half of Cambridge households are considered “housing cost burdened” by standard affordability measures; spending more than 30% of household income on housing expenses. It will be critical that affordable housing, both rental and homeownership options, are available to Cambridge residents in the years to come. This can be achieved by strategies aimed at



preserving the housing stock that is currently affordable, expanding affordable housing options with new and/or renovated properties, and increasing home ownership opportunities in the City to provide more stability and long-term investment options. Feedback from the community has been clear; quality housing that is at affordable levels is something needed in the Pine Street neighborhood. The recommendations below are designed to help facilitate this:

- 1. Establish a Housing Trust Fund.** The City of Cambridge should create a local housing Trust Fund with a dedicated source of funding to support affordable housing initiatives. Local funds can be used to leverage state and federal resources and can provide flexibility in how the City supports the development and preservation of housing for City residents and workers. The fund could be used for a wide range of affordable housing strategies from providing down-payment assistance, to providing low/no-cost loans for home rehabilitation. The City could also explore using the fund to provide gap financing to private/non-profit developers to generate new housing on many of the vacant/abandoned sites in the neighborhood. Ideally the fund should be used to provide loans which are funneled back into the trust fund over time to be re-used for subsequent projects. Therefore, the Cambridge housing trust fund should be set up as a revolving fund.
- 2. Create a down-payment assistance program for first-time homebuyers.** Home-ownership is foundational component of revitalization and stability in a neighborhood and a critical goals of the CNRP. Owning a home represents personal investment into the well-being of the community and creates a sense of ownership in the overall health and direction of the neighborhood. The City could establish a program to facilitate home-ownership opportunities through down-payment assistance. First-time homeowners should be given priority and the City can set the parameters of the program as desired. The assistance could be neighborhood-specific and allocated in coordination with a land bank entity to generate vitality on blocks that need stabilization and investment.
- 3. Partner with private or non-profit developers to build affordable housing on City owned sites.** The City of Cambridge has been increasing its property portfolio over the past several years through tax-delinquency receivership. This pipeline of properties is likely to grow as the housing vacancy issue is proactively addressed by the City through policy direction and leadership. If a land bank entity is created in Cambridge, this would create a steady pipeline of City-owned property some of which could be made available for redevelopment by the private sector. The provision of free or reduced cost land is an important way to close the gap between delivering market-rate and below-market-rate housing because land is a major driver of the cost of development. City control of land also provides the opportunity to incentivize the types housing projects that will meet the community's housing affordability needs while also preserving other community goals such as rehabilitation of deteriorating housing stock and neighborhood stability. The City could issue a pilot RFP on a City-owned site that is a good candidate for redevelopment (multiple adjacent parcels in need of demolition for example). The details of the RFP could be structured such that a portion of the units generated would be maintained at affordable levels and made available to residents in the neighborhood through land entitlement conditions.



4. **Explore creating a density bonus program in exchange for affordable housing.** The City could explore offering a density bonus in certain zoning districts in exchange for the provision of affordable housing. Additional density is an important mechanism for closing the gap between the cost of delivering market-rate and below-market rate housing. Increased density is not appropriate everywhere in the City, so the density bonus policy should be implemented in specific parts of the City as defined through a future public engagement process. It is important that the density bonus be applied in a transparent manner so that developers have predictability in the approval process and so that the City can structure the land entitlements to be contingent on affordable units that will help meet the City’s housing goals.
5. **Offer property tax and impact fee rebates to developments that include affordable housing.** The City should promote existing and adopt new property tax abatement programs. A property tax exemption or abatement can make it easier for nonprofit developers to build housing using Low Income Housing Tax Credits or other state and/or federal resources. The property tax relief can serve to close some of the gap between the cost of building housing and the income generated by rents affordable to lower-income households. Property tax abatement can also be used as an incentive to rehabilitate dilapidated rental properties when property owners agree to maintain rents at affordable levels.

Enhance and Activate Public Spaces

The perception of a public place can have a big influence on how it is used, and whether it fosters a sense of community or keeps people away. During the community engagement process for this project, residents of the neighborhood raised concerns about many elements of the public spaces in the Pine Street Neighborhood. These elements range in size from small street furniture to larger infrastructure projects, but they all are important pieces to the neighborhood revitalization puzzle.

During the table discussions at the February Community Visioning meeting, residents were asked to reflect on strengths, weaknesses/threats, and opportunities of the neighborhood. While there were many thoughts on the strengths of the neighborhood ranging from its rich history and culture to its strong institutions such as churches and service clubs, only one public space related element was mentioned; The Empowerment Center. In contrast, table discussions related to weaknesses/threats and opportunities for the neighborhood highlighted a strong concern within the community about the condition of/lack of public spaces in the neighborhood and a consistent desire to improve/add them. Many of the tables reported items related to open spaces, parks, and placemaking as “transformative” priorities for the neighborhood. The public realm can serve as the bloodline of a neighborhood. These spaces are where neighbors can engage and spend time outside of their homes. These are important elements to quality of life in a community, and critical to successful revitalization. The following items reflect feedback from the



community and potential planning strategies that can help improve public spaces in the Pine Street Neighborhood:

- 1. Explore creating a new public pocket park at the corner of High Street and Muir Street.** There are currently two vacant land parcels at this location. Due to the angle of the intersection the site is highly visible and accessible. A small pocket park in this location would provide a place for passive recreation, small community events both informal and programmed, and would add a placemaking element to this prominent intersection.
- 2. Collaborate with the neighborhood on enhancements and renovations to Cornish Park.** During the community engagement process Cornish Park was identified at several tables and by the Core Group as needing restoration and redesign. The community expressed safety concerns in the park, trash/litter issues, and poor lighting, all of which are contributing to its underutilization and perception as an unsafe environment. This is one of the largest open space features in the neighborhood and can be a major asset/activity center for the community. Specific feedback from the community has been to remove the fencing that is limiting the accessibility to the park, and partnering with a neighborhood watch program to proactively monitor the park.
- 3. Install streetscape improvements on Pine Street and High Street.** Providing a pedestrian friendly environment along the major neighborhood corridors will help to activate the streets and public spaces. Elements such as small street trees or shrubs and landscape planters and bike racks can help soften the pedestrian experience along the street. ADA accessible crosswalks and traffic calming measures at prominent intersections are needed. More streetlighting, trashcans, and other street furniture such as benches can help to create a safer, cleaner, and more comfortable public realm.
- 4. Work with neighborhood stakeholder groups and institutions to create a “neighborhood watch” program.** A consistent feedback theme during the community engagement process was concern with crime in the neighborhood. Explore the feasibility of creating a “neighborhood watch” program in coordination with neighborhood groups/institutions and the City Police Department. Measures to proactively address crime can help increase safety in the neighborhood.
- 5. Consider a pilot “pop-up/placemaking urbanism” project in the neighborhood to be implemented by City staff and residents.** Pop-up or placemaking urbanism involves temporary changes/improvements to the built environment that are typically implemented in gathering places or underutilized public spaces. The City could plan a pilot project to be implemented by resident volunteers in the Pine Street neighborhood. These types of projects are low-cost but can often make lasting changes.
- 6. Continue to promote the side lot initiative with homeowners to expand green space in the neighborhood.** In coordination with Dorchester County, the City currently offers a side lot conveyance program which provides vacant lots to adjacent property owners who are interested



in increasing the size of their yards. Additional marketing and outreach of this program could expand and help preserve green space and open areas in the neighborhood.

Facilitate Social Cohesion

An important component of the CNRP mission statement is to use social cohesion strategies to help revitalize the neighborhood. Fostering opportunities for residents to engage, interact, and socialize are foundational to lasting revitalization. The need for more events and businesses in the Pine Street Neighborhood was expressed during the community outreach sessions for this plan. In addition, previous studies like the RUDAT and the Downtown Retail Study, while covering a different geography, had consistent conclusions that additional business development is needed in the core areas of the City. The following strategies could foster more vitality, business development, and connection over time in the neighborhood:

- 1. Explore an event programming partnership between the City and the Empowerment Center.** Programming, events, and neighborhood activities can engage residents and invoke a sense of community. The best types of events are not always elaborate productions, but often smaller activities that occur more often. Regularity is key; whether it be a block party on the first Friday of the month, or a weekly market; events that people look forward to and know will reoccur are often the most successful. The City and the Empowerment Center could explore collaborating with more regularity on programming and events in the neighborhood.
- 2. Consider transforming City-owned vacant buildings at strategic locations into business incubator spaces.** As Cambridge continues to expand its inventory of vacant/abandoned buildings, explore the possibility of converting properties in strategic locations into business incubator spaces. The City could look for public-private partnership opportunities to rehabilitate homes (or groups of adjacent homes) to be used for small businesses. The incubators could offer low-cost rent and flexibility on the types of uses and lease-terms.
- 3. Explore creation of a Pine Street Neighborhood Retail Overlay District.** Small-scale retail, restaurants, and cafes are important to the vibrancy of a neighborhood activity corridor such as Pine Street. While many of these types of establishments once prospered in the neighborhood, Pine Street has struggled to retain commercial uses. Residents have expressed a desire for businesses growth in the neighborhood. In addition, the RUDAT study highlighted the need for linkages between the key areas that define Cambridge. A stronger commercial presence along Pine Street and select cross-streets will help to link the neighborhood to the downtown core. As part of the 2015 adoption of the Downtown/Waterfront Development District zone and form-based code standards, additional flexibility was provided to the Pine Street commercial areas as



part of the downtown core area. These zoning changes permit a wide range of commercial uses and increased flexibility for commercial businesses while maintaining historic character through the form-based code. These changes were brought forward to the Council based on recommendations of the RUDAT study. As housing vacancy stabilization efforts ramp up in the City, the next phase of business development could benefit from creating a neighborhood retail overlay district along Pine Street. An overlay district would allow the City to customize the zoning in this area even further; and facilitate small business investments through tailored incentives. While a zoning strategy is not directly injecting capital into the area, nor is it guaranteeing business development, it can be a mechanism to reduce the cost and risk associated with opening a business. Reduction or elimination of parking requirements, removing special exception regulations among other items can often go a long way in helping margin-sensitive small businesses decide to invest.

- 4. Establish a Pine Street Neighborhood Civic Association.** Explore interest with stakeholders and residents in establishing a civic association to represent the Pine Street Neighborhood.