



PAS MEMO

The Baltimore Planning Academy: Community Empowerment Through Civic Education

By Elina Bravve

In 2018, the Baltimore Department of Planning (DoP) launched the Baltimore Planning Academy. The [Planning Academy](#) is a cohort-based, six-week program designed to build community leadership around urban planning, zoning, and development topics (Figure 1).

The development of this program stemmed from five goals embedded in the DoP's Equity Action Plan. The first goal states that the DoP aims to "improve and increase the dialogue between the Department of Planning and underserved communities in Baltimore." The Planning Academy was an action recommended under this goal.

The Planning Academy seeks to elevate the ability of community members to affect the public processes around planning, policy, and urban development and to elevate equitable public engagement as a major goal for the DoP.

This *PAS Memo* explains the vision and goals of the Baltimore Planning Academy, its structure and design, and the impact thus far of the program. The *Memo* also offers recommendations and action steps for planners toward replicating this program in other municipalities.



Figure 1. The Baltimore Planning Academy's 2019 cohort (Baltimore Department of Planning)

Equity and Engagement in Context

Broadly defined, *equity* seeks to redistribute public resources based upon public need. In 2015, DoP staff began exploring what this concept could mean for planning in Baltimore.

That year, a food justice training at the DoP galvanized a small group of staff to create an Equity in Planning Committee. Monthly meetings were attended by at least one member (but often more) of each [internal division](#), and initially involved a process of self-education and discussion, focusing on urban planning and local government policies that have led to inequitable outcomes in Baltimore and so many cities like it. The focus soon shifted to developing an equity action plan with concrete goals and recommendations for the purpose of presenting these ideas to senior leadership.

The Committee worked together over the course of 2015–2017 to develop its own shared language and understanding of equity. This resulted in the following internal definition:

An equitable Baltimore addresses the needs and aspirations of its diverse population and meaningfully engages residents through inclusive and collaborative processes to expand access to power and resources.

The [Equity Action Plan](#) was finalized in 2017. It consists of five overarching goals developed collectively by members of the Equity in Planning Committee, each with a series of specific recommended actions. The five goals are as follows:

1. Improve and increase the dialogue and connections between the Department of Planning and underserved communities in Baltimore.
2. Ensure that the Planning Department staff reflect the demographics of Baltimore City.
3. Use an equity lens to develop, revise, and evaluate City policies.
4. Use an equity lens to prioritize capital investments.

5. Evaluate the Planning Department's internal practices and policies.

As a result of the plan's recommendations, Tom Stosur, DoP director at the time, made the decision to hire a senior-level departmental official, current assistant director Stephanie Smith, to operationalize the plan. The DoP reorganized staffing capacity internally to create additional capacity around equity—and engagement.

While there is not a single definition for the term, for the purposes of this *Memo*, “public engagement” means the interactions between planners, planning officials, and the public. Public engagement is the process through which:

- Planners inform residents about what development is occurring in their community, and what plans, programs, and policies are impacting and informing these changes.
- Residents are able to inform and shape development patterns in their community by influencing the design of programs and policies and sharing their experiences and perspectives.
- Residents are able to become civic leaders in their community—this includes leading a neighborhood group or civic project, becoming a member of a commission or an advisory group to the local government, or working to build the cross-sector relationships necessary to spur neighborhood development.

The DoP's focus on both equity and engagement led to the creation of the Baltimore Planning Academy.

Origins of the Planning Academy

The origins of the Planning Academy predate the DoP's formal equity work. In April 2013, the DoP had collaborated with the local nonprofit Citizens Planning and Housing Association, Inc., to organize a weekend capacity-building workshop series called the East Baltimore Leadership Academy. This program was, in part, a response to the ongoing [East Baltimore Development Initiative](#), a 20-year public-private effort, often contentious, to redevelop the community adjacent to the Johns Hopkins University medical campus.

The idea of the Leadership Academy was to equip residents of the area with the technical tools necessary to advocate effectively on behalf of their communities in response to the proposed redevelopment. The workshop series was attended by 150 residents and covered zoning, the development review process, and the legislative process, as well as community organizing tools. While the DoP considered expanding the pilot program to other communities across the city, capacity to expand was limited at the time.

This experience helped inform the development of the DoP's Equity Action Plan. In support of the plan's first goal—to improve and increase dialogue and connections between the DoP and underserved communities—the Equity in Planning Committee added a specific action: the development

of a civic education program built on the East Baltimore Leadership Academy model.

The subsequent equity-focused reorientation of the DoP under the direction of Stephanie Smith led to an opportunity to develop the Planning Academy in earnest.

Models for Equity and Engagement

Several engagement models informed the vision, goals, and design of the Baltimore Planning Academy.

- **The International Association for Public Participation's [Spectrum of Public Participation](#).** This framework describes five different approaches to engagement on a progressive continuum, along which the public has increased levels of responsibility for decision making (IAP2 2018). Practitioners are to match each approach on the spectrum to the context of a given project. In order to move beyond the “inform” level of engagement, the DoP needed to equip residents with the knowledge necessary to participate effectively as decision makers. The Planning Academy was conceived as a mechanism to move engagement across this spectrum.
- **Arnstein's [Ladder of Citizen Participation](#).** Proposed by Sherry Arnstein in 1969, this model posits that effective public engagement requires shifting power, either in terms of decision-making or resources. Arnstein notes that public participation specifically requires enabling residents who are “presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future” (Arnstein 1969).
- **Equity planning.** This [framework](#) was proposed in 1969 by Norman Krumholz, who served as Cleveland's planning director under Carl Stokes, one of the first Black mayors elected to office in a major American city (Brown 2005). Krumholz framed planners as activists; in equity planning, all urban planning decisions are evaluated through the lens of how they would impact the least-advantaged residents. A similar viewpoint informed the development of the Baltimore DoP's Community Planning team in the 1960s under director Larry Reich.
- **The American Planning Association's [Planning for Equity Policy Guide](#).** This APA policy guide, published in 2019, asserts “that applying principles of equity is an ethical responsibility” for professional planners (APA 2019).

The DoP also adopted a [four-part lens](#) from the Urban Sustainability Directors Network. It states that for any policy or project, decision-makers can consider four elements of equity: structural, procedural, distributional, and transgenerational (Park 2014). When developing the Planning Academy, our team carefully thought through how to apply this lens to our new program.

- **Structural equity: *What historic advantages or disadvantages have affected residents in the given community?*** When designing the curriculum for the workshop series, we wanted to open the program with a discussion of the

history of land use and its impact on existing inequitable land patterns in Baltimore. We wanted to openly discuss the ways in which the planning profession has contributed to systemic racism and the unequal distribution of resources. This framework was an important foundation for the discussion of development and zoning to follow in coming weeks. Understanding the structural inequities that persist in Baltimore to this day was important to promote public dialogue, build a shared understanding of history, and create the space for later discussions that would center equity.

- **Procedural equity:** *How are residents who have been historically excluded from planning processes being authentically included in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the proposed policy or project?* When designing our outreach process, we felt that it was important to prioritize the applicants from communities that have experienced persistent disinvestment based on government policies, especially because we received far more applications than seats available for the course. We used the city's [Housing Market Typology](#) (Figure 2), an imperfect but consistent measure, to assess neighborhood disinvestment and offer "bonus points" through the application process to candidates from communities that were most distressed per the Typology data. Finally, we carefully tracked the demographics of our applicants. When we saw gaps, we took the extra time to expand the outreach process, working closely with our Community Planners to conduct targeted outreach.
- **Distributional equity:** *Does the distribution of civic resources and investment explicitly account for potential racially disparate outcomes?* As discussed in further detail below, we view the Planning Academy as a redistribution of resources. DoP provides a high level of service to developers through pre-development meetings, during which developers interact with staff and are able to gain a deep understanding of how their project moves through the development process. We envisioned that the Planning Academy would provide communities with a similar support apparatus—through the workshop series, participants would gain an understanding of the development process and how to most smoothly navigate it from the perspective of a community member or group at Baltimore's Board of Municipal and Zoning Appeals (BMZA) meetings or at Planning Commission.
- **Transgenerational equity:** *Does the policy or project result in unfair burdens on future generations?* Just before the COVID-19 pandemic, we began exploring the development of a complementary program focused on young people as an offshoot of the Planning Academy, in collaboration with the [Enoch Pratt Free Library](#). While this project was put on hold, it continues to be a high priority for the future as the Planning Academy continues to evolve.

DoP staff also reached out to the City of Philadelphia's planning department for information on its [Citizens Planning](#)

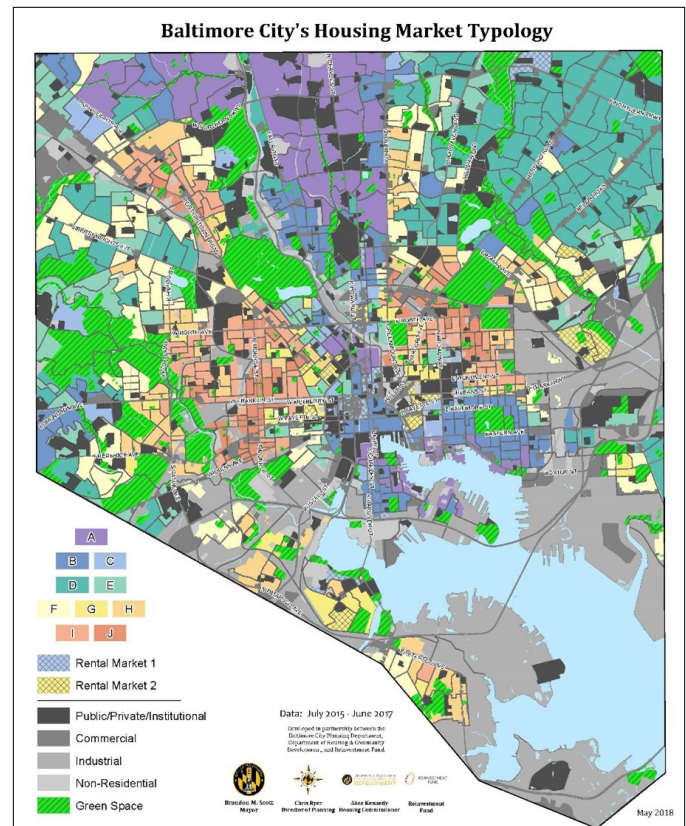


Figure 2. Baltimore's Housing Market Typology map (City of Baltimore)

[Institute](#), founded in 2010 (see the sidebar on p. 4). And as staff worked to develop the first Planning Academy, the feedback and participation of the Equity in Planning Committee was invaluable, helping to fine-tune many elements of the pilot project, from recruitment to curriculum design.

Overcoming Barriers to Engagement

The Planning Academy was conceived as a tool to address some of the barriers to effective public engagement in Baltimore. Baltimore's planners are keenly aware that the public has what is often described as "planning fatigue." Planners have sought resident input on a variety of planning efforts, but often without the implementation funds to move from vision to reality. And these planning efforts have sometimes been viewed as transactional, rather than relationship-building, because engagement often took the form of one-time opportunities through a public meeting or town hall to offer feedback.

The Planning Academy seeks to address this by focusing on deeper relationship-building as a central goal. We aim to build relationships between residents across the city as well as build relationships between residents and staff. Residents have the opportunity to learn from one another, potentially work together on projects, or share ideas and resources. And we aim to humanize government, moving the perception from that of inaccessible and uncaring bureaucrats to that of project partners, colleagues, and neighbors.

The Philadelphia Citizens Planning Institute

The [Philadelphia Citizens Planning Institute](#) (CPI) came into being in 2010 as the “outreach and education” entity within the Philadelphia City Planning Commission (PCPC). At the time, the city had begun a major zoning code reform project and was about to embark on a new comprehensive plan—Philadelphia 2035—something the city had not done since 1960.

Although zoning and planning are two of the main ways the public can influence their physical surroundings, processes often involve technical jargon that limits who is able to participate. CPI was imagined as a catalyst, a way to demystify planning processes and enable residents from all neighborhoods to participate more equitably. Though the program has evolved over time, what hasn’t changed is the emphasis on creating a citywide network by connecting people with similar challenges, and the emphasis on providing practical tools for residents to take their own action. In the process, CPI has helped build a diverse and engaged constituency for planning that can be tapped by city agencies to promote programs and initiatives.

About CPI

Philadelphia is rich in residents who are invested in their neighborhoods, with thousands of block captains and hundreds of civic associations and neighborhood-based community development corporations. CPI seeks to offer something for anyone who wants to become an active participant, regardless of where they live or what experiences they may bring.

CPI’s main programming is a course of eight weekly classes held each spring and fall. The orientation session introduces participants to the course requirements and to each other. Three required core classes address city planning, zoning, and development processes (Figure 3). Participants attend at least two of three special topic classes, which change every semester. At the final workshop session, students are invited to make five-minute presentations on a topic of their choice to meet the final project requirement. Participants who attend all required classes and turn in a final project receive a certificate and Citizen Planner card.

Volunteer instructors represent public, for-profit, and non-profit sectors. Participants can make important connections with these subject matter experts and with fellow students facing similar issues in different neighborhoods.

CPI alumni are invited to take special topic classes and be presenters—a key piece of peer-to-peer learning. They can participate in the Alumni Committee, organizing neighborhood tours and helping to plan annual celebrations. The CPI staff (director and program manager) connects citizen planners with other alumni working on similar issues or in the same neighborhood. Alumni also receive quarterly newsletters and job opportunities posted through private Facebook and LinkedIn groups.



Figure 3. CPI Spring 2018 cohort core class exercise asking table teams to role-play a development scenario (Philadelphia Citizens Planning Institute)

The Value of CPI

Despite the limitations of virtual classes—because of COVID-19, the course has been virtual since 2020—CPI continues to attract over 150 applicants for each cohort of 30. The alumni network is now 700 strong, representing all 18 city planning districts and over 125 neighborhoods.

Citizen planners have become important “bridge-builders” between staff planners and the neighborhoods they represent. They were involved in every district plan during the Phila2035 planning process—serving on steering committees, helping with outreach and facilitation for public meetings, and supporting plan implementation.

The value of this program for planners is recognized by Anne Fadullon, director of the city’s Department of Planning & Development: “CPI has revolutionized our ability to engage with the public, which has in turn improved our agency’s plans and other work immeasurably. Moreover, many other city agencies have worked with citizen planners to fulfill community engagement and outreach needs.”

The PCPC is looking forward to leveraging the CPI network as we begin to plan the engagement strategy for an update to the city’s comprehensive plan. Philadelphia’s citizen planners have become a vital resource in our work to build trust and new relationships in every neighborhood.

Donna Carney is the director of the Philadelphia Citizens Planning Institute. She can be reached at donna.carney@phila.gov. For more information on CPI, visit <https://citizensplanninginstitute.org>.

Another goal of the Planning Academy is to equip residents with the knowledge they need to advocate more effectively for their communities by connecting them to resources, tools, and information. We seek to overcome the “information gap” in Baltimore.

The public conversation around development is often biased in favor of those “in the know”—residents who have the privilege of flexibility to attend meetings, know exactly who to direct their concerns towards, or are most able to effectively organize a letter-writing campaign. Across the country, public engagement often reveals a bias in favor of wealthier and whiter homeowners. For example, [a study from Boston University](#) found that white, male, homeowners, and older residents are overrepresented at public meetings relating to planning and development issues in the Boston metropolitan area (Brey 2018).

This information gap affects the influence of community organizations. In Baltimore, some neighborhood groups have established land-use committees. These groups might have in-house technical expertise in the form of attorneys, architects, or other built-environment professionals to guide group advocacy efforts around development. But this type of knowledge remains the exception rather than the norm. Many more community groups lack internal land-use expertise and are left at a disadvantage. The Planning Academy was designed to start to chip away at this gap by equipping more residents (and the formal and informal community groups with which they are affiliated) with the knowledge needed to more effectively navigate city processes related to Planning Commission and BMZA.

Finally, the Planning Academy aims to empower residents to shape their neighborhoods and Baltimore as a whole. In the past, public meetings—town hall meetings, hearings,

and other formal public events—were the starting point of engagement. We now recognize that engagement needs to begin long before a public process takes place. We believe that the Planning Academy is laying the foundation for better engagement down the road. By building a network of engaged and informed residents across many city neighborhoods, we are laying the groundwork so that residents can more deeply engage with the design of recommendations and policies and provide the sort of input that can change the direction of plans.

About the Baltimore Planning Academy

A number of elements and considerations make up the Planning Academy program: outreach to and recruitment of Planning Academy participants, including the application and review process; program curriculum and module facilitation; and ensuring that the program is serving the intended audience. Staff continuously evaluate Planning Academy participation and outcomes, making improvements as needed.

Outreach and Recruitment

To recruit for the Planning Academy program, we lean heavily on our social media and digital communication channels. To make outreach as easy as possible for our internal staff team, our engagement team created a digital folder of materials: an email template, a flyer, a FAQ, a series of social graphics, and a social media “toolkit” with hashtags and recommended text to accompany our social posts (Figure 4). This folder is shared with our internal Planning staff and partners both within and outside city government, as we urge all to spread the word during the application period. We also highlight the Planning Academy prominently on our website and in our newsletter.



Love Baltimore? Have ideas to make it more inclusive? Join the Baltimore Planning Academy.

Applications open now!

#Shapeyourbmore

Learn more? www.baltimoreplanningacademy.com

Bring your questions, enthusiasm and curiosity about Baltimore.



“I applied to the academy to get a better understanding of how the Planning department worked and ended learning much more to help me be a better leader in my community”

**REGINA HAMMOND
REBUILD JOHNSTON SQUARE**

Figure 4. Flyer and social media outreach message for the Baltimore Planning Academy (Baltimore Department of Planning)

Because we lack a budget for a broad digital or print marketing campaign, prior to launching the Planning Academy, we decided to test the waters by running mini-workshops across the city at libraries and community centers. During these sessions, called #PlugintoPlanning, we provided a quick overview of planning and solicited input on what residents might want to learn from a potential urban planning themed educational workshop series (Figure 5). This was an opportunity for residents to weigh in on the design of the curriculum for the Planning Academy, and an opportunity for our team to begin early outreach for the Planning Academy.

The Planning Academy application consists of four short essay questions:

- *How do you describe Baltimore? What do you love most about your city and community?*
- *What are some of the biggest challenges or opportunities you observe in your community?*
- *Why do you want to participate in the Baltimore Planning Academy? What are the top skills that you would like to gain through your participation? What issues do you hope to be better prepared to address upon graduation?*
- *We are seeking participants who are committed to their communities. Being involved can take many forms and does not necessarily equate to a specific leadership position or title. Describe your recent community involvement in Baltimore. What perspectives, skills, or experiences do you draw from as an active member of your community?*

We are not looking for perfect writing; we are looking for responses that convey passion for the city and a commitment to learning as part of a community. The application also includes demographic questions, which keep us accountable: is this program serving a community of residents that represent Baltimore?

Each application is reviewed anonymously by an initial team of reviewers composed of staff and alumni volunteers. The scoring is subjective; each reviewer scores each response on a scale ranging from 1 to 5. Top-scoring applications are sent to the program management team for a second review, which also looks at demographics and neighborhood geography to ensure that our cohort is representative of the city. At this stage, we map applicants and provide bonus points to those from disinvested communities per the Housing Market Typology data tool noted above.

The DoP's Community Planning & Revitalization team is an important partner in outreach efforts. [Community Planners](#) are assigned to geographic areas (planning districts) and work closely with other city agencies, private citizens, neighborhood and community-based organizations, and nonprofits to ensure that sound planning principles are the basis for neighborhood planning efforts. This team was originally formed many decades ago by director Larry Reich for the purpose of ensuring neighborhood involvement in the development process.

We work closely with our Community Planners to address outreach gaps throughout the recruitment process. As applicants respond to our call, we track race, gender, age, and neigh-



Figure 5. #PlugintoPlanning mini-workshops allowed DoP staff to gather community input and begin outreach for the Planning Academy (Baltimore Department of Planning)

borhood location. When we notice that applicants are lacking from a particular part of the city, we work with the community planner representing that geography to address the gap.

One constant: there are far more applicants than seats. We ask applicants whether they've applied in prior terms and we try to prioritize applicants who reapply. We offer a program waitlist, as usually a few spots open up with schedule availability changes. We also post our materials on the [DoP website](#) so that anyone interested can review our curriculum. We hope that our alumni will continue to share what they learn with their community—through meetings and informally—pointing their neighbors to the many resources available.

Our alumni have proved to be our most important outreach partners. This is critical, because government outreach and engagement programs are viewed with varying degrees of distrust by the public at large. Enthusiastic word-of-mouth recommendations through our network of alumni have become a critical piece of the outreach puzzle.

Curriculum and Facilitation

The program is run over the course of six weeks each fall and spring. The opening session always starts with a round of introductions, where each participant shares what brings them to the program and what they are hoping to get out of the dialogue.

Relationship building is important to the program, and we focus on setting aside time specifically for this priority. Pre-COVID, we always provided dinner at the start of each session, and time was set aside for participants to sit and eat together informally before we dived into content. During COVID, when the program was primarily virtual, we delivered snack boxes to each participant's home when in-person meetings were impossible. When we began to return to hybrid programming, we set aside a time for in-person introductions, socially distanced at a park.

The first module of content sets the tone of the program by emphasizing racial equity as a theme. This session focuses on the intersections between systemic racism and land-use planning. It builds on a presentation developed by our Historic Preservation team collaboratively with one of our land-use planners that was initially piloted at a staff meeting as part of our internal equity training. A historic preservation planner presents this material and engages participants in a dialogue about its implications. Our goal is to weave the topic of equity into all of our conversations throughout the Planning Academy and encourage questions and comments during the rest of the sessions that refer back to this initial discussion.

The remainder of the sessions cover zoning, development review, neighborhood planning, and budgeting (Table 1). A new addition to the curriculum has been a site visit or tour where we work with a community group or a developer and visit a project site across the city (Figure 6, p. 8). This opportunity to get into the city as a group and talk to developers has received positive feedback from our participants.

The facilitators rotate, but we work with a small team of regular internal facilitators. Each facilitator develops their own presentation and presents on the day of the session. Each session has one or two facilitators. Nearly all facilitators are DoP staff, but we invite guests to support the sessions as well. We do not hire external speakers, as we do not have a budget for this. The primary cost is staff time.

We leave some room for flexibility. For example, we noticed that gentrification was often brought up during our workshops, but without much opportunity to dissect the term and what it meant in the Baltimore context specifically. We ended up creating a discussion-based module on this topic and weaving it into the six-week program for several cohorts to better reflect group interests. This session encouraged participants to unpack what the terms *gentrification*, *equitable development*, and *neighborhood revitalization* meant to them. It asked them

to consider, what, if any, development is acceptable? What does it mean for a development project to be community-led? And it led towards solution-based dialogue around what an equitable development project should look like in Baltimore.

Who Is in the Room?

As previously stated, one of our goals is to ensure that, at a minimum, the participants of the Planning Academy represent the demographics of Baltimore City. Moreover, our program is designed to serve communities that are less likely to participate in the public process in Baltimore. Thus, we wanted Planning Academy participants to overrepresent from Black communities that have historically faced disinvestment in Baltimore (and nationwide) as a result of inequitable programs, policies, and procedures perpetuated by government entities.

Over the course of six cohorts, nearly 180 Baltimore residents representing 107 neighborhoods across the city have participated in the Planning Academy. In terms of race, 72 percent of Planning Academy participants have been Black. In terms of age, participants have been fairly evenly split across age groups, with a slightly higher percentage (31 percent) representing 30–39 years of age. We have had less participation from seniors over age 65 (five percent), which is interesting given that many neighborhood associations are led by our senior community. Finally, Planning Academy participants tend to be female (69 percent), which aligns with anecdotal evidence of activism among female residents in Baltimore.

Past Planning Academy participants have included Baltimore City educators, community organizers, artists, urban farmers and community gardeners, lifelong Baltimore residents, neighborhood historians, designers (of all forms), advocates for digital equity and public health and the environment, and more. These residents bring a wide range of backgrounds, skills, and talents to our program. The sidebars on pp. 9 and 10 highlight two Planning Academy participants.

Table 1. Baltimore Planning Academy Sessions

Session	Description
Week 1	This session covers the impact of systemic and institutional racism, specifically through the lens of land use and urban planning history as it relates to Baltimore City.
Week 2	This session provides a broad introduction of the Zoning Code in Baltimore City: how it is used and how it can be navigated. What type of development projects trigger opportunities for public input, and how can residents navigate the Board of Municipal and Zoning Appeals (BMZA) hearings.
Week 3	This session continues the discussion on land use, focusing more broadly on development in Baltimore City. How do developers interact with the Department of Planning?
Week 4	This session is an outdoor walking tour or site visit. This rotates around the city and is hosted by a CDC, developer, or community group.
Week 5	This session offers a broad overview of the budget process in Baltimore and particularly, Planning's role as the manager of the Capital Improvement Program (CIP). How are investments such as parks, transit, and street improvements planned and funded in Baltimore City? How does the Operating Budget process work, and how can residents play a role?
Week 6	This session covers neighborhood planning. What is neighborhood planning and who drives this process in Baltimore? What is the City's Neighborhood Plans Policy?

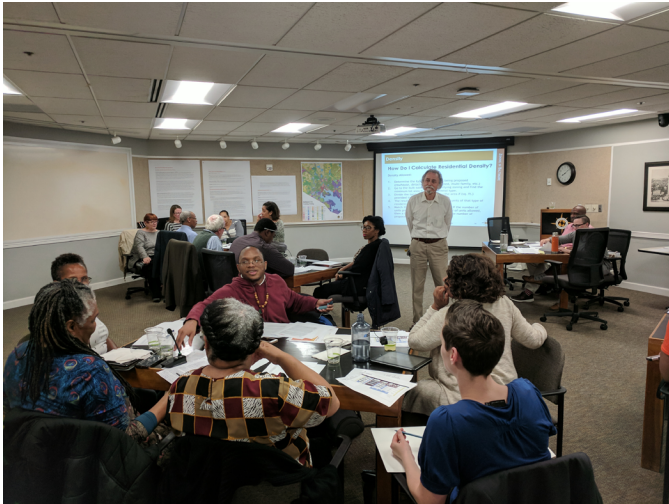


Figure 6. Planning Academy sessions include presentations with discussions as well as site visits (Baltimore Department of Planning)

Outcomes: Alumni Accomplishments

Planning Academy alumni have made significant contributions to DoP projects and to the many communities where they reside. An alumnus of the program was appointed by the mayor to serve on the Planning Commission, and six of the 20 Comprehensive Plan Advisory Council members are alumni of the program. Several others have recently joined the Climate Action Plan Advisory Council. Others have weighed in on specific planning policy issues, such as the development of [equity criteria](#) as part of the DoP's Capital Improvements Program (CIP) Oversight Committee.

The development of community-led neighborhood plans is core to the Planning Academy curriculum. A workshop led by community planners covers in detail what it takes to have a neighborhood plan accepted by the Planning Commission—what elements must be included, what the process generally looks like, and how to decide if a community-led plan would be beneficial. And several alumni have taken on lead roles in developing neighborhood plans in partnership with the community, like Regina Hammond in the Johnston Square neighborhood of East Baltimore. A resident of the community since the 1980s, Hammond began organizing ReBuild Johnston Square, a community organization, in 2013. Since then, with partners, the community has spearheaded the renovation of a community park, rehabbed an entire block of vacant properties, and is now working on the construction of a 60-unit affordable apartment building. In 2020, under Hammond's leadership, the [Johnston Square Vision Plan](#) was accepted by the Planning Commission.

Many alumni have tackled civic projects, ranging from art and beautification projects led by Pam Curtis, a NW Baltimore advocate and community leader, in collaboration with artists in the Park Heights community (Figure 7) to a community food distribution effort led by Monica Lapenta, who leads the Italian Cultural Center of Baltimore. Through the Planning Academy, staff is constantly reminded that Baltimore, at its heart, is a community of residents committed to positive change. The many other exceptional community building projects under-

way speak to the unique nature of Baltimore City as a place where creative energy is driving impactful projects.

And several alumni have gotten involved in development themselves. In a field that is largely male dominated and difficult to break into, we've cheered as several female alumni of the Planning Academy steadfastly pursued a different approach to development—with equity at the center. This has also spurred additional conversations within the DoP about how to best serve emerging developers as a whole: Given our limited resources, what else can we do to provide support to neighborhood-focused developers? One initial step under consideration is to expand our pre-development offerings and



Figure 7. Neighborhood beautification project led by Planning Academy alumna Pam Curtis (Pam Curtis)

Planning Academy Participant Spotlight: Ashley Esposito

Ashley Esposito (Figure 8) has lived in Baltimore since 2016; her husband was born and raised here. Ashley fell in love with the Violetville neighborhood when she came to visit her brother-in-law on Halloween. She writes, “Halloween is my FAVE! And Violetville’s streets were packed with kids and the neighbors were all outside—it was great! We are now raising our 15-month old here who has been nicknamed ‘Violetville Vinny.’”

Ashley co-founded the Village of Violetville, Inc., a neighborhood association that she describes as an “un-association,” to bring her community together and meet community needs. According to Ashley, “We do things differently in our organization. First of all, I don’t view myself as a [traditional] leader. A lot of the ideas, events, and solutions are offered by my neighbors. I just create the space to connect people. I see people and communities like a hive of bees. They are all working and moving... having centralized communication and resources makes that work much more efficient.” For Ashley, the Village of Violetville is a neighborhood wellness association because of its focus on being responsive to the needs of the community. Building connection is at the heart of the work.

Working with the Department of Planning and the SW Community Planner, accomplishments have included funding and replacing a new community sign, organizing a holiday

decorations contest (and pet calendar!), and coming together to advocate for park improvements and business improvements at Wilkens Plaza, a nearby shopping center with national food retailers.

About the Planning Academy, Ashley writes, “I learned about the history of the city development, how planning works, and what opportunities for engagement exist. I also have been able to give a lot of feedback [on planning-related policies and programs]. Every neighborhood has different needs and we’ve all been able to give feedback via the Planning Academy” to build better engagement programming and opportunities for residents.

In 2021, Ashley was chosen for a [Weaver Award](#) for her work in the community to build trust and connect people, receiving \$7,000 to complete a community project.



Figure 8. Planning Academy alumna Ashley Esposito (Baltimore Department of Planning)

provide additional advisory services to alumni of the Planning Academy program pursuing development.

Finally, the DoP is also seeing benefits from this program. The Planning Academy has resulted in an alumni network representing over 100 neighborhoods throughout the City of Baltimore. As Baltimore embarks on updating our comprehensive plan, we have turned to this network to lead as members of an advisory council and to explore the design of our engagement strategy. Without them, we would not have the ability to engage residents so early in the process.

This group is already influencing the shape of the planning process. With their input, we are proposing a more decentralized engagement strategy than in the past. In addition to traditional DoP-hosted events, we are working with a network of community groups that are designing their own engagement events and opportunities at the neighborhood level to meet the needs of the communities that they serve.

Action Steps for Planners

The experience of DoP staff in building the Planning Academy offers some lessons learned for planners designing a civic education program for their community. Building such a program takes staff time but requires minimal additional resources. For a planning agency, building a planning academy program is an important step towards more equitable engagement—ensuring that community groups have access to resources in the form of information so that they can be better prepared

to engage developers and the city during the planning and development process.

Get started. The first step towards developing a planning academy is forming a small team of internal staff committed to designing a curriculum that fits the needs of residents, based on frequently asked questions from community. This internal staff team should include a mix of staff with technical expertise on core topics, direct experience engaging community, and someone with an understanding of social media and outreach. You may also want to consider engaging residents in the design of the curriculum itself. Getting at least one member of the agency executive team on board early is also critical to success.

Design the curriculum with the community in mind. Prior to launching the Planning Academy, our team traveled to libraries and community centers around town for several #plugintoplaning conversations, as described above. During these conversations, we gathered information on what people wanted to learn about how our department functioned and what misconceptions residents had around the urban planning process. These conversations informed the development of our pilot curriculum.

Build an internal program team. While the Planning Academy facilitators rotate, we have an internal team of regular instructors to cover the core curriculum. This way, we aren’t starting each cohort from scratch; we can build on an existing foundation and tweak things in response to input and evaluations from participants. Our amazing team of facilitators lend a

Planning Academy Participant Spotlight: Sister Yeshiyah Israel

Sister Yeshiyah Israel (Figure 9) is a lifelong resident of Baltimore City and president of the Pimlico Merchants Association. Her family has been an anchor in the Park Heights community for over 20 years with their businesses, Scott's & Sons Furniture and YBI African Apparel, the latter of which she owns. Sister Israel's journey began "as a young girl watching [her] grandmothers sew, making wedding dresses and my great-grandmother making quilts."

About her neighborhood, Park Heights, Sister Israel says, "This area is steeped in history. We are building a momentum of pride and ensuring that our streets are safe and clean." She is committed to building business and community initiatives in Baltimore by engaging the city's youth in meaningful beautification projects such as painting murals and cleanup days, using her storefront as a meeting space. Her latest project, Pimlico Market Cafe (PMC), will help address the food desert crisis facing the Southern Park Heights region of Baltimore.

For Sister Israel, equitable neighborhood development is a practice of building and maintaining neighborhoods where all individuals and families can thrive. This means ensuring



Figure 9. Planning Academy alumna Sister Yeshiyah Israel (Baltimore Department of Planning)

that development is responsive to the needs of all community members, particularly the most vulnerable. Sister Israel writes, "It is my goal to make the Pimlico Market Cafe accessible to all members of the community. Our healthy foods approach should be shared by all."

In Fall 2021, Sister Israel was a [featured community resident](#) whose story was captured by [The Guardians](#), a public art, photo documentary, and storytelling project developed by artist Whitney Frazier with creative photography by Kirby Griffin.

broad range of deep knowledge and expertise to the program—from zoning to neighborhood planning.

Create a welcoming space. The majority of our tiny budget goes towards community building. We purchase tote bags from a local nonprofit arts organization and use those bags to provide a resource binder to each participant filled with key information. We spend most of our funding on food, and when in person, we set aside time at the beginning of each workshop for participants to sit together and get to know each other informally over a meal. This opportunity to build connections is consistently lauded as something greatly valued by our alumni. We also provide parking passes and transit passes for residents commuting to our workshops, and while we haven't provided childcare formally, we welcome parents to bring their children to workshops as they need.

Offer opportunities to stay connected and lead. We view Planning Academy as just the beginning. Over time, we envision a larger network of alumni with the foundation necessary to serve in leadership roles formally and informally on topics related to urban planning within and outside of city government.

The sidebar on pp. 11–12 offers additional insights and recommendations from a national scan of community planning academies.

Conclusion

Baltimore's planners knew that our model for public engagement needed to expand and shift. We needed to build trust more effectively, work with residents much earlier in the public process, and ensure that our communities had the information

and resources that they needed to better advocate for their neighborhoods. To build a broad foundation for more effective public engagement, we decided to design a civic education program. The Baltimore Planning Academy was the result. Through this program, we hope to build a better foundation for public engagement around urban planning.

Through the Planning Academy, participants are better equipped to navigate the planning and development process: providing input into public processes, taking leadership roles in developing and implementing neighborhood plans, designing and executing new community projects, and connecting more of their family, friends, and neighbors to critical information about city programs. Over time, we anticipate that the alumni network will grow to have a greater impact at the neighborhood and city level across Baltimore. And we hope that planners in other communities will be inspired by Baltimore's experience and pursue broader and deeper engagement processes for their residents by creating their own community planning academies.

About the Author

Elina Bravve has been a city planner for the City of Baltimore since January 2016. Her responsibilities include managing the Planning Academy initiative, as well as supporting the upcoming comprehensive plan process. Prior to joining Baltimore City, she worked as a researcher for the National Low Income Housing Coalition, a national public policy nonprofit. Bravve holds a master's degree in city and regional planning from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Reimagining Community Planning Academies

For more than 25 years, community planning academies (CPAs) have offered planning departments a more direct pathway for expanding and improving community engagement in their planning and land-use processes. In May 2021, a team from the Research to Action Lab at the Urban Institute began a national scan of different CPA models. We sought to identify and synthesize their characteristics and features: Who hosts CPAs? Who participates? What do they teach? And we asked: Could CPAs serve as forums for making local land-use, land development, and urban planning systems more inclusive, equitable, and resilient to help communities address issues such as climate change, pandemic recovery, and racial injustice?

From our research and interviews we identified three basic CPA types, each of which focuses on different groups with specific needs, understandings, and goals when it comes to improving planning and land-use in their communities.

- The classic community planning academy.** Local planning departments host this traditional model with staff assigned to recruit, instruct, and manage the CPA, which is targeted at local leaders from community-based organizations and neighborhood groups and others interested in planning-related issues. Programs consist of six to 10 weekly courses on the basics of urban planning, zoning, and land development, as well as special land-use topics such as affordable housing, transportation, and community and economic development. In some cases, group projects or capstone presentations enable participants to apply the concepts they have learned in their community. Examples of this model include [Philadelphia's Citizens Planning Institute](#), which has served more than 1,000 members over the past 12 years, as well as the Baltimore Planning Academy.
 - The land use & planning professionals model.** University-affiliated planning and land-use policy centers or institutes, often in partnership with state APA chapters, host these annual or bi-annual workshops that train local government land-use decision makers (e.g., planning commissioners, zoning board members) or professional planners from planning agencies within that state. One- to two-day trainings cover the roles and duties of land-use decision-makers (e.g., public meeting rules, conflict resolution, legal rules, etc.) or priority land-use issues and hot topics for continuing education credit for practicing planners. Examples of this model include the [Center for Land Use Education](#) (CLUE) at the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point, the [Land Use Leadership Alliance](#) (LULA) Training Program at Pace University Land Use Law Center, and the [American Citizen Planner](#) certification program at Michigan State University Extension.
 - The community builder model.** In this community capacity-building model, courses on planning, land development, and local policy making are infused with leadership development and empowerment to build and expand the knowledge and power of young, emerging BIPOC leaders through urban fellowships and placements on regional and local boards and commissions. Often run by local nonprofits and grounded in principles and practices of social justice and community organizing, examples of these up-to-year-long programs include the [Greenlining Institute's leadership academy](#) in Oakland, California, and [Nexus Community Partners' leadership development academy](#) in the Twin Cities metro area.
- To help planners ensure that all types of CPAs facilitate community dialogue, elevate community voices, and empower community action, we offer the following insights and ideas based on our scan and synthesis for improving existing CPAs or for launching new prototypes:
- Invest in dedicated community planning education.** CPAs run on a shoestring budget with small staffs and often rely on foundation funding. During lean budget years several planning departments were forced to suspend their CPAs. Planners, with support from CPA alumni, have a strong case to make about the impact and influence of their CPAs and the need for expanding funding to their elected officials.
 - Lean into action, advocacy, and community capacity building.** Beyond the courses and the classroom, CPAs provide prime opportunities for service-learning projects, collaborations with university planning studios, and empowering graduates to advocate for land-use processes and decisions that have hurt neighborhoods, especially in communities of color. Ensure that CPAs have space for the development of leadership skills, public speaking, and community organizing. Spend time cultivating CPA alumni through enrichment courses, networking, and coaching around placement on local advisory boards and commissions.
 - Align multiple CPA models.** Each of the CPA models has something different to offer. They serve compatible but slightly different missions and constituents. Consider expanding the classic CPA to include programming and activities that integrate features from the other models.
 - Establish collaborative CPA partnerships and networks.** A city or region can have more than one type of CPA. The city planning department might host the classic CPA, but local nonprofit groups might run a series of neighborhood-scale bootcamps, while the state university manages an annual planning academy for elected officials, land-use commissioners, and professional planners. Imagine a network of CPA types within a region or state that could compare notes and share resources and ideas.
 - Elevate structural racism and equitable land-use reforms.** All CPA models can serve as a platform for community conversations about the legacy of redlining, segregation, and exclusionary zoning. Create or revamp CPA curricula to explain the disparate impacts that past and current land-use plans and policies have on neighborhoods of color. Invite debate and provide innovative

examples from other cities to empower participants to reimagine more equitable planning and land-use systems.

For decades CPAs have provided planning departments with a platform for increasing the land-use literacy of a wide range of community members—from the grassroots to the grass-tops. Our project work identifies new opportunities for nonprofits, universities, and planning departments to adapt

and expand the CPA model so that it can become a catalyst for reforming planning and land-use policies and programs to be more inclusive, equitable, and resilient.

Joe Schilling, senior policy and research associate at the Urban Institute, leads the CPA project thanks to support from the Kresge Foundation. For more information contact him at Jschilling@Urban.org.

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