

**HOWARD UNIVERSITY
THE LEDROIT PARK INITIATIVE
A PARTNERSHIP WITH FANNIE MAE
AND
THE FANNIE MAE FOUNDATION**

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ABSTRACT

The LeDroit Park Initiative: In partnership with Fannie Mae, the Fannie Mae Foundation and LeDroit Park neighborhood residents, Howard University is successfully implementing a comprehensive multi-phase program of redevelopment within a 150-block area surrounding its central campus. The program includes the rehabilitation and new construction of 43 units of housing that provides affordable homeownership opportunities for University employees and local residents along with financial and technical assistance to purchasers. This development, in turn, is creating a catalyst for much more private-sector development among the scores of vacant and abandoned properties throughout the immediate area.

The Initiative also involves infrastructure upgrades including street and alley resurfacing, sidewalk-bricking, tree planting, traffic-calming measures, the installation of new lighting, and the redevelopment of open space and park areas. The development of a new Town Center with neighborhood-serving retail, housing and commercial parking facilities, together with the establishment of a cultural district that includes the preservation of an endangered historic landmark and transit-oriented development are additional features of the Initiative. These are intended to bring economic and cultural vitality to an area that was once the heartbeat of the African American community in Washington, D.C.

The development of the Initiative is an ongoing process: construction of infrastructure improvements has begun, and the University is participating in discussions with the city and its neighbors concerning the development of other major land uses for the area. The community will be wired to create a 21st Century Electronic Village, providing modern telecommunications access to the University, the Internet, and the World Wide Web.

The Washington Post hailed the program as “the most significant redevelopment proposal to be unveiled in the District since the master plan for the revitalization of Pennsylvania Avenue was approved 23 years ago” and urged the City to “endorse the Howard initiative as a prototype for revitalization of other neighborhoods.”

INTRODUCTION OF THE ORGANIZATION

Howard University, one of only 48 U.S. private, Doctoral/Research-Extensive universities, comprises 12 schools and colleges. Founded in 1867 by the United States Congress, its mission as a comprehensive, research oriented, historically Black, private University, is to provide an educational experience of exceptional quality to students of high academic potential with particular emphasis on providing educational opportunities to promising African American students.

The University comprises five campuses located on over 240 acres of land, and includes a hospital, twice cited by U.S. News and World Report as one of the best in the nation; the first black-owned public television station in the country; a commercial FM radio station; a publishing company and art galleries. Its current enrollment of 10,610 students enjoy academic pursuits in more than 120 areas of study leading to undergraduate, graduate and professional degrees.

Through its core values of *leadership, excellence, service* in seeking *truth*, the University is dedicated to attracting and nurturing faculty who, through their teaching and research, are committed to the development of distinguished and compassionate graduates, and to the quest for solutions to human and social problems in the United States and throughout the world.

Howard University continues to attract the nation's top students and produces more on-campus African-American Ph.D.s than any other university in the world. Since 1998, the University has produced two Rhodes Scholars, a Truman Scholar, three Fulbright Scholars and four Pickering Fellows.

RESTATEMENT OF THE INITIATIVE

LeDroit Park, once an outlying suburb of the City of Washington, first appeared on the map in 1873 as a subdivision, which was purchased from the University and developed by a former Howard University Trustee. By the late 19th century, all of the restrictive covenants that prevented blacks from settling there were removed, and the elegant homes became the residences of Washington's black intelligentsia, many of whom were associated with the University. Ernest Just, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Mary Church Terrell, Anna J. Cooper, Kelly Miller and other distinguished members of the community called LeDroit Park their home.

Over the years, however, as the housing market gradually became desegregated, residents of LeDroit Park began to find housing outside of the area. The rate of absentee ownership began to rise, housing vacancies increased, and all of the ills characteristic of struggling inner city communities began to show evidence in this community as well.

By 1973, in anticipation of the need to expand its hospital facility, the University began to acquire properties to be used for health-oriented purposes. Over a 25-year period, 45 properties adjacent to the hospital were acquired. Once purchased, the structures (mostly row houses) were boarded up for later institutional use. These plans were never implemented, and area residents launched their own strategy for addressing the problem.

Increasingly concerned about the growing deterioration of their community and the prospect of rampant institutionalization of their residential neighborhood, residents sought and obtained local and national historic district designation for the area. This effort ended the leveling of houses, initiated the celebration of the illustrative African-American residents who lived there, and prepared the way for the area to be restored to its former grandeur.

In 1995, H Patrick Swygert, a Howard University alumnus became the University's 15th president. The following year, the Board of Trustees approved The Strategic Framework for Action, which spelled out strategic goals and objectives for the University through the year 2001. "Enhancing National and Community Service" is one of its four major areas.

When President Swygert toured the area where the central campus interfaced with the community, he was surprised and shocked to learn that the University owned so many boarded-up structures, and resolved to address the issue. In a departure from its past, the University decided to focus its community service in the neighborhoods closest to the campus, and began to make substantive investments in the adjacent Georgia Avenue Corridor. With this new record of accomplishment and growing momentum, the University turned its attention to LeDroit Park.

The Howard University LeDroit Park Initiative has three themes: 1) to celebrate the history of the area; 2) to redefine the community; and 3) to enhance the quality of life.

Phase I of the Initiative called for conversion of the University's 28 unoccupied structures and 17 vacant lots into homeownership opportunities for University employees and municipal workers, and to do so in a manner that would provide a catalyst for neighborhood-wide revitalization in a 150-block area.

The Initiative envisioned wiring historic LeDroit Park to create a 21st Century Electronic Village, providing modern telecommunications access to the University, the Internet, and the World Wide Web. It calls for the development of a cultural district that will include a Town Center with retail and entertainment and an African-American Museum.

An initiative of such scale and complexity required committed institutions of considerable prowess. Fannie Mae, one of America's most respected financial institutions, and the Fannie Mae Foundation are the University's strategic partners in the LeDroit Park Initiative.

DESIGN

The planning team anchored its strategy in three principles. First, the University - the area's single largest employer - has the capacity to be a catalyst for change that extends well beyond its boundaries, and enhances the quality of life for all who live within its shadow. Hence, a 150-block area surrounding the University was identified as the Initiative's target area.

Second, the Initiative needed to begin with the redevelopment of the properties already owned by the University. Here, redevelopment could begin at once, because the University had site control. Politically, addressing the long-held concerns of its neighbors held the promise of securing their support for subsequent redevelopment plans that would benefit both the University and the community. Phase I of the Initiative, then, would consist of rehabilitating twenty-eight vacant row houses and the construction of fifteen new units of housing. A housing assistance program was designed to help home purchasers (both Howard employees and municipal workers) buy their homes, and an extensive homeownership counseling service was provided. The redevelopment of these properties was intended to be a catalyst for the redevelopment of one hundred-thirty other vacant area properties that were not University-owned.

Third, the Initiative had to be comprehensive in nature and benefit the city as a whole, and many more residents than those who were able to afford the housing opportunities provided. The Fannie Mae Foundation partnered with Howard by supporting three studies that produced a streetscape design for the upgrade of the open spaces and infrastructure, a cultural district study (to highlight the feasibility

and potential of revitalization of this once vibrant commercial and entertainment core of the community), and a land use plan for the 150-block target area. The studies were used to propose improvements and amenities that would enhance the existing and proposed housing, add value to the community as a whole, and augment the cultural and economic opportunities that would ensure the long-term success of the overall redevelopment plan.

Phase II of the Initiative, then, involved plans for infrastructure upgrades that included the redevelopment of open spaces like McMillan Park, the resurfacing of streets and alleys, tree planting, bricking of sidewalks, the installation of new lighting and traffic-calming measures.

In keeping with the third principle of broader neighborhood benefit, Phase III of the Initiative called for the development of a Town Center and a Cultural District. The Town Center became the vehicle for turning underutilized University- and city-owned properties along the Georgia Avenue Corridor (a major commercial strip that has been in decline for four decades) into an area that would provide new neighborhood-serving retail, housing and commercial parking.

The Cultural District is to anchor the east end of the “U” Street Festival area, once known as the old Black Broadway and zoned as the city’s Uptown Arts and Mixed use Overlay District. The crown jewel in this plan is the restoration of the Howard Theater, an endangered historic landmark, as part of the National African American Museum and a larger transit-oriented development around the Shaw-Howard University metro station.

IMPLEMENTATION

The University relocated its community relations staff into a renovated convenience store on Georgia Avenue, and began to make a substantial investment in area improvements. It turned to outside partners to build additional muscle and dollars for the project. Fannie Mae provided over \$20 million in intellectual and financial resources for the creation of the housing initiative. In addition, the Fannie Mae Foundation provided more than \$1 million to support studies resulting in streetscape and infrastructure improvements, a comprehensive land use plan and a cultural district study.

The University won \$2.4 million in grants between 1995 and 2000 to conduct local community development activities in the area. Verizon was invited to become the initiative's technology partner, and contributed resources to the effort, including high speed Internet connections, the latest in home security technologies, and the capacity for in-home networks.

Sales of the housing units were expedited through incentives offered to fire fighters, police officers, teachers, and University employees. These incentives included down payment and closing-cost assistance offered by the University and the District,

below market interest rate financing provided by the D.C. Housing Finance Agency, and first time homebuyer tax credits. Today, not one home stands unoccupied among the redeveloped properties.

These efforts provided a catalyst for the development of 307 new units of housing in an area that has since seen a marked improvement in property values. The changes have sparked \$65 million in commercial development in the area, including a new University bookstore located on Georgia Avenue, trendy restaurants, 33,000 square feet of retail space, a new visitor's center, a modern Emergency Trauma Center at Howard Hospital, and a joint Howard/Metropolitan Police Department security station. The redevelopment is expected to expand to over 130 other vacant and boarded properties in the area. Owners of some of these properties have already begun to redevelop in response to the University's efforts.

PHASE II consists of \$25 million in public infrastructure improvements in the area. These improvements include improved roadway, sidewalk and alley paving, traffic-calming measures, and upgrades in lighting, plantings, and signage. Over \$10 million of the funding has already been raised, and construction of these improvements began in 2001. All of the east-west streets in LeDroit Park have been upgraded along with the adjacent alleys, with the exception of the special street, "T" Street, which has the traffic circle and two gateways aligned along its length and is scheduled for special treatment. Traffic-calming measures have been implemented as well with the elimination of high volume rush hour commuter traffic on the historic roadways, the installation of additional stop signs and special paving at intersections.

PHASE III consists of the development of a Town Center that will provide significant retail, housing and parking facilities needed in the area; and a Cultural District that anchors the east end of the U-Street Festival area, once known as the Old Black Broadway. An RFP for the Town Center has been issued; and land acquisition and assembly are taking place in the area where the Cultural District development will occur.

The implementation of the Initiative is ongoing and its success can be attributed to the effective working relationship established between the University and its strategic partners. The University now enjoys the support, encouragement, and participation of its community, and continues to demonstrate its long-term commitment to improve the quality of its surroundings for itself and its neighbors

B E N E F I T S

Since the Initiative's launch in 1997, over 300 units of new housing are under construction or have been completed area-wide, and the community's housing market has taken a positive turn. Overall, housing costs fall in affordable to upper-

income levels and are successfully providing a mixed-income environment for residents.

Commercial development is also being generated in the area. To date, more than \$65 million in commercial and public benefit investments have been committed or invested in the community. This development includes bookstores, restaurants, 33,000 square feet of retail commercial space, a new visitor's center, a modernized Emergency Trauma Center at the Howard University Hospital, and a joint Howard University/Metropolitan Police Department Security station. Verizon, another major partner, has wired the community, so that every home developed by Howard University has Internet access, the capability for in-home networks, and the latest in home security.

A new vitality is taking place on what was once the most important commercial stretch in Washington, DC 's African American community.

R E T R O S P E C T

The Howard University LeDroit Park Initiative has set a new standard for "town and gown" partnerships. Thus far, the Initiative is being replicated in 15 other cities, with more to come. It was recognized by the American Institute of Architects with the 2002 Housing PIA Award for Community Design; and was cited in a nationwide study by the Initiative for a Competitive Inner City as an example of how inner city revitalization can be stimulated through the successful engagement of academic institutions.