

***MOUNT ROYAL IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION
LONG RANGE PLAN FOR BOLTON HILL-2005***

Adopted January 2005



The MRIA Board of Directors unanimously voted to adopt this strategic plan at the January 2005 meeting. In doing so, each board member committed him/herself to actively chairing and participating in the committees described herein. Those committees identified include:

Greening Committee
Alleys & Footways Committee
Architectural Review Committee
Zoning Committee
Institutions Committee
Economic Committee
Neighborhood Relations Committee
Community Development Committee
Security Committee
Education Committee

Those undertaking to pursue this strategic plan will need to think and act creatively with sensitivity, broad vision and an entrepreneurial spirit. We believe that Bolton Hill is positioned to assertively tackle the major issues that confront us as a community. Our future is bright and the opportunity to elevate Bolton Hill to an even higher level is before us.

Our predecessors were confronted with severe problems that challenged the very existence of our community. Thanks to their successes we have the opportunity to focus on a different set of issues while remembering the need to not give up ground won. This strategic plan is a blueprint for the current and future leadership of the MRIA.

It will require the MRIA to reconsider some operational systems. The recommendation to expand greatly the number of standing committees will require Board Members to be more active, possibly to even require Board Members to minimally agree to co-chair a committee. At the same time an enhanced structure creates the opportunity for the organization to reach out and attract new volunteers, grooming them for future leadership roles.

This is an exciting time with much to be gained and a legacy of community building to be left behind after successfully implementing the Plan.

Thanks

On behalf of the Board of Directors, sincere appreciation is given to the Strategic Plan Steering Committee members: Neal Friedlander, Susan Van Buren, Michael Seipp, John Kyle, Michael Molla, and Bob Pellaton for their efforts and excellence in preparing this plan for the MRIA and Bolton Hill community. Appreciation is also expressed to the many Bolton Hill residents for their participation in the community charrettes and small discussion groups which assisted members of the Steering Committee.

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INTRODUCTION

The Bolton Hill community was first surveyed during the 1840s, but construction began in earnest in the 1850s, interrupted only by the Civil War. Although its first 70 years were characterized by steady growth and progress, by the end of World War I the residents of the neighborhood, “faced by threats of commercial invasion, loss of property values, tenant occupation and deterioration of the building stock, felt under siege.” (Mary-Paulding Martin, *The Measure of Bolton Hill*, 1978)

In response, community residents founded the Neighborhood Corporation in 1919, which in 1928 was succeeded by the Mount Royal Improvement Association (MRIA). The MRIA focused on preserving the character of Bolton Hill by emphasizing the importance of home ownership. Economic development and institutional growth represented significant threats to their “incomparable residential area screened with leaves, near the heart of town, business, music, and theater.”

Over the next 75 years, generations of neighborhood residents successfully fought to maintain the quality of residential life in Bolton Hill. Despite the decline suffered by many Baltimore neighborhoods, particularly between 1950 and 1970, Bolton Hill continued to be an attractive destination for homeowners and institutions.

Thus, it is very understandable that the first Long Range Plan developed by the MRIA in 1983-1984 focused on the importance of home ownership and expressed skepticism toward economic and institutional uses of residential properties.

Yet, by the time of the second Long Range Plan developed by the MRIA in 1993-1994, the focus was beginning to change. The importance of institutions to the continued viability of Bolton Hill was recognized, as was the importance of MRIA to looking beyond its boundaries and fostering relationships with other neighborhoods.

As this year is the 75th anniversary of the MRIA and as it has been a decade since the last long-range plan for Bolton Hill was developed, MRIA felt that it was an important and opportune time for a new long-range plan.

PROCESS

The process for the development of this new plan has been much more expansive than the earlier efforts. The entire community was invited to participate in two daylong charrettes on the future of Bolton Hill. The agendas of the conferences were designed to be open ended. The conferences explored issues that the neighborhood wanted to address in this new plan.

The MRIA then appointed a steering committee composed of Board and non-Board members to write a draft of the plan. As part of its development, the committee is seeking out the views of a wide variety of stakeholders. Ultimately, this plan will be presented to the Board of the MRIA for consideration and adoption.

OBSERVATIONS and TRENDS

Before describing themes that arose from the neighborhood's initial discussions about its future, it is important to set forth some observations and trends that have been noted or commented upon by a number of observers.

1. Survival Mode versus Well-Established Community

The neighborhood feels much more comfortable about its future stability even in the face of the City's challenges. In purely economic terms, the most expensive single family home in Bolton Hill 15 years ago would now sell for at least three times that price. There has been continuing restoration and renovation of houses with reduced density as apartments are converted to single family or duplex use. There are new market rate developments such as Spicer's Run and a new willingness to invest in properties across traditional boundaries such as Eutaw Place and North Avenue. The recent successes of Reservoir Hill are gratifying. Yet, it still takes only one or two problem properties in a given block to threaten the stability of the entire block.

2. Population Trends

The demographics of Bolton Hill appear to be changing. More families with school-age children are continuing to live in the neighborhood. This is in part the result of the success of the Midtown Academy and the fact that the value of housing in Bolton Hill is such that it makes less economic sense to move. More Washington-based commuters are making Bolton Hill their home. More African –Americans homeowners are living in the neighborhood. There are fewer absentee landlords. As housing prices have continued to rise and, concurrently, the cost of rents, MICA students have moved into student housing or to other neighborhoods. Finally, there is a sense that due to the increased residential flux (i.e. fewer life-long residents), it may be harder to maintain a sense of community.

3. Institutional Relationships

The impact of Maryland Institute – College of Art (MICA) on the neighborhood over the last 12 years cannot be underestimated. The development of Lots 18-19 into the Commons and the renovation of the Women’s Hospital into Meyerhoff House have stabilized the northern and southern halves of the neighborhood. More importantly, the development of the MICA-Bolton Hill relationship over the last 15 years has made it clear all of us understand that institutions are residents and that if the Bolton Hill community is to continue to prosper and succeed, the neighborhood needs to reexamine its relationship with all its institutional neighbors and vice versa. For example, the churches in the community need to be involved in the dialogue as do the educational institutions, both public and private, and the other fraternal groups that make Bolton Hill their home.

4. Political Relationships

With the formation of the Midtown Benefits District and the Midtown Development Corporation, Bolton Hill has grown increasingly comfortable with the mechanism of accomplishing projects and solving problems by multi-neighborhood actions. What has become clear is that our ability to control our neighborhood’s destiny will increasingly depend on our ability to form linkages/partnerships with adjoining neighborhoods and institutions within those neighborhoods. The recent change to single member city council districts raises additional questions for the future. Despite an apparent dilution of representation, Bolton Hillers still expect our public servants to be responsive, although it has been our tradition to ask relatively little of our elected officials knowing the needs of other neighborhoods are far greater. Bolton Hill, through the MRIA, has mastered over the decades the art of speaking to the City with one voice so that our message is clear and effective.

5. Economic Relationships

In both community-planning conferences, the need for additional retail shops and services was reiterated. This is not a new phenomenon. The two ongoing issues of the neighborhood are a lack of a market share large enough to support these businesses and questions concerning the best location for retail establishments. The contributions to Bolton Hill of the *Hidden Bean*, *Bolton Hill Blossoms*, *Four Star Video*, *the Park Avenue Pharmacy*, *Belle Hardware* and “b” cannot be ignored. Due to their effect on neighborhood life, the “lively street scene concept” with its mix of residences and businesses/institutions as a way of enhancing community is beginning to gain currency among residents.

VISION-A NEW PARADIGM FOR BOLTON HILL

The theme of this long-range plan is to establish a new paradigm for the future of our neighborhood. It is a paradigm that is mindful of the fact that had not past generations placed the emphasis on preserving the residential character of Bolton Hill, this would not be the community in which homeowners and institutions strive to locate and which adjoining neighborhoods attempt to emulate. Thus, our physical beauty, our parks and open green spaces, our commitment to historic preservation, and our insistence on zoning and building code enforcement, density reduction and trash abatement must not be forgotten as we develop this new plan.

At the same time, if we want to succeed and prosper as an urban neighborhood, we must focus our energies on developing relationships with our Bolton Hill institutional and economic neighbors. We also need to establish similar relationships with adjoining neighborhoods and institutions within those neighborhoods. For example, residents of Bolton Hill desire more economic choices and together with our business neighbors, we need to discover how to better integrate those businesses into the fabric of community life. Bolton Hill has successful nursery, primary and secondary educational institutions in the neighborhood. As a community, we should discuss how to strengthen these institutions that in turn will strengthen the entire community including adjacent neighborhoods. The same dialogue, with the same goal of a stronger community, should be instituted with the churches of Bolton Hill. This same dialogue, with the same goal of stronger communities, should be instituted with adjoining neighborhoods. Finally, the MRIA, the most distinguished neighborhood improvement association in the City, should consider how to direct its efforts and activities to help enhance community for this historic neighborhood.

Our Vision

Bolton Hill is the premier diverse urban community committed to historic preservation and maintaining its attractive residential character; with lively streetscapes, green parks and pathways, safe and child friendly streets, supportive institutional neighbors, local shops which meet our needs and dedicated to helping the City to grow into a vibrant and healthy metropolis.

ELEMENTS OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN

INFRASTRUCTURE

Bolton Hill must continue its constant vigilance over attempts to reduce standards for the infrastructure of the community. The strategic plan must focus on historic preservation, streetscape and lighting, alleys and footways, sanitation and green space. There has been renewed interest in and use of public space (e.g. Sumpter Park, Fitzgerald Park and the Eutaw median) and this trend should be encouraged. The possibility of additional open space opportunities should be pursued.

To make this effort self-sustaining it is recommended that the MRIA:

- Establish a Greening Committee committed to the maintenance of the green spaces in Bolton Hill including our street trees and parks. The Committee will have the following responsibilities:
 - Commission a landscape plan for the neighborhood, which would address trees, tree wells, lighting, walking and paving. This plan would be coordinated with MICA's, Midtown's, and Baltimore City's plans.
 - Work with our elected officials to amend the City's streetscape plan for Midtown.
 - Develop an inventory of lighting throughout the neighborhood, highlighting the areas that need improvement and negotiate with the City for those improvements.
 - Investigate how other communities e.g., Roland Park and Guilford, have undertaken to keep their green spaces preserved.
 - Explore and implement mechanisms, for example a foundation, to support park, streetscape and green space maintenance and explore obtaining grants for capital improvements in the plan.

- Establish an Alleys and Footways Committee with the following responsibilities:
 - Survey the alleys and footways and establish a priority list of needs and improvements and then negotiate with the City for a set-aside of community bond funds to support the improvements.
 - Survey and compile a list of streets requiring repaving for submission to the City's Capital Improvement Plan.
 - Publish and distribute a neighborhood clean-up tip sheet to homeowners, landlords and tenants.
 - Organize seasonal neighborhood clean-ups coordinated with Midtown and the City.
 - Coordinate pest control for alleys in the neighborhood.

- Review the CHAP Committee and Zoning Committee structure to ascertain that Bolton Hill is consistently presenting its positions on historic preservation and its

commitment to density reduction. Also prepare information to communicate, particularly to new residents, the rules relating to historic preservation.

INSTITUTIONS

Bolton Hill is blessed with many strong institutions. As there have been shifts in the residential population, these institutions have acted as a backbone for the neighborhood. These institutions help promote diversity, attract new residents, and support community activities.

A theme that ran through all of the discussions and workshops during the planning process is the concept of institutions as neighbors and the need for these institutions to become more involved in community life.

The MRIA should establish a mechanism whereby institutional neighbors are involved in the decision making process of the organization and directly assist the Association in achieving the goals and objectives established through the Strategic Plan.

This process will involve a constant dialogue between residential and institutional neighbors. The purpose of the dialogue is to seek different perspectives, find areas of agreement, respect areas of disagreement, and arrive at solutions. The end result will be a stronger more unified neighborhood. The mechanism for inclusion developed by the MRIA must ensure that the process of dialog proceeds in a deliberate manner over time.

The institutions include MICA, churches, educational institutions, and businesses. There are institutions that are located outside the traditional boundaries of Bolton Hill, which impact our community, e.g. University of Baltimore and the Druid Hill YMCA and mechanisms for dialog with such institutions need to be explored.

Not all of these institutions will respond to our overtures and some may even view our attempts at inclusion as detrimental to their well-being. The dialog within the MRIA may be difficult at times since residential neighbors are not uniform in their positions vis-à-vis institutional desires.

Some of our institutional neighbors are strong and financially healthy while others are functioning on a day-to-day basis. Still others, in a nascent stage of their evolutions played an important role in bolstering Bolton Hill, and now need MRIA's support and encouragement to continue to grow.

In summary this process will not be easy, just as securing a consensus among residential neighbors is not easy. If we hope to build an even stronger and more thriving Bolton Hill, it is a process we cannot avoid.

Therefore the Strategic Plan recommends the MRIA:

- Form an Institutions Committee with the following responsibilities

- Prepare a list of neighborhood institutions and then offer to meet with each of those institutions to discuss issues relating to “neighborhood concerns” i.e. future plans for growth and possibilities for joint action.
- Continue this dialogue where welcomed by the neighborhood institution.
- Develop a recommendation for MRIA to create institutional seats on the Board of Directors that would rotate on an annual basis.
- Ensure that institutional activities are publicized in *The Bolton Hill Bulletin* in an effort to build community.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

A strong sense among the participants at both charrettes during the planning process is that Bolton Hill needs to explore the issue of business development within and around the neighborhood as a way to enhance community life.

The hope is that our streets will become places of increased social interaction. The sidewalk cafes of “b” and the Hidden Bean demonstrate how economic development can create a positive street presence and enhance community.

Those who favored more economic development hoped that small entrepreneurs would look to Bolton Hill as a place where their businesses could thrive. Others expressed the hope that our main streets, North Avenue, Mt. Royal, Dolphin and Howard Streets would become places where convenience shopping, dining and social gatherings occur on a daily basis.

Ideas that were expressed included:

1. Small specialty stores lining Mt. Royal Avenue on the east side.
2. The Armory anchoring the south end of the community by sponsoring different venues on a weekly basis.
3. Reversing the fortress mentality of the properties on North Avenue in lower Reservoir Hill creating a positive street frontage for both communities.
4. Using the ground floor spaces of the neighborhood institutional buildings for commercial endeavors.
5. Purchasing the shopping center on McMechen Street to be rebuilt to serve both the communities to the west of Eutaw as well as Bolton Hill.

However, it is not clear how widely this approach is shared by the neighborhood. It is a significant philosophical change when measured against the efforts of the community over the preceding 75 years. Reaching consensus on this issue is important, as a pro-active movement to endorse these concepts without consensus could be destructive to the unity of the neighborhood.

The process of exploring avenues to create a lively community must be deliberate and democratic in its approach. As described in the action plan, the recommended process will be deliberate, inclusive, and characterized by a willingness to develop creative approaches to this issue. Our future as a neighborhood can be enormously enriched by achieving the proper balance.

It is recommended that the MRIA:

- Form an Economic Development/Lively Street Scene (ED/LSS) Committee including representatives of neighborhood businesses, with the following responsibilities:
 - Develop and implement a comprehensive planning process that through consensus arrives at specific goals and objectives relating to improving the environment for retail in and around the community.
 - Determine the feasibility of a “livability” survey of the neighborhood inquiring which specific goods, services and amenities residents want to have within walking distance, where and when residents are most likely to meet other people in the neighborhood, which factors affect pedestrian activity and attitudes and how existing programs, services, retail and recreation satisfy current expectations.
 - Prepare a study that would consider what types of businesses this neighborhood could realistically support and, even if there is sufficient market share, whether there are adequate sites for these businesses to prosper.
 - Consider among other questions the following: whether the shopping areas on McMechen and in Sutton Place are opportunities for regional attractions; whether North Avenue from Eutaw Place to the Expressway should be a Main Street Project; whether the east side of Mount Royal from Mosher to North Avenue presents an opportunity for retail growth; whether the University of Baltimore’s Bolton Yards presents an opportunity for retail growth; and whether it is appropriate to use the ground floor of our institutional neighbors’ buildings for community retail.

- In order to effectively implement any community approved parts of the plan, the planning process will include discussions on the structure of the implementation including the following:
 - Should the MRIA create a Community Development Committee (CDC) or align itself with an existing CDC?
 - Does the urban renewal plan require amendments?
 - What partners are necessary to achieve elements of the plan?
 - What public entities need to be engaged to successfully implement the plan?

- What financial resources are available to leverage local contributions and should there be local investor control of any development proposal?
- Do we want the City to use its eminent domain authority to “take” property not meeting the goals of the community?

NEIGHBORHOOD RELATIONS

Bolton Hill’s history has been one of self-reliance and inward focus. This was by necessity. Nonetheless, our approach as a neighborhood has been changing. Bolton Hill probably was the most enthusiastic neighborhood of those that created the Midtown Special Benefits District, despite divisions within our community on this issue.

MRIA’s recent experience with the SNAP program, as well as our ongoing experience as a member of the Midtown Special Benefits District, has resulted in continuing changes in our worldview. Our neighbors, including Reservoir Hill, Seton Hill, Upton, Madison Park and Midtown, like Bolton Hill, have made great strides recently in building stronger, more stable communities.

It has become obvious that for Bolton Hill to develop solutions to issues affecting our borders, MRIA must ask the adjoining neighborhoods if they would like to discuss these issues. A joint neighborhood approach will achieve the best results for all concerned.

Bolton Hill has tremendous resources and experience among its residents (both residential and institutional) and a history of successfully solving problems that could be an asset to its surrounding neighbors. One proposed vision for the future was a network of mutually supportive communities with common agendas working together to build a stronger community that reflects the diversity of the City’s residents. The MRIA should consider taking a leadership role in bringing together leadership from our neighboring communities to explore our commonality, establish mutual support systems, and institutionalize a system of networking that supercedes the individual and reflects the community at large. Another approach to working with our neighbors is to join with Bolton Hill institutions that already have a tie to a given neighborhood, e.g. Brown Memorial’s relationship with neighborhoods to the west on housing issues.

The incentive for Bolton Hill to engage in this kind of effort lies in the belief that our neighborhood, surrounded by healthier neighborhoods, will in turn be made stronger and vice-versa.

It is recommended that MRIA:

- Appoint a Neighborhood Relations Committee with a goal of establishing working relationships with our adjoining neighborhood improvement associations.

- The first of these efforts should be directed to the west and north. Upton has undertaken an enormous planning process, and MRIA on behalf of Bolton Hill should request to be at the table with that community. Madison Park is experiencing resurgence as is Reservoir Hill. There are multiple opportunities to work with these neighborhoods and such efforts will benefit both neighborhoods. An assertive outreach program can only help Bolton Hill and the next generation of residents.
- This Committee's membership would be assigned the responsibility of designating an ambassador to each of our neighboring organizations. Based on reports from the ambassador, the Committee would outline specific issues that Bolton Hill views as having a significant influence on the future of both communities (e.g. Pedestal Gardens), develop a rapport with the leadership of those organizations, reach an understanding of that community's goals and objectives, and define ways that MRIA can support their agenda.
- Other suggestions for the Neighborhood Relations Committee included becoming involved in a coalition of historic district and establishing relationships with Heritage Trails and BACVA.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

As was mentioned in the introduction to the Strategic Plan Bolton Hill's demographics are changing. The key change is the residential flux the neighborhood is now experiencing. Where as in previous generations, once a Bolton Hiller always a Bolton Hiller, we are now seeing more residents moving in and out of the community at a much faster pace.

This residential flux may be making it more difficult to maintain community cohesiveness. In order to not lose this important element it is incumbent upon the MRIA to look to new ways to increase the interaction of residents in the community.

Therefore the Strategic Plan is recommending that the MRIA:

- Form a Community Development Committee. This Committee will explore the possibility of implementing the following programs/initiatives and provide the Board of Directors with specific action plans.
 - Free distribution of the Bolton Hill Bulletin to all households in the community,
 - A coordinated campaign to promote Bolton Hill,

- An expanded program to orient new homeowners, new tenants and visitors to the neighborhood,
- A systematic outreach program to invite individuals to become involved in existing neighborhood activities,
- Expansion of a more interactive Website and
- Use of the Website to advertise our institutional neighbors' events.

SECURITY

Thanks to the diligent efforts of the past generation of leaders in Bolton Hill the issue of crime has become less prevalent as the primary topic of concern throughout the community.

However, the incidences of property nuisance crime, prostitution on our western and northern edges, continual car break-ins, and the occasional robbery continue to plague the neighborhood. We must not let our guard down. Baltimore continues to suffer from extensive criminal activity and without a vigilant eye it can tear at the very fabric of our community.

Bolton Hill has been blessed to have volunteers patrolling our streets and a neighbor, MICA, willing to extend their security patrols. These efforts must be sustained.

It is recommended that the MRIA:

- Establish a Security Committee with the following responsibilities:
 - Assist in maintaining the COPS program,
 - Recruit block watchers for every block in Bolton Hill,
 - Meet regularly with MICA to coordinate security efforts,
 - Meet with the University of Baltimore to negotiate an expansion of their patrols to augment MICA,
 - Meet with the National Guard to develop strategies for patrolling on Dolphin Street and lower Bolton Street,
 - Meet with the State GSA Police to coordinate patrols on Eutaw Street and Dolphin Street,
 - Attend the monthly Police Community Relations Commission meetings and

- Maintain the BHEN crime alert system.

EDUCATION

Bolton Hill is attracting families with young children, as evidenced by the growing Mommies and Daddies Club. This is a sign of a very healthy community.

However in order to continue to attract and keep these families and their children in the neighborhood the MRIA will have to focus on the educational opportunities in the community.

An example is the issue of the future of the Bolton Hill Nursery School, Midtown Academy and Mount Royal and Eutaw-Marshburn Public Schools, all very important if not critical to the future health of our neighborhood. How does the MRIA approach these neighbors in an effort to start the needed dialog?

Mount Royal Elementary and Middle School is a good physical facility located in the heart of Bolton Hill (with a good teaching staff) but lacks the ability to attract Bolton Hill children to its student body.

Eutaw Mashburn on the western boundary is constantly being singled out for closure due to a failing physical plant.

The Bolton Hill Nursery School is in danger of losing its playground and may not be able to operate out of the Brown Memorial Church in the future.

Midtown Academy is an exciting educational center that is meeting the needs of some of our families. It is a community school that is in need of an expanded physical plant, financial support and requires diligent political oversight to ensure its survival.

There appears to be no master plan for providing quality public education for the children of our community.

The MRIA must take a leadership role in education and it is recommended that:

- An Education Committee be established to undertake the following:
 - Meet with the leadership of the four primary schools in the community and identify key issues,
 - Meet with the Deputy Superintendent of Schools for the Bolton Hill District and obtain all educational plans for the area,
 - Prepare an education master plan that looks at the continuation of Mt. Royal – should Midtown take over the elementary school? Should Eutaw-Mashburn or Mt Royal be used to support the needed MICA expansion? –

The needs of Midtown and the Nursery School and the broader issues related to support from the central office of the School System, and

- Develop recommendations for action by the MRIA on educational issues.