

In LeDroit Park, Howard Is Teaching by Example

[FINAL Edition]

The Washington Post - Washington, D.C.

Author:	Rudolph A. Pyatt Jr.
Date:	Dec 28, 1998
Start Page:	F.04
Section:	FINANCIAL
Text Word Count:	760

In the book "Washington at Home," LeDroit Park is depicted as a neighborhood that conveys a strong impression of an earlier era in the District's development.

But with the decline of many of LeDroit Park's older residences accelerating after World War II, the neighborhood fell victim to population turnover, crime and other social ills by the 1970s, according to the illustrated history of neighborhoods in the nation's capital.

In an effort to improve the situation, the LeDroit Park Civic Association tried unsuccessfully several years ago to get Howard University actively involved in the neighborhood.

Now Howard is responding to its neighbors, taking the lead in implementing an ambitious but sorely needed community revitalization plan.

Howard's LeDroit Park Initiative represents a major shift from the university's previous land-banking policy. It is, at the same time, a tangible example of a dramatic move to more active involvement with the community under H. Patrick Swygert, who was appointed president of the university three years ago.

The plan for this new initiative is, without question, 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. City officials should endorse the Howard initiative as a prototype for revitalization of other neighborhoods.

After buying and holding blighted property near the campus for decades, Howard is converting its holdings to more productive uses. With Fannie Mae as a strategic partner, the university is rehabilitating 28 unoccupied houses and developing housing on 17 vacant lots for sale to home buyers.

That, however, is only the initial phase of a comprehensive plan to revitalize the historic LeDroit Park neighborhood and others around the university.

"The LeDroit Park Initiative presents an opportunity to demonstrate in our nation's capital that sustainable, comprehensive revitalization can be achieved in an urban area with private and public investment capital," Howard University Vice President Hassan Minor Jr. explained in a summary of the plan.

With support from the Fannie Mae Foundation, the university has developed a detailed streetscape plan for improvements in public infrastructure and several new land-use initiatives designed to help LeDroit Park and surrounding neighborhoods.

Howard intends to have the fence removed from around the McMillan Reservoir near the campus and convert the area into a park. The plan further calls for development of a town center containing shops, restaurants and other amenities.

Howard also wants to build a major office building south of the campus over a Metro station and develop what university officials envision as an extension of an arts district the city plans to develop in the Seventh and Eighth streets corridor downtown. Thus, Howard plans to build a jazz museum, renovate the Howard Theater and encourage the Smithsonian Institution to build its National African American Museum in the revitalized district around the campus.

Earlier, Howard signaled its intention to spur revitalization on Georgia Avenue, once a thriving commercial thoroughfare, just west of the main campus. In an attempt to create what Minor described as a "viable and stable community around the campus," the university bought the former Wonder Bread Bakery and moved its data center into the building, which also houses retail shops.

Later, the university purchased a liquor store near the campus and converted it into a security office, staffed jointly by the Howard and Metropolitan Police departments. At the same time, the university renovated its hospital on Georgia Avenue, adding a new emergency room and trauma center.

The idea for this forward-looking strategic plan is Swygert's. But Minor, project director for the initiative, credits James Johnson, Fannie Mae's outgoing chairman, for articulating the broad philosophy underlying it.

Fannie Mae, a congressionally chartered stockholder company, is the nation's largest provider of home mortgages. But Johnson "was talking about a role {for Fannie Mae} beyond providing mortgages," Minor said, recalling an address Johnson made several months ago to business leaders and public officials. "He talked about rebuilding America's communities."

Not only did Howard's revitalization plan "resonate" with Johnson, but "he gave it his highest support," Minor said last week.

Fannie Mae is providing low-fixed-rate mortgages for home buyers, but the initiative is also being supported by other lenders, including NationsBank, GMAC, Riggs, Crestar and Industrial banks.

Bell Atlantic-Washington, D.C. Inc. has agreed, meanwhile, to wire LeDroit Park, providing state-of-the-art telecommunications access to the university and the Internet.

The LeDroit Park Initiative is the essence of economic development. Although spearheaded by Howard University, it is a public-private partnership model that can and should be replicated in other D.C. communities.

Credit: Washington Post Staff Writer