

Baltimore group has plan to use land trusts to make more affordable housing available

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Advocates develop plan to bring jobs, affordable homes to neighborhoods without displacing residents.

A coalition of affordable housing advocates launched a campaign Thursday to press Baltimore leaders to use a combination of land trusts, bonds and local hiring initiatives to develop struggling neighborhoods.

The Baltimore Housing Roundtable outlined its plan, developed over the past three years, at a forum that drew about 250 people, according to Rachel Kutler, one of the organizers. The strategy is designed to boost resident participation in development plans, create jobs and re-invigorate communities without displacing the people who live in them, she said.

"When you invest in the neighborhoods, you invest in the people," Kutler said of the advocacy group, United Workers.

The next step for the coalition — made up of nonprofits, religious institutions, academics and others — is to cultivate support from residents, elected officials and candidates for public office.

Gov. Larry Hogan and Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake announced a plan this month to ramp up demolition of houses that are abandoned and falling apart, then offer incentives for redevelopment. The city and state agreed to spend \$94 million to knock down about 4,000 vacant properties over the next four years and make \$600 million in state financing options available for development in the city.

But the coalition says their plan goes a step further by building in safeguards that protect the residents in struggling neighborhoods as those areas become more prosperous. They want master plans developed with resident participation and stronger local hiring requirements that focus on providing ex-offenders the opportunity to deconstruct and rehab vacants.

Community land trusts are a cornerstone of the coalition's campaign. The trusts — which develop or oversee affordable housing and amenities, such as playgrounds — would receive \$20 million annually from public bonds. The group also wants another \$20 million a year to deconstruct vacant houses, hire residents and support urban agriculture.

Peter Sabonis, editor of the coalition's "Community + Land + Trust: Tools for Development without Displacement" report, said the plan is a blueprint to create a more equitable economy in Baltimore over time, as it has in Boston's Dudley Street neighborhood.

The initiative there led to the cleanup of litter and vacant lots and development of 225 permanently-affordable homes, a greenhouse, community garden and charter school.

"This would change the way Baltimore looks," said Sabonis, who is director of legal strategies for the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative and a former longtime Baltimore resident.

"We're setting out a development framework that says, 'Here's how to solve this.'"