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From the Baltimore Business Journal:

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How Old Goucher is transforming itself into the city's latest up-and-coming neighborhood

Aug 30, 2019, 8:54am EDT

Baltimore's waterfront neighborhoods often get the bulk of the attention when it comes to talk about the city's growth.

From Fells Point's historic charm and picturesque views, to the rising towers and burgeoning upscale dining scene in Harbor East, those communities have plenty to offer prospective residents.

But a neighborhood two miles north of the Inner Harbor — removed from the tourist attractions and downtown's hustle and bustle — is quietly making a case of its own as another center for growth and revitalization.

Old Goucher, tucked between Charles Village, Remington, Barclay and Station North, had one of the city's highest growth rates at the last census (81.6% between 2000 and 2010). It also has a host reasons — easy accessibility, historic architecture and a diverse population of businesses and residents — that make it well positioned to become Baltimore's next hottest neighborhood.

The past year has brought new momentum to that vision with the opening of a wine bar and biergarten from Lane Harlan, the restaurateur behind popular



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Old Goucher's streetscapes and historic architecture are some of the attributes drawing people to the neighborhood.

concepts in nearby Remington, as well as plans for a handful of other dining- and entertainment-focused businesses to join the neighborhood in the coming months.

What also sets Old Goucher's transformation apart are its grassroots origins. While change in other city neighborhoods has been driven by developers and large institutions, the Old Goucher community has sparked its own revitalization, recruiting business owners and encouraging additions that hew to a vision plan developed earlier this decade.

"Our whole mantra from the beginning has been development without displacement," said Kelly Cross, the president of the Old Goucher Community Association. "We are building a neighborhood for us, for the people who live in the neighborhood first and foremost."

We took a look at how the community is making it happen.

Cross moved to Old Goucher from Washington, D.C., in 2010, drawn to the neighborhood's promise. He and his husband found an 1850s-era red brick mansion online and quickly fell in love with its historic details and spacious courtyard.

They were charmed by the Italianate and Queen Anne-style architecture of the houses that make up most of the neighborhood's residential stock as well as its proximity to Penn Station and walkable streetscapes.

"The bones of the neighborhood were such that you can't find in too many cities in the U.S. anymore," Cross said.

But there were downsides to living in Old Goucher, too.

Initially, "it was very barren, there were no trees, there was concrete everywhere," Cross recalls. The first year the couple spent in their new house, there were multiple homicides in the neighborhood, including one that Cross' husband witnessed.

The two decided to make some improvements on their own. On evenings and weekends, they would sledgehammer through concrete sidewalk and repave the walkways with brick. They installed new tree pits and planted greenery.

Over time, others joined in the effort, removing more than 700 tons of concrete and asphalt and planting more than 800 trees.

“These first phases were just trying to undo the damage that had been inflicted on the neighborhood over the decades,” Cross said.

Expanding green space is a core focus of the Old Goucher Vision Plan, a 112-page blueprint for the neighborhood's development that resulted from a series of community charrettes in 2013 and 2014.

It's a return, in some ways, to Old Goucher's origins. The neighborhood takes its name from Goucher College, which built its campus there in the late 19th century and was an anchor for the community until the school relocated to Towson in 1953. In the years after the college left, campus lawns were paved over to make room for surface parking lots and auto body shops, in step with the country's growing reliance on cars.

The ensuing decades also saw 470 buildings in the community demolished, while only 48 new structures were built. A growing roster of social services found a home in the neighborhood, which today has seven methadone clinics, a probation office, group homes and counseling services.

The neighborhood's changing physical landscape also shaped Old Goucher into the mixed-use community it is today. The vision plan embraces that identity by encouraging new small business uses as well as targeted high-density development on vacant land.

Other goals include bolstering transit options and preserving historic buildings in the neighborhood, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1978.

The small businesses are starting to crop up. Late last year, Harlan — the restaurateur behind Remington taqueria Clavel and speakeasy W.C. Harlan — opened Fadensonnen, a natural wine bar and biergarten in the courtyard of a carriage house on West 23rd Street. They're part of a larger complex called Socle, also home to Sophomore Coffee and Larder, a food counter and grocery store.

Harlan was drawn to the neighborhood by the courtyard space and proximity to her other businesses.

"We wanted to come to Old Goucher because it's where we found a physical space, formally a run down lot, that we could transform into an open air courtyard," she wrote in an email.

A block away, longtime B&O American Brasserie bartenders Brendan Dorr and Eric Fooy are preparing to open Dutch Courage, a gin bar in the former residence of the Goucher College president. And No Land Beyond, a Station North gaming space, has announced plans to move to a larger building in Old Goucher with room for a gaming library and bar.

The neighborhood is also home to the Co_Lab co-working space, design agency Post Typography, software company Figure 53, video rental store Beyond Video and used record store Wax Atlas, which opened in the spring. Veteran businesses include performance venue Ottobar, Brother Music and Terra Cafe.

Cross, who is also running for the Baltimore City Council's 12th District seat, said the community is in talks with other restaurateurs and potential bar operators — some from as far away as the West Coast — who are interested in Old Goucher.

The developments have happened without any city subsidies. Old Goucher's demographics are also among some of the most diverse in the city, with a racial diversity index of 67.8%, compared with Baltimore's index of 54.5%.

Old Goucher "is the geographic center of the city," Cross said. "It's where black Baltimore meets white Baltimore, where poorer neighborhoods meet more affluent areas. I think we have a development opportunity, but also an obligation to use our neighborhood as a glue to bind our whole city together."

To that end, the neighborhood is also leaning into its identity as a hub for the LGBT community. Baltimore's Pride parade moved from Mount Vernon to Old Goucher in 2017, and the Pride Center of Maryland, an LGBT resource center, hopes to build a new, \$7.4 million headquarters on a vacant, city-owned lot at 2004-2012 N. Charles St.

Developer Ian Parrish, who also owns the Baltimore Eagle leather bar in Old Goucher, is eyeing the same property for a different project. Parrish submitted a bid to transform the lot into a five-story development with street-level retail, residential units and community gathering space.

Land in the neighborhood will likely become a hotter commodity as more businesses open up, said Richard Gans, a local real estate agent.

"Right now, it has a bad rap for being a dead zone," he said. "Businesses coming into the area seeking development, especially restaurants — that, I think, is going to be the biggest game changer."

"I think people are starting to realize it's an area they can command a higher price for," he said.

As Old Goucher grows, the community doesn't want to lose its unique character, Cross said.

That's why, in addition to new business development, the neighborhood has supported a public art initiative called ARTSite Old Goucher that's brought works like artist Dread Scott's "A Man Was Lynched By Police Yesterday," a banner that protests police brutality, and Zoe Leonard's poem "I Want a President" to the exterior of buildings in the community.

The works are thought-provoking and provocative — another installation features the words "Eat Ass Pray Love," a spin on the title of travel novel "Eat Pray Love."

The display has offended some people — but Cross is OK with that.

"What we're trying to do in our neighborhood is just jolt Baltimore from the center," he said. "City life is messy, it's complicated, it's supposed to be like that, and I think we're happy to encourage that messy creativity in Old Goucher."

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