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Life science cornerstone opens in East Baltimore

First of 5 buildings part of planned Hopkins research hub

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On land once occupied by decaying rowhouses, rats and drug dealers, a \$54 million life sciences building will open today as the cornerstone of an ambitious plan to remake East Baltimore into a research hub complete with parks, businesses and more than 2,000 new homes.

The seven-story glass-and-steel building will house the Johns Hopkins Institute for Basic Biomedical Sciences and three other tenants. Four more life sciences buildings are expected to open in the next decade. Already, 900 properties have been acquired -- and many of them demolished -- to make way for the \$1.8 billion project just north of Johns Hopkins Hospital.

The biotechnology park "is a living example of an industry in Baltimore that is vibrant and growing," said Deputy Mayor Andrew Frank. "We're not making buggy whips in Baltimore, and we're not building automobiles in Baltimore. But we have a strength on which to build, and that's Hopkins and the University of Maryland. And companies want to be in the orbit of those great institutions."

Frank compared the scope of the project to the development of the Inner Harbor.

City officials and private developers are betting that the draw of Hopkins, as well as quality housing, a new school, athletic facilities and ample parkland, will convince businesses and families to move to an area that not long ago was destitute.

"We're trying to encourage people who have a choice to choose to live in this community," said Frank. In addition to the new housing, the 88-acre project calls for up to 100,000 square feet of retail, including restaurants, a hotel and other businesses. About 6,000 new jobs will be created.

"I believe that within the next five years this will be the ideal place," said Alison Smith, 46, who has lived on Broadway since she was 11. She welcomes the development. "The police presence since construction started is very good. Crime is down. Drugs are down. Things are improving."

Not everyone is so pleased. Despite unusually large relocation benefits, some displaced residents say the soul of their community is being lost. They are also upset that no new or rehabbed homes have been completed, though two rental apartment buildings -- one mixed income and one for seniors -- opened last year.

"I own a home. I don't want to go into a rental property," said Donald Gresham, chairman of the Save Middle East Action Committee. His home, in the 900 block of Chester St., is slated to be demolished for the new school.



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"Historically, we want to live where we came from," he said. "We're low-income and working poor, and we worked very hard to get what we have."

Gresham has been assured by East Baltimore Development Inc., the nonprofit organization managing the project, that he will not have to move until a rehabbed home is available for him to purchase and move into. EBDI is providing homeowners with about \$153,000, as well as covering moving expenses.

Nearly 400 families have been relocated to other areas of the city, to Baltimore County or elsewhere in Maryland. Others who want to stay in the neighborhood are expected to move into rehabilitated homes, 20 of which will be completed by the end of the year.

"Unfortunately we needed to undertake some very significant, and for those involved, personally painful property acquisition and redevelopment activities to get to this point," said Jack Shannon, president and CEO of EBDI. "We're now opening the first life sciences building, which is just the first part in the creation of thousands of new jobs in this new community."

Last year Gresham's community group boycotted a ceremony marking the halfway point of construction of the new building because of unhappiness with the relocation plan. But after negotiations with EBDI, the group says it is pleased with the housing plan and will not boycott today's grand opening.

"I view that as progress," said Shannon, who took over the project five years ago after it got off to a rocky start with its neighbors. Since then, in addition to the relocation benefits and assistance to help renters become homeowners, EBDI has offered job training programs so residents can find jobs in the high-tech industries expected to move in.

The construction has provided work for hundreds. Of the 765 construction jobs, 437 went to residents of Baltimore, 120 of whom lived in the EBDI project area. That work will continue for a decade.

In the next year alone, developers say they will break ground on 49 townhouses along Eager Street and several other buildings: an apartment complex, a building to house 500 Hopkins graduate students, and the second life sciences building.

City officials see the focus on science and technology as key to expanding job opportunities in Baltimore, and the project has received significant state and local support. Today's grand opening will be attended by Gov. Martin O'Malley, Mayor Sheila Dixon, both U.S. senators, several other elected officials and Hopkins President William R. Brody.

The project's supporters emphasize that unlike previous urban renewal projects in Baltimore, this one is taking pains to accommodate the people who were there before all the building began.

With most of the houses in the area valued around \$30,000, the typical federal relocation benefit would be about \$50,000. But EBDI pooled together money from Hopkins and philanthropies such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation to boost the benefit to \$153,000. And any family that moved out and wants to return will be given the chance to do so.

One-third of the new homes will be market-rate, one-third work force housing and one-third affordable housing. Work force housing is for families that earn between \$40,000 and \$120,000 a year; affordable housing for those earning less than \$40,000. All the houses will be priced at market levels to preserve their value, but programs are being set up to help lower-income families afford them.

Alison Smith, the longtime resident on Broadway, said she's glad to see more homeowners coming into the neighborhood. They take care of their homes better than landlords, she said. The new housing, she said, "is bringing in a different type of folk -- more working people, Hopkins people."

She was sitting on her stoop Wednesday evening with her 8-year-old son, William, waiting for her brother to come take him to Little League in Baltimore County. She thinks the playing fields in her neighborhood are too dangerous.

"It's a shame I have to send him that far out," Smith said. She said she looks forward to the day when he can walk to baseball practice.

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