



Photo: Baltimore Green Space

### *Success Story*

# The Community Open Space Preservation Project

**THERE ARE NEARLY 30,000 VACANT AND ABANDONED LOTS IN THE CITY OF BALTIMORE**, with an estimated 11,000 of those being owned by the Mayor and City Council, and of those, 4000 are managed by the Department of Housing and Community Development. These vacant lots often attract dumping, drug use and other crimes, as well as negatively impact property values and the quality of life for residents in the area surrounding the vacant lot.



A number of City residents and organizations have taken it upon themselves to clean and improve a small number of these lots and turn them into community assets. Community-managed open spaces such as vegetable gardens, pocket parks, meditation gardens and recreational spaces all have a positive impact on a community – providing social, economic and environmental benefits. What once were littered, depressed lots are now clean, vibrant spaces.

In 2010, the Baltimore Office of Sustainability, in partnership with Baltimore Green Space and the Department of Housing and Community Development,

## SUCCESS STORY

published a report on the Community Open Space Preservation Project. Realizing that a number of these well managed and lovingly cared-for spaces had no clear and affordable way for communities to preserve their urban oases, the team set out to identify a streamlined process for protecting these neighborhood treasures. The project started in 2009, to identify the criteria and processes for protecting these open spaces through their transfer from City ownership to land trusts. As a result of this process, two treasured community open spaces, the Duncan Street Miracle Garden and the Pig Town Horseshoe Pit, were transferred to a local land trust for permanent protection in 2010.

A land trust is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission is to preserve land. Most commonly land trusts are associated with the conservation of large parcels of rural land and protecting that land from development in the future. A land trust can also exist in an urban environment, protecting community-based projects and providing affordable ways to purchase and preserve land. The City of Baltimore has a number of land trusts that work in a number of neighborhoods or city-wide.

Baltimore Green Space, a local land trust and partner for this project, outlined criteria to be met in order for a community-managed open space to be transferred to a land trust for \$1 per lot. These criteria include: requests for preservation must come from the people involved with the site; the community must demonstrate a capacity for long-term management of the site; the open space must have a strong function in at least one community use; and the green space must demonstrate a match between identified environmental risks and how the site is used.

Once these criteria are met, the next steps in the process of preserving these open spaces can get underway. Developing this process was an intensive period of review and evaluation, requiring the involvement of many partners including the Office of Sustainability, the Department of Housing and Community Development, the Planning Department's Comprehensive Planning Division, Comptroller's Office, and the Board of Estimates. The Community Open Space Preservation Project is a perfect example of how advancing the goals of the Sustainability Plan

require collaboration across many diverse sectors. The outcome of this collaboration was a detailed roadmap outlining the "Steps taken by a land trust" and the "Steps taken by the City" in order to move a community-managed open space through the process and to formal preservation through a Land Disposition Agreement. This agreement formally transfers ownership of the property from the City to the Land Trust for preservation. Community members are still responsible for maintaining the land, but they can now do so with peace of mind.

Each agency involved in the Community-Managed Open Space Team has agreed to work diligently and under the guidelines that were developed. By doing so, the hope is that other community-managed open spaces will be preserved and that communities and residents throughout the City of Baltimore will continue to improve the cleanliness of the City by transforming vacant lots into shining examples of environmental stewardship. All while knowing that their hard work and determination will not be jeopardized, but rather acknowledged and protected.

### SUSTAINABILITY PLAN GOALS ADDRESSED

- Sustain a clean and maintained appearance of public land
- Transform vacant lots from liabilities to assets that provide social and environmental benefits
- Provide safe, well-maintained recreational space within ¼ mile of all residents
- Raise the environmental awareness of the Baltimore community
- Eliminate litter throughout the city
- Protect Baltimore's ecology and biodiversity