

TAP Druid Hill: Reclaiming the Park for the People

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On Wednesday afternoons between June and September, residents who live near Druid Hill Park have the opportunity to shop for fresh, locally-grown produce – not to mention enjoy smoothies, baked goods and even massages – at the farmer’s market held at the southwest edge of the park.

If they can get there, that is...

That’s easy enough for [Graham Coreil-Allen](#), an artist and transportation advocate who lives in the Auchentoroly Terrace neighborhood. All he has to do is wait for the right moment to dash across the nine lanes of expressway that separate the park from the homes to the west.

For some of Graham’s elderly neighbors, though, that’s not an option. It’s also not easy for them to walk several blocks up to Gwynns Falls Parkway, take two traffic signal cycles to cross Auchentoroly Terrace and McCulloh Street, and walk another several blocks down to the farmer’s market.

So instead of going to the market just across the street from their homes, Graham said some of his neighbors would “just sit in their lawn chairs and watch and listen to the farmer’s market” from their property.

“But they were unable to go,” he said. “And that’s not fair.”

Graham is part of a group of community stakeholders trying to fix that. They’re pushing to redesign the streets around Druid Hill Park in order to make it more accessible to the surrounding neighborhoods: particularly

Reservoir Hill, Penn North, Auchentoroly Terrace and Mondawmin. The public face of that stakeholders group is called The Access Project for Druid Hill Park, or [TAP Druid Hill](#) for short.



In the first half of the twentieth century, this wasn't a problem. Residential streets in Auchentoroly Terrace like Bryant and Whittier Avenues led directly to the park. When looking at aerial photography from the 1920s, Graham counted more than 20 access points to the park from the surrounding neighborhoods. Today there are only five from the south and west, and only three more from Roosevelt Park and Woodberry on the other side.

The loss of access is the result of two expressways – the Druid Hill Expressway and the Jones Falls Expressway – built between the late 1940s and 1960s. As part of the new construction, Auchentoroly Terrace and Druid Park Lake Drive went from two-lane, meandering park roads to five-, eight- and nine-lane arterial roads to shuffle cars between the northwest outskirts and downtown.

As you might expect, there was resistance from the community at the time. The NAACP opposed the street-widening, arguing that it would hurt black

communities, as did multiple community associations. But the primarily black and Jewish working-class neighborhoods lost the fight. It's worth noting that a powerful advocate of the expressway plan, [legendary political boss Jack Pollack](#), lived near the northern end of Auchentoroly Terrace. As Graham put it during a walking tour he was leading around the park, Pollack essentially gave himself an express route to downtown.

While it worked out well for Pollack, it has come at a cost for many other nearby residents. According to TAP Druid Hill's website, half of them don't own cars, and therefore get little benefit from the widened roads. The park, one of Baltimore's most expansive green spaces, is cut off from the neighborhoods by a moat of asphalt and high-speed steel. The resulting air pollution makes residents, especially children, [more susceptible to asthma and other health problems](#). And if they want to travel out of their neighborhood on foot or via any option other than a car, they often have to navigate unsafe roads dominated by speeding motorists.

Resident complaints about these difficulties led Council Member Leon Pinkett of the 7th District to [call together a group of community leaders and organizations in 2017 to begin working on solutions](#).

An early accomplishment was the [Big Jump](#), a trial-run shared-use path that went up in 2018 along Druid Park Lake Drive and 28th Street. It connects the park to Remington in the East for pedestrians and people who ride mobility devices, scooters and bikes.

That's right, I said bikes.

Wait...

[via GIPHY](#)

Okay, let's get into it.

Yes, part of TAP Druid Hill's mission involves constructing "bike lanes." The hope is that the Big Jump will ultimately lead to a permanent shared-use path (or network of paths) that goes all the way from Remington to Mondawmin Mall. And other design plans for the area around Druid Hill Park will likely include similar paths.

A few points to address any objections:

1. "Bike lanes" is a bit of a misnomer. Shared-use paths are meant to accommodate all kinds of non-motorist traffic. Remember, half the residents near Druid Hill Park don't own cars. They may not all ride bikes, but they can still benefit from these protected paths.
2. Many people do, in fact, ride bikes. And Graham argued that it's many more people than motorists tend to notice when they are driving and focusing on other visual cues. Giving these vulnerable road users a safe space to ride is a priority, even if not the only or the highest priority.
3. When we build protected lanes, [more people ride bikes and scooters](#). That suggests it's lack of safety – not lack of interest – that drives some people away from those options.
4. When more people ride bikes and scooters, or walk, it means fewer cars on the road. That's good for everybody, including drivers who want to get where they're going more quickly.
5. Concerns about the connection between bike lanes and gentrification are understandable. That's why Graham, Council Member Pinkett and the other stakeholders are making a point to seek out community input in the design process. The success of the long-term project can largely be gauged by how well it enables existing residents to access nearby resources and jobs, regardless of whether they drive or not.

If I missed anything, or you still want to throw things at me, you are always

free to [email me and join the conversation](#).

The point is not to eliminate cars. Graham thinks of it instead as “inverting the pyramid.” Rather than prioritizing the most privileged road users – people who drive personal cars – we would prioritize the most vulnerable users. So making sure the roads are safe for the elderly and disabled to walk across (perhaps to access public transit) would be at the top of the pyramid. From there we work our way down to more privileged, less vulnerable road users. But nobody is left out. Everybody is safe, and everybody gets where they want to go.

Baltimore’s Department of Transportation has already begun the process for a [Complete Streets](#)-based redesign around Druid Hill Park. After a delay of six to nine months, Graham said the plan is back on track under the [DOT’s new leadership](#), with the first phase of construction hopefully being completed soon after the [reservoir project](#) in the park wraps up. A resident-led community health survey was just concluding when Graham and I spoke in October, and the results should be out soon to inform the process. And at every step along the way, TAP Druid Hill’s [website](#) and [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) accounts will serve as contact points for residents who want to keep up with what’s going on.

As for Graham, he’s entering the final six months of an [OSI-Baltimore Community Fellowship](#) that began in late 2018. He is frequently involved with transportation-based public art projects in Baltimore and elsewhere, such as the [colorful crosswalks you can see outside Margaret Brent Elementary School](#) in Old Goucher. At any given time you can probably find a [walking tour](#) he’ll be leading soon in the city. And if, on one of those tours, you identify pedestrian safety issues, he might even [advocate with you to get them addressed](#).

Earlier this month, as part of the [Brilliant Baltimore](#) festival, Graham and a team of residents splashed colorful light all over the archway at the Druid Hill Park entrance. (Well, it was the entrance, before the expressway cut it off.) The street was closed to car traffic for a night and people walked, marched and danced their way to [Rawlings Conservatory](#) in the park. Perhaps it was a way to plant a seed in their imaginations of what life around Druid Hill Park could be someday soon.

After his fellowship ends in April, Graham plans to keep TAP Druid Hill going. And he will continue to participate in the stakeholders group as a representative of the [New Auchentoroly Terrace Association](#), where he serves as Communications Specialist and acting Vice President.

When I asked him what his ideal Baltimore would look like, he said it would be a place where everybody has an opportunity to live and thrive, with access to sustainable, healthy transportation and public spaces.

"I'm very hopeful for that," he said. "For all the challenges that we face, we have so many great institutions that are either proactively learning how to be better or they're being forced to learn and act better by activists. And that's a testament to the character and willpower of the residents."

Graham came to Baltimore in 2008, which still makes him a newcomer in the eyes of some residents. Having previously lived in New York, he especially appreciates the way Baltimoreans, even strangers, acknowledge each other in public. Even a simple "How ya doin'?" as people pass each other on the street is more than he typically saw in other places he's lived. But in Baltimore, he noted, people recognizing each other's humanity in small ways like that is commonplace.

Now to make the streets safe for more of those interactions...