THINKING ABOUT 2008

The year 2008 was perhaps more memorable for the negatives than the positives. Of course, there was one significant positive: the nomination and then election of Barack Obama to be the President of the United States. We don't know if his presidency will be good, bad, or some mixture of the two, but we do know that it was a triumphant breaking of one social barrier that has at times poisoned the American culture: elevating a person of African heritage to the highest office in the country.

Nationally, 2008 might best be remembered by the dramatic downturn in the economy. The downturn (recession) is said to have begun in late 2007, but by September 2008 there was a freefall in employment, company earnings, and more. The construction industry practically came to a halt, and this has dramatically impacted the job prospects of many immigrants who are not well-educated nor fluent in English. Langley Park houses several thousand such immigrants, and so the mood in the neighborhood has been of concern or despair.

The vibrant quality of the neighborhood was injured by the decision of a government official to prevent food vendors (many of whom had worked in the neighborhood for a decade or more) from engaging in their micro-businesses. This hurt the finances of the entrepreneurs, forced economically-marginal residents to purchase more expensive food, eliminated the social centers that the vendors became, and made adaptation to US culture more difficulty. The official said that eliminating the vendors made the neighborhood more “beautiful,” but of course beauty is subjective. Sterility is not beauty in the eyes of many people, especially those who have come from vibrant places around the world.

The neighborhood itself became threatened by the plans of those appointed to develop a “sector plan” for Langley Park and its nearby areas. The sector plan calls for tearing down many somewhat affordable apartment houses and replacing them with higher-cost residences, roads, and more. Clearly, the plan's...
IMMIGRATION NEWS: SOME POSITIVES

GETTING IMMIGRATION RIGHT: An editorial in the New York Times (26 December 2008) states: “It is so important to reverse the Bush administration’s immigration tactics, which for years have attacked the problem upside down and backward. To appease Republican nativists, it lavished scarce resources solely on hunting down and punishing illegal immigrants. Its campaign of raids, detentions and border fencing was a moral failure. Among other things, it terrified and broke apart families and led to some gruesome deaths in shoddy prisons. It mocked the American tradition of welcoming and assimilating immigrant workers. But it also was a strategic failure because it did little or nothing to stem the illegal tide while creating the very conditions under which the off-the-books economy can thrive. Illegal immigrant workers are deterred from forming unions. And without a path to legalization and under the threat of a relentless enforcement-only regime, they cannot assert their rights. It’s a system that the grubbiest and shabbiest industries and business owners … could not have designed better.”

UPCOMING DEBATE: The immigration issue that was hot during the primary campaign and cooled during the general election is likely to experience a temperature rise in 2009 as pro- and anti-immigration forces regroup and refocus. Will undocumented immigrants who have worked for many years in the USA (when the economy had great needs for them) be allowed to legalize their status by meeting a set of requirements, or will the cries for deportation rule the day? Those with strong views on the matter should contact their representatives in Congress. For a discussion of the issue, see inter alia Tom Barry’s article at http://www.ilw.com/articles/2008,1223-barry.shtml.

BUT DEBATE DELAY: “The next administration’s preoccupation with economic crises will likely prevent immigration advocates from capitalizing on steep losses suffered by their foes in last week’s election, delaying any attempt to ease entry for people in the U.S. illegally. Of the 13 House Republicans who lost their seats on Nov. 4, [ten] were members of the Immigration Reform Caucus, which has opposed a path to citizenship for the country’s estimated 12 million illegal immigrants. … Tom Tancredo of Colorado is retiring, as is Rep. Duncan Hunter of California, another voice for increased border security and crackdowns on illegal immigration. Together, these losses shifted the political landscape on a problem that has defied solutions over the past two decades.” (Wall Street Journal, 12 November 2008). Let’s hope that delay does not mean immigration will be off the agenda, and let’s especially hope human concern will eventually prevail.

WHAT ABOUT THE WALL? Pressure is building to halt construction of Homeland Security’s unfinished US-Mexico border wall. The controversial project, originally scheduled to be completed by the end of 2008, is the target of reinvigorated opposition from border residents, elected officials, indigenous communities, human rights activists, and environmentalists. Anticipating the change in administrations, border wall opponents are stepping up their lobbying of the transition team to ensure the fencing is halted and even reversed.

AT LEAST IN MARYLAND: Governor O’Malley has signed an executive order designed to enhance the lives of the state’s immigrants. From the order: “Increasing the pace of naturalization will allow [immigrants] to fully participate in civic life and take advantage of the full array of available job opportunities; … Learning English is critical to ensuring that foreign-born Marylanders can maximize their earning potential and help alleviate the State’s labor shortages by participating in the workforce; … A proactive policy for new Americans in Maryland will ensure our economic competitiveness by helping employers meet critical workforce needs and allowing foreign-born Marylanders to have a meaningful opportunity to succeed; … Comprehensive federal reforms are needed to ensure that immigration occurs within a fair and legal framework that protects all workers, promotes permanent legal immigration, prioritizes enforcement, and ensures respect for the rule of law …” This is a good step forward!

ACLU: The American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland has created its first Immigrants Rights Project. “The ACLU believes that the U.S. immigration system is broken and it is the federal government’s responsibility to fix it. That is why our project will fight against local government initiatives that threaten public safety by targeting immigrant communities for dragnet detentions and harassment.” The project’s leader states, “Maryland’s immigrant community adds richness and diversity to our state’s social fabric and strength to its economy. Draconian measures which target immigrants not only tear away at immigrant families and communities, but hurt all members of society.”

IMMIGRATION EFFICIENT? We all know about the months or years of delay getting a decision from Immigration. Maybe there’s hope: The Bush administration has launched an overhaul of the agency, selecting an industry consortium led by IBM to reinvent how the government handles the millions of applications each year for visas, citizenship and approval to work in the United States. So a tentative plus for the administration!

GOVERNMENTS: NOT ALWAYS PERFECT!

REAL I.D. NOT REALITY: Taking action against the unfunded federal mandate that runs into the hundreds of millions for Maryland during a time of spending cuts and furloughs without making Marylanders any safer from terrorists, the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland has asked Governor O’Malley not to fund implementation of the REAL ID Act in the fiscal 2009 budget and not to seek legislation implementing the Act. The ACLU’s letter points out that the National Governors Association opposes the REAL ID Act, primarily because it forces on the states an unfunded federal mandate to issue essentially federal identity cards without any national security benefits.

IS ADDED RENT JUSTIFIED? In Prince George’s County, the School Board decided some weeks ago to lease a building for $36 million to provide system office space. Is this the time for such an expenditure? And now the county is considering leasing a building for $1 million a year that would enhance convenience. Is this the time for such an expenditure? What if these monies were used to reduce the furlough/cuts in county employees’ pay and the job cuts for schools (see below)?

SCHOOLS, TEACHERS, GRADUATION

SCHOOL POSITIONS IN JEOPARDY: News reports indicate that up to 900 jobs may be cut as the result of the tightening budget. Of course, next year the cuts may even be deeper. If there’s no money to pay people, it’s reasonable to consider cuts. Alas, most vulnerable may be people serving as parent liaisons, and yet they are extremely valuable to overcome the social-psychological distance between parents and school personnel. The distance is a significant factor in immigrant-heavy schools such as Langley Park McCormick ES, Buck Lodge MS, and High Point and North-
western HS. Don't think the budget problems are not threatening the quality of education in the country—and country.

**BLAME TEACHERS?** “Toward the end of an important speech in Washington last month, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, said to her audience: ‘Think of a teacher who is staying up past midnight to prepare her lesson plan. ... Think of a teacher who is paying for equipment out of his own pocket so his students can conduct science experiments that they otherwise couldn’t do. ... Think of a teacher who takes her students to a We, the People’ debating competition over the weekend, instead of spending time with her own family.’ Ms. Weingarten was raising a cry against the demonizing of teachers and the widespread, uninformed tendency to cast wholesale blame on teachers for the myriad problems with American public schools.” (From “Race to the Bottom” by Bob Herbert, New York Times, 23 December 2008, p. A21.)

**GRADUATE FAILING STUDENTS?** The Washington Post (23 December 2008, p. A16) questions the “graduate the failing” approach. A portion of the editorial reads: “With the deadline drawing closer for Maryland’s new graduation requirements to take effect, an estimated 4,000 high school seniors are still failing. The solution of state education officials is to allow principals and local superintendents to waive the rules for certain students unable to pass the exit exams. So much for the noble effort to make a high school diploma really mean something.” Standards appear to be falling at all educational levels. There will be high school graduation without mastering material at that level, and at the so-called “Flagship Campus” of the Maryland System of Higher Education, at College Park, many students are receiving As and Bs who a decade or so would receive Cs and Ds. Why not simply give all teenagers high school and college diplomas for the cost of printing them? Then the few teenagers who want to learn can do so, and the rest will be selected in or out by employers.

**OUR HEALTH: IS IT THREATENED?**

**THE NEIGHBORHOOD HOSPITAL:** Washington Adventist Hospital has received the final Montgomery County approval to relocate to the White Oak/Calverton section of the county. Next comes preparation of a Certificate of Need with the state. When the relocation takes place, the old campus will include still include health facilities that (hopefully!) will continue to meet the emergency and other needs of Langley Park and other area residents. Loss of the health facilities, given the minimal clinic offerings in the area, would be very harmful to the health of tens of thousands of people.

**MEDICAID:** The funding crunch at the state level is impairing Medicaid coverage for the poor. In Maryland, payments to hospitals, nursing homes, and other care providers have been cut, and more cuts are likely as the state’s economy worsens. The usual recommendation is not to be poor. Alas, job losses are expanding poverty. The year 2009 will be a challenge.

**SCHIP:** A poll commissioned by the child advocacy group First Focus found overwhelming public support for a renewal of SCHIP, which is scheduled to expire on 31 March 2009. The poll also found that about two-thirds of the respondents favored eliminating the five-year waiting period for legal immigrant children. (Currently, the cruel component of SCHIP is that the program is not available to legal immigrants during their first five years in the country — except for those residing in states that use state funds to cover legal immigrants who qualify.)

**HEALTH CARE VIA FQHC:** Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) offer health care to economically-strressed families. “The primary purpose of FQHCs is to expand access to primary health care for uninsured and under-served populations, who experience financial, geographic, or cultural barriers to care and who live in or near medically underserved areas and areas with federally designated as having a health professional shortage (HPSAs). FQHCs accept Medicaid and Medicare patients as well as uninsured individuals.”

Good idea! But alas, in Prince George’s County, the five health centers in the program are in Glenarden, Capitol Heights, Oxon Hill, Suitland, and West River. No help for people who live in and around Langley Park! Could this result from prejudice? Note that in Montgomery County, two of the four health centers in the program are near Langley Park: Mary’s Center in Long Branch at 8709 Flower Ave., and Community Clinic at 7676 New Hampshire Ave. When will Prince George’s County provide the needed facility?

**PURPLE LINE: HOPEFULLY SOME DAY!**

Planners in Montgomery County have announced support for the light rail Purple Line alignment running the trains mostly above ground and next to the Georgetown Branch Trail. The light rail will link Bethesda, Silver Spring, Langley Park, College Park, New Carrollton, and more. A key stop will be the planned transit center at University Blvd. and New Hampshire Ave. (See graphic.)

The Washington Post quotes the key author of the planning report: “‘We have to grow, and we have to do it in a way that is sustainable. The bottom line is that we have to take care of folks in these near suburbs so that we can experience growth in a reasonable way that is less dependent on the auto.’"

If the gentrification—displacement seemingly called for by the “sector plan” does not take place, the transit line will be of great help to the working class residents of Langley Park, Takoma Park, and nearby areas. So the task now is to support the Purple Line while demanding that housing affordable to the current residents of Langley Park be provided in or very close to the neighborhood once the destruction and upscale rebuilding begins. Let’s hope political representatives of the area will put aside potential vested interests and help to preserve affordable housing.

**REMITTANCES DOWN, SUFFERING UP**

The money flow is slowing, and therefore the back-home families of many immigrants to the USA and other so-called developed countries are suffering. Of course, the immigrants are also suffering — for some so much that they have returned or are considering giving up on the American dream. The New York Times (25 December 2008) reports: “The financial crisis that is in full swing in the world’s developed countries is only beginning to reach the poorest, and labor migrants, with feet in both worlds, are among the first to feel it. Flows of migrant money to developing countries … began to slow this fall, the first moderation after years of double-digit growth, according to the World Bank.” The three countries receiving the largest remittance sums are India, China, and Mexico. The chart shows the remittance billions in 2008.
BUSINESSES IN THE LANGLEY PARK AREA ARE HURTING TOO

In recent issues of Barrio de Langley Park, we noted and photographed houses in foreclosure and being auctioned to the lowest bidder. The people whose lives have been ruined by the economic downturn (thanks either to foolish optimism on the part of the buyer and/or to evil manipulation by the lender) were sometimes in the area. Sad scenes.

Businesses have had difficult times too, especially with the decline in retail purchases and restaurant food. The top end of stresses on businesses can be observed in the automobile industry; it seems that GM loses billions of dollars each quarter.

The “for lease” signs are popping up along the International Corridor, and probably within the year or more that experts anticipate the downturn to last, those signs will proliferate. Already, National Wholesale Liquidators has gone into bankruptcy, and other businesses such as Casa Furniture are closing their doors thanks to the business decline. ALP interviews of businessmen found that all 15 have experienced downturns. Hopefully, the upturn expected in late-2009 will bring business and jobs (and people!) back the area’s great vibrancy and success stories.

LANGLEY PARK CALENDAR

Wednesday, 14 January 2009: Community meeting on the schools and the superintendent search at High Point HS, 7:30 p.m.
Monday, 19 January 2009: Final presentation of the “sector plan,” details TBA
Wednesday, 21 January 2009: Rally on the Mall for more immigrant-favorable legislation and actions, details TBA.
Thursday, 12 February 2009: Action Langley Park meeting at the Langley Park Community Center, 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.
Thursday, 9 April 2009: Action Langley Park meeting at the Langley Park Community Center, 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.
Sunday, 3 May 2009: Langley Park Day at the Langley Park Community Center, 12 noon to 4:30 p.m.
Thursday, 11 June 2009: Action Langley Park meeting at the Langley Park Community Center, 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.

RADIO PROGRAM

Montgomery College now has a 30 minutes radio program “Mi Escuela es su Escuela” about the college and opportunities. The program airs at 3:30 p.m. on Radio America, 1540 AM. Here are some upcoming programs:
• Jan 12: Liliana Arango, Director of the Hispanic Business Institute
• Feb 2: Wendy Maldonado on Financial Aid
• Feb 9: Marion Valletto on International Students Admission
• Mar 2: Mario Parcon on Applied Technologies
• Mar 9: Gloria T. Bonilla, Community Outreach Adviser, on college programs, admission processes, and more

“2008” continued from Page 1

nners involved care more about “development” than the lives of thousands of people who live in the apartment houses. Of course, the economic recession will postpone any implementation of the sector plan for a few years, but then the gentrification and displacement will surely occur. Too bad some of the planners don’t live in Langley Park; maybe then there would be some understanding of the human disruption that the plan calls for.

[NOTE: For a commentary on the sector plan, go to this site: http://www.gazette.net/stories/12252008/princol151630_32474.shtml]

From a HUD report: “High quality, affordable housing is fundamental to the economic and physical well being of families, communities, and the nation. Despite its importance, a “perfect storm” of factors over the last several years has led to near crisis-level shortages of affordable housing. Among these factors are formerly pro-growth local governments that have become slow-growth, NIMBYs (Not-In-My-Backyard sentiments by neighbors of proposed housing developments) who resist development, rapid price increases in housing across much of the country in the first half of this decade, and declines in federal resources for affordable housing. Most recently, the problems in the subprime mortgage market have limited access to loans even for borrowers with good credit histories. Each party in a development proposal has legitimate concerns: local budgets are strained, causing challenges in how to finance the education of current schoolchildren, much less new ones who may occupy new developments. Likewise, NIMBYs often have legitimate concerns about traffic and environmental impact. The people who need the affordable housing also have a legitimate claim, however, and the lack of housing is leading to consequences for both households and local and regional economies that may become increasingly severe. The most obvious of these is that many families pay disproportionate shares of their income for housing, leading to financial stress.” (From “Research on State and Local Means of Increasing Affordable Housing” prepared by Apt Associates, 2008).

Local planners: please read! And think!