

# Reinventing urban centers

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) May 25, 2017



The Governor's Business Summit, recently held at Baltimore's Hilton Convention Center Hotel, was a well-organized affair under the direction of Secretary of Commerce Mike Gill and his staff. The event that attracted 700 business, government and education leaders from around the state also made some news. Gov. Larry Hogan, in his opening remarks noting the state's economic progress, announced his effort to accelerate business growth with his Excel Maryland initiative, highlighting the state's existing strengths in the fields of cybersecurity and life sciences.

Indeed, cyber infrastructure and cybersecurity were on many minds as the featured luncheon speaker, who traveled the longest to attend the event, took front and center. Esti Peshin, general manager at the Cyber Division of Israel Aerospace Industries, described the detailed care and serious investments needed to ward off attacks such as those caused by the Wannacry virus wreaking havoc around the world just days before the summit. We were pleased to learn that her company will have a Maryland presence.

With so many things to consider, and not having expertise in either cybersecurity or the life sciences, I gravitated to one session closer to the realm of topics covered by Regional Perspectives. The panel session was titled, Major Developments Refining Urban Centers.

Serving as moderator was someone actively engaged in developing a new center, indeed a city within a city, Tom Geddes, CEO of Plank Industries, the parent company of the developer of Port Covington.

The panelists provided quite a diverse array of employment venues:

- Howard Hughes Corp., developing the next generation version of downtown Columbia, was represented by Greg Fitchitt, vice president for Columbia, now in the midst of its 50th anniversary celebrations, is refining James Rouse's original vision of the community to become "the center of culture and commerce" for Howard County. With thousands of new residential units being added to this suburban downtown, complemented by new shopping, dining and entertainment venues, the goal is to give those living, working and shopping there the experience of being in a walkable village.

- Tradepoint Atlantic, represented by Aaron Tomarchio, vice president of corporate affairs, involves a complete reclamation of what, following the demise of Bethlehem Steel Corp.'s Sparrows Point steel mill and a series of failed successors, had become an industrial wasteland ... the ultimate brownfields site. Now it is being transformed into a growing complex of transportation, distribution and logistics companies, anchored by such firms as FedEx and Under Armour, bringing new employment and hope to a beleaguered part of the region.
- Quite distinct from each of the other panelists, was the presentation by Richard May. As the leader of the West Baltimore Innovation Village, he is hoping to orchestrate a complex urban environment with many moving parts. Think of the broad swath of the city stretching from Mondawmin on the northwest to the University of Baltimore on the southeast. In its path are such anchor institutions as Coppin State University and Maryland Institute, College of Art. Add to that the transformations going along the North Avenue, including the demolition of the Madison Park North housing complex and the rebuilding of the nearby John Eager Howard (soon to be renamed Dorothy Haight) elementary school. The Innovation Village can be seen as an effort to bring new employment opportunities, starting with an array of job readiness programs, to an area that has been largely bypassed in terms of investment for many decades.

### **A new message**

So, what is the message from all these different employment centers? Note that these variants depart from the model that prevailed in commercial/ industrial development in the second half of the 20th century: the office park or industrial park, almost entirely auto-dependent, surrounded by seas of surface parking. Note also that each of these developments represents a refashioning of the existing urban landscape, rather than new developments on outlying greenfields.

In Columbia's downtown, density is increasing, parking is more often to be found in multi-level structures, and the emphasis is to make a walkable experience for those coming to work, shop or dine. The Tradepoint site is unique in that its advantages for the new businesses that are locating there are related to the multiple forms of transportation – road, rail and seaport – readily at hand. The Innovation Village is still perhaps more conceptual than realized in physical terms, but it represents an effort to bring economic development directly to the community, rather than challenge the local residents to make long and costly commutes across the region.

Each of these developments has the opportunity to add to the economic vitality of our region, and we can hope for their success.

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