

LOCAL NEWS

# ‘The dust is flying’ in East Baltimore’s Johnston Square



A lot at Greenmount Avenue and Biddle Street, is being prepped for the construction of affordable housing and a new Enoch Pratt Free Library branch. (Jerry Jackson/Staff)



By **JACQUES KELLY** | [jkelly@baltsun.com](mailto:jkelly@baltsun.com)

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A renewed part of Baltimore is about to rise at the corner of Biddle Street and

An official groundbreaking is a few days away for the Greenmount Park Apartments and the library.

It's a component of a site that goes from Chase to Biddle streets just east of the Jones Falls Expressway. Plans call for a green park area to fill out some of the property, along with the apartments and library.

The rebuilding of Johnston Square is moving ahead alongside another major East Baltimore endeavor, the transformation of the old [Perkins Homes public housing site](#), the Oldtown area and [Somerset Homes](#).



Regina Hammond is the neighborhood's intrepid and cheerful leader who sees hope when others dismissed Johnston Square as a lost cause.

"The dust is flying in Johnston Square," she said of what's going on this summer.

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Those airborne particles also include old brick mortar as a row of 19th century East Biddle Street houses makes the transition from abandoned slums into rental housing for school teachers.

“It’s taken 11 years,” said Hammond, a former paralegal who is executive director of the Rebuild Johnston Square Neighborhood Organization. “It took a lot of faith and a lot of working together.”

Hammond is working closely with ReBuildMetro, a nonprofit organization revitalizing the Oliver, Johnston Square and Johns Hopkins Hospital-adjacent communities. ReBuild Metro started this task in 2006, and 18 years later, much of the neighborhood is free of blighted housing. ReBuild’s work is painstaking and focuses on a house-to-house preservation approach.

Some of its restored homes are sold to new buyers. Others are rented.

Jake Wittenberg, whose firm Edgemont Builders is preserving and reconstructing the East Biddle homes being readied for teachers, described his assignment: “The houses had been vacant for easily 20 years. We found trees growing within the brick walls.

“This spot is only three blocks away from the Prime Rib [the Mount Vernon steak house] and shows how I-83 creates two separate worlds. Such is the nature of

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Johnston Square's namesake park is not so well known, but there are recognizable nearby landmarks including the historically African-American Saint Frances Academy and the Metropolitan Transition Center, formerly known as the Maryland Penitentiary. Downtown Baltimore is not far away, and as Wittenberg pointed out, Mount Vernon and its restaurants and cultural attractions are just to the west, across the Jones Falls Expressway.

"ReBuild Metro has accomplished something that hasn't been done here since the great rowhouse builders of the 1920s," said Wittenberg. "Rebuild has restored whole sections of Baltimore that go on for blocks and blocks."

It's tricky deconstructing (and reconstructing) homes that have been empty for so long. When one of the home's brick facades had to be structurally rebuilt (the old Formstone textured cement covering trapped moisture and compromised the home's front), Wittenberg's crew went to work.

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When he needed parts for the fancy Victorian cornices, Wittenberg tapped area woodworkers. He had veteran East Baltimore wood turner Mark Supik work his miracles at his shop on Macon Street. Other housing parts were fabricated by R. Thomas Frock's lumber mill on Loch Raven Road near the Cloverland Dairy.

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There's a strategy behind the immediate boundaries of Johnston Square, a neighborhood that earlier generations called Baltimore's Tenth Ward. It was a voting district and part of the city south of Green Mount Cemetery and not too far from the Johns Hopkins Hospital.

In the grand scheme of redevelopment, ReBuild Metro devised a way to transform Baltimore communities from Pennsylvania Station to the Hopkins Hospital.

Wittenberg said: "It's amazing to be a part of something that is greater than you. Everyone on our team wakes up looking to do this job."

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