

# Oakland Mills Community Needs and Recommendations

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## Introduction

The PALS program requested we investigate two communities in Columbia, Oakland Mills (OM) and Owen Brown (OB), to find specific trends that would suggest their respective prognoses and to make recommendations for improvement in light of them. Upon initial research we found the two communities were very different and it became difficult to organize data and patterns for each of the two communities. It was then decided to focus the group effort on one of the communities, Oakland Mills, because it seemed to have a greater risk for neighborhood decline.

Collectively, our research methodology included site visits and observations, stakeholder interviews with residents and leaders, data collection, review of publications and public information produced by Columbia and Oakland Mills, and review of relevant literature on community development. The areas we researched in depth were housing and marketability, business, crime, and education. To evenly distribute the effort between group members we split up research areas into teams of two. Group members made individual and group trips into the Oakland Mills area at first passively, to get a general sense of the area, then again to speak to residents and attend community events. We toured hot spot areas like the East Columbia Branch Library, the Village Center, and the public parks. Group members initiated conversations with residents on the street by visiting the Village Center and weekly farmers' market. Through further research our group was able to gain interviews with OM board members, active community members, PTA members, and non-profit and police representatives, to collect both quantitative and qualitative data.

Generally, there were themes we were able to identify that made OM unique. This included the diverse population, the secluded location of the Village Center, and a higher rate of crime than the rest of Howard County. Through further investigations we picked up on issues and trends, and were able to visualize where the community is headed and offer solutions through our social work and community development lens.

Initial demographic research helped us better profile Oakland Mills. With a population of 9,369, it has decreased by nine percent since last year. One of the most unique qualities of Oakland Mills compared to other parts of Columbia is the slight majority of non-White races. The high racial diversity includes the largest concentration of Hispanic and Latino residents in all of the Villages. The median age is currently 35.1 years, which is the youngest median age in all of the Villages. The mean household income, at roughly \$94,000, is also the lowest in all of the Villages. The community is also very educated, with 78% of residents receiving at least some higher education beyond high school. This profile is an indication that OM is more diverse not only racially but also economically.

## Summary of Findings

### Commercial/Village Center

As for the commercial portion of our research, we focused on the Oakland Mills Village Center. The Oakland Mills Village Center is the second oldest of the Centers in Columbia (Columbia Association, 2014). It contains 95,757 gross sq. ft. commercial retail and office space and can be found at 5880-5896 Robert Oliver Place in the Village of Oakland Mills (Columbia Association, 2014).

The Oakland Mills Village Center is comprised of a major grocery chain (“Food Lion”) along with other smaller-scale establishments (Columbia Association, 2014). These include a take-out restaurant, drycleaner, bar, dine-in restaurant, liquor store and a barber shop. “Sam’s Mini Mart” is also located within the Village Center, proving to be a major asset to the community as its inventory caters to the hispanic and latino population. As we conducted research, we drew much of our knowledge of the area from interviews with community members, the Oakland Mills Board of Directors, site visits and analysis of the Columbia Association and the Oakland Mills Community Association (OMCA) Task Force’s analysis of the Center.

The Columbia Association’s Market Study highlights trends in the Oakland Mills Village Center quite elaborately. The study demonstrates that the large grocery store has consistently struggled to maintain health profits due to excessive competition from neighboring village centers and poor access from potential outside consumers (Columbia Association, 2014). The major grocery store faces competition with a nearby “Wegmans,” “Wal-Mart,” and “Whole Foods” (Columbia Association, 2014). The Oakland Mills Village Center is also significantly affected by numerous retailers and restaurants located in The Mall at Columbia (Columbia Association, 2014). Additionally, the lack of major roadway access prevents folks from outside the community from shopping in the Oakland Mills Village Center (Columbia Association, 2014).

Our interviews provided us with perspectives on the Village Center that bring light to the aforementioned studies. Although we do not consider these interviews to be representative, they are tools to help us connect with community members. According to a member of the Oakland Mills Board of Directors, the Village Center is “declining,” “less desirable,” and provides “little attraction to the outside.” A local resident also claimed that she prefers to drive to other nearby shopping centers for her groceries, despite living in close proximity to the Oakland Mills Village Center. She referred to the Village Center as “dumpy.” On the other hand, we heard from another community member that the Sam’s Mini Mart is an asset to the community as it caters to the strong Hispanic and Latino populations of Oakland Mills.

### **Commercial recommendations.**

As a group, we recommend two major items in order to support commercial development in Oakland Mills. The first is to promote stability among the anchor commercial feature. As the Columbia Market Study notes, the current major grocery store experiences too much competition from neighboring village supermarkets, and struggles to maintain a healthy profit margin due its isolation (Columbia Association, 2014). Therefore, we agree with the Community Plan to replace the major grocery store (OCMA Task Force, 2015).

The second part of our recommendation is drawn from our study of the Oakland Mills Community Plan. We encourage the development of a sports facility to attract outside high schools and middle schools as outlined in the Plan (OCMA Task Force, 2015). We believe this could help maintain the success of the ice rink, attract outside consumers and supporting the community living in Oakland Mills (OCMA Task Force, 2015). If improving the transportation to the Village Center is not an option or is not within the scope of this project, we still believe a major civic attraction could help uplift the commercial status of the Oakland Mills Village Center.

In terms of resources to boost the commercial sector in Oakland Mills, we would recommend the Columbia Association continue to provide the Oakland Mills Community Association with grant funding to help execute their efforts outlined in their community plan (Columbia Association, 2015b). The Howard County Economic Development Authority (HCEDA) could also serve as a major resource in revitalizing the Oakland Mills Village Center (HCEDA, 2015). The HCEDA also offers a Catalyst Loan Fund to boost minority and women-owned businesses (HCEDA, 2015). This would be a great way to promote diversity and inclusion in the Oakland Mills commercial environment, maintaining Rouse's mission for the area. Apart from direct funding, HCEDA could also help link potential business owners in Oakland Mills to additional funding opportunities. For instance, the Maryland Department of Business and Economic Development (DBED) and the Small Business Administration (SBA) Loan Fund offer funding to boost small businesses, which could eliminate many of the vacant storefronts and empower the residents of Oakland Mills. We highly recommend that regardless of how commercial revitalization takes place in Oakland Mills, that it is accomplished by balancing the needs of current Oakland Mills residents, business owners and outside consumers. We recognize this is a difficult task, but we feel it would greatly benefit Oakland Mills and Columbia as a whole.

## Housing

Columbia is an area of high opportunity, and many of our interviews revealed people want to move to the city for its great schools, green space, beautiful communities, and appealing amenities. Oakland Mills has access to those opportunities and resources while being comparatively more affordable than other Villages (Table 1). This makes it the kind of community that can be desirable to new families, working class people, and people on a fixed income (such as retirees or SSI recipients). 48% of Columbia residents pay more than 30% of their income on housing, meaning they are overly burdened with housing costs (Columbia Association, 2013). Toward the need for affordable housing, Oakland Mills has a substantial number of rental properties and an average rent 61% below the Columbia average (Columbia Association, 2013). Oakland Mills is also accessible to low-income renters using public assistance: according to our interviews, many landlords accept Housing Choice Vouchers and a percentage of units in the Verona apartment complex are set aside and managed by the Howard County Housing Commission. Additionally, single-family homes in Oakland Mills are slightly smaller and more affordable than the Columbia average (Columbia Association, 2013). The need for more affordable homes, both to buy and rent, is growing in Howard County (Mullin & Lonergan Associates Incorporated, 2011), making the overall accessibility of Oakland Mills within resource-rich Columbia a great strength of the Village.

Table 1. Basic housing statistics for Oakland Mills

Indicator	Oakland Mills	Columbia
Average home sale price <sup>a</sup>	\$310,000	\$325,000
Mean household income <sup>a</sup>	\$93,957	\$112,900
Average monthly rent <sup>a</sup>	\$1,250	\$2,040
Median days on market	60 <sup>b</sup>	61 <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Columbia Association, 2013

<sup>b</sup>Redfin Corporation, 2015b

<sup>c</sup>Redfin Corporation, 2015a

Yet, it is important to note that renting or buying a home in Oakland Mills remains unaffordable for most. According to our interviews, area wages have not kept pace with the cost of living in Oakland Mills. Average rent for a two-bedroom apartment stands at \$1,250, meaning a household needs to be making at least \$50,000 per year to afford rent (determined using calculation guidelines provided by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2015). One-third of OM residents make below \$50,000 per year, and 6.8% of residents live at or below the poverty line (Columbia Association, 2013). Zoning restrictions that prevent the construction of new affordable housing units, compounded with very limited inclusionary zoning requirements, curtails the availability of affordable housing. Homes sell at an average price of \$311,000, 15% higher than the state average (Realtor.com, 2015). Homeownership is particularly out of reach for minority households because of their lower average incomes (Mullin & Lonergan Associates Incorporated, 2011).

As Oakland Mills was one of the first Villages, the housing stock is older and slightly less desirable than that in newer villages or in the new Downtown development. Stakeholder interviews also revealed that Oakland Mills has a number of homes being managed by absentee landlords, causing issues with home maintenance up to covenant standards.

Additionally, the neighborhood can at times be hostile to low-income residents or think poorly of them. This was observed in stakeholder interviews, which revealed a perception that low-income renters and public housing tenants were the cause of crime and the degradation of the neighborhood. The residents of Oakland Mills perceive their community to be overburdened with subsidized housing, and there was backlash to the Housing Commission's purchase of Verona two years ago, where 20% of units have been set aside for moderate income residents (Yeager, 2015). When the Commission expressed an interest in buying Grand Pointe as well in 2015, the Village Board Co-Chairs immediately blocked it and any discussion of the plan. Residents have been left disappointed by a lack of transparency in both the Housing Commission and the Village Board's decision-making (Yeager, 2015).

### **Housing recommendations.**

Oakland Mills is an attractive neighborhood that benefits from high-performing County schools, good jobs, and a number of community amenities. The community is also poised to gain in desirability



due to its close proximity to the new Downtown development. Oakland Mills should capitalize on these benefits to draw in new families who desire its quiet suburban appeal and its accessibility to Downtown without the luxury or high cost of other Villages.

Increasing the 'curb appeal' of Oakland Mills may also further the effort to increase the appeal of the Village to new residents. Stakeholders noted that the restrictive nature of covenants can at times hold back needed updates to aging homes. Working with property owners and the Village Board to alter covenants to allow for greater home modernization and renovations could revitalize the neighborhood. In addition, simple community projects, funded by the OM Village or the Columbia Association, could bring neighbors together to give blocks of aging homes a facelift. This has the additional benefit of offering a way to help struggling residents adhere to covenant standards for home maintenance. Neighborhood participation in such block beautification projects and events also helps to strengthen neighborly relationships and improve residents' sense of belonging and investment in the community.

Howard County has effective affordable housing programs, including the Moderate Income Housing Unit and Low Income Housing Unit programs that include both rent and ownership opportunities (Howard County Maryland, 2015b). However, we observed that both leaders and residents in Oakland Mills stigmatize subsidized housing and blame it for decline in the area. We did not uncover evidence that low-income households are, in fact, a reason for concern.

The attitude that any increase in subsidized housing in Oakland Mills is unacceptable (Yeager, 2015) runs contrary to the ideals espoused in the Oakland Mills Community Plan. The Plan recommends increasing senior housing and incentivizing the purchase of homes in the Village by local employees such as teachers (who can make as little as 38% of the average OM household income (Howard County Public School System, 2015a), police officers (who can make as little as 54% of the average OM household income (Howard County Maryland, 2015a), and civil servants (Oakland Mills, 2015). It also fails to recognize the real and growing need for affordable housing in the Village and in Columbia, as well as the interests of residents in Oakland Mills who may already be struggling with the cost of housing and home maintenance.

Yet, for what subsidized housing there is in Oakland Mills, it stands that if that housing is not properly maintained and little is done to lift up those residents and fully include them in the community, then it is likely that the currently hostile and divided environment will persist. Three recommendations follow from this hypothesis: to increase low-income housing across Columbia, to proactively reach out to and include lower-income families in planning and decision-making for Oakland Mills, and to work to undermine the stigma on low-income housing and families.

As a whole, Columbia needs to prioritize the creation and dispersal of affordable housing throughout all Villages and the Downtown development. Because there are very limited opportunities for new construction in Oakland Mills, areas of new development (such as Downtown) are ideal for the construction of new affordable and public housing units, both for rental and ownership. One method of accomplishing this is by increasing inclusionary zoning mandates for mixed income development. Additionally, these affordable units should be geographically dispersed and integrated throughout all Villages so as to undermine any place-based stigma that can be implicitly associated with such units.

In Oakland Mills, lower-income households need to be outreached to and engaged by community leadership. As a part of the Oakland Mills community, they must be involved in planning and resource-use decisions. Without these people at events and meetings, it will continue to be easy to overlook and 'other'-ize them and to deny actions that could promote their best interests. They constitute a more vulnerable population in the community, and they are at risk of bearing the brunt of the consequences, whether foreseen or unforeseen, when community-wide decisions are made without them. Conducting outreach to apartments, multi-family units, and subsidized units is one way to begin cultivating and encouraging the participation of lower-income households in community programming and decision making. In the long run, the Oakland Mills Board should aim to be representative of the full racial, ethnic, and class diversity in the community, even if it means reserving seats on the Board for particular demographic representatives, as in the case of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, 2015).

Lastly, intentional and thoughtful work must be done to undermine the stigma on low-income housing and residents. Columbia or Howard County leadership should shed light on the inaccuracy of the perception that Oakland Mills is particularly burdened with subsidized housing. They should also work to promote research that dispels the myths surrounding subsidized housing and lower-income families. This work can draw on the "Consider the Person" Campaign to increase awareness of the diverse array of people who utilize public housing assistance (Consider the Person, 2015). Additionally, it should be remembered that Columbia was founded intentionally as a community that would promote the thriving of all people (Columbia Association, 2015a). Even before the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, Rouse aimed to achieve economic, racial, religious, and cultural diversity and integration in Columbia, with housing "at rents and prices to match the income of all who work there" (Columbia Association, 2015a). Now, across the nation, once racially integrated suburbs are becoming re-segregated with detrimental effects (Orenfield & Luce, 2013). Oakland Mills is a Village with exceptional economic and racial diversity that is economically accessible to more, rather than fewer, people. This should be

considered one of the Village's biggest strengths, and careful and thoughtful measures should be taken to embrace and promote this diversity. Maintaining economic and racially integrated communities requires intentional measures to maintain affordability, enforce fair housing laws, build diverse community leadership, and actively embrace diversity as an asset (Orenfield & Luce, 2013).

## **Education**

The research conducted on the schools in the Oakland Mills area have revealed that there are issues that need to be addressed in its students, staff/faculty, and Howard County Public School System (HCPSS). According to several School Improvement Plans, including those from Oakland Mills High School (OMHS) and Stevens Forest Elementary School (SFES), there are three areas of concern: Rigor, performance, and student and staff engagement (Howard County Public School System, 2015d; Howard County Public School System, 2015f). More specifically, as an issue of rigor, both schools agree that access and increased participation in "above-level and Gifted and Talented (GT) classes" is a goal that may assist with the student capacity for mathematics (Howard County Public School System, 2015f). Also, attention is called for teachers to enhance their ability to question and discuss difficult academic topics with students (Howard County Public School System, 2015d; Howard County Public School System, 2015f). This is meant to diversify the teachers' ability to assess student understanding, especially in math.

Another area of concern involves improvement of school test performance. In such high schools as OMHS, one "Area for Focused Improvement" is to increase the students' SAT scores to average at least 1650 (Howard County Public School System, 2015d). In comparison to the HCPSS, OMHS has consistently been at least a hundred points less than HCPSS, averaging in the low 1500s for the last three years (Howard County Public School System, 2015b; Howard County Public School System, 2015d). Also, in elementary schools, such as SFES, MSA scores have reflected an increased rate of loss from those "advanced" in their Mathematics and Reading MSA scores and an increase in those who have scored as "basic. (Howard County Public School System, 2015e)" In the 2013-2014 school year, compared to the HCPSS, SFES has a greater average of "Proficient" and "Basic," while all of HCPSS "Advanced" students outweighs SFES by 20 percent (Howard County Public School System, 2015b; Howard County Public School System, 2015e). The final factor to be improved is student and staff engagement as indicated by the Gallup Survey/poll (Howard County Public School System, 2015d; Howard County Public School System, 2015f).

The Gallup Survey/Poll is a qualitative survey that assesses student and staff engagement in schools, the students' hopes, and their wellbeing (Howard County Public School System, 2014a; Howard County Public School System, 2014b). As indicated by this poll, more than half the faculty and staff at

Oakland Mills schools indicate that there is not enough employee engagement at their schools, while a broad range of students indicate that how involved and safe they feel in school(Howard County Public School System, 2014a; Howard County Public School System, 2014b). Only 40-60% of students in area have positive aspirations about their prospects of graduation and future success (Howard County Public School System, 2014a; Howard County Public School System, 2014b). Finally, between 55-65% of students express that they are thriving in their school environments (Howard County Public School System, 2014a; Howard County Public School System, 2014b).

### **Education recommendations.**

One recommendation that may mitigate the effects of these issues is an investment in diversity, especially in staff relations with students. In the improvement plans of SFES and OMHS, attention is drawn to redefining student needs through multiple measures of testing (Howard County Public School System, 2015d; Howard County Public School System, 2015f). Furthermore, teachers are expected to develop communication skills to determine a student’s understanding of advanced academic subject materials and “readiness for acceleration. (Howard County Public School System, 2015f)” Also, in the area of test preparation, in addition to GT classes, OMHS has a variety of advanced and special programs including the John Hopkins Professional Development School, Foreign Language Exchange Program, and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math Program) (Howard County Public School System, 2015c). Therefore a social worker’s role could be educating teachers on how to motivate all groups of students in participating in special or advanced programming starting with freshman or even Oakland Mills middle school students. Along with this option, a social worker can provide assistance to creating Student Support Teams and 504 plans to help a student achieve optimal levels of learning. OMHS has a large economic and racial diversity profile, with a majority of students being African American and 38% of students using free or reduced lunch programs. As an opportunity to promote diversity relations and student rigor, it could be helpful educating teachers on cultural competency and how to engage participation from those specific diverse communities (Howard County Public School System, 2015b).

Finally, building student hope and wellbeing through the use of a “growth mindset” encourages individual achievement, which is important to determining student performance (Howard County Public School System, 2015f). As a collaborative effort between students, staff, and faculty, Oakland Mills schools can build a diverse community that can raise Oakland Mills test scores and student/staff engagement and can increase this area’s investment prospects (Howard County Public School System, 2015d; Howard County Public School System, 2015f).

## **Crime**

As research has inferred, the crime rate of the Oakland Mills area has increased within the last five years. From a comparison between Columbia, Howard County, and Oakland Mills, realtor.com (2015) has indicated that Oakland Mills has a larger count of five criminal acts than its larger counterparts out of a national average of 100 cases in 2015. These acts include: Personal, Murder, Rape, Assault, and Burglary (Realtor.com, 2015). The data had revealed that, greater than Howard County or Columbia alone, Oakland Mills has the greatest total of 63 cases out of every 100 cases from the national average of all crimes (Realtor.com, 2015). From further investigation, from data collected by the Howard County Police Department (HCPD), the calls for potential and occurring crimes between 2010-2015 have corroborated the issue that social control may need to be reassessed.

According to the statistics provided by HCPD, the six most reported crimes of 2010 were animal complaints, assault, disorderly conduct, domestic, noise complaint, and suspicious subjects (G. Koch, personal communication, 2015). Overall, the amount of calls concerning crimes made in the Oakland Mills area as of 2010 totaled 1283 (G. Koch, personal communication, 2015). As the statistics have shown, throughout next four year, in 2014, the rates of each of the six crimes were raised (G. Koch, personal communication, 2015). This does not include 2012, where there was a sudden increase in crimes, which subsided by 2013 (G. Koch, personal communication, 2015). Finally, in 2014, five out of six of the crimes had shown an increased in the amount of reported crimes, totaling 1609 reports of potential or occurring criminal activity (G. Koch, personal communication, 2015). It was the calls reporting suspicious subjects that decreased from 168 to 135 reports (G. Koch, personal communication, 2015).

### **Crime recommendations.**

In an effort to gain social control of the Oakland Mills area, there are several suggestions and acts that may contribute to alleviating this trend of increased criminal activity. For example, at the “National Night Out” event, hosted by the HCPD on August 4, 2015, Howard County Chief of Police Gary Gardner had announced some of the department’s “new initiatives” by the HCPD. One of these is “a new Pathway Patrol Section,” which provides officers transportation such as “motorcycles and mountain bikes” that can access areas that may be inaccessible by police cruisers or on foot (Janney, 2015, p.1, para. 4). Another initiative is the HCPD’s new use of social media networks so that “neighborhoods can share information (Janney, 2015, p.1, para. 4).” In this case, this social media being used is Nextdoor (Janney, 2015).

Another solution could involve the role of a social worker, as an advocate, facilitator, and organizer, to revitalize the Neighborhood Watch in cahoots with the Howard County Police Department, especially in the neighborhoods around the Village Center, where data shows that crime is prevalent. It could bring together the community in general while working towards a shared goal of reducing crime and increasing the marketability of Oakland Mills. The social worker's role could be to involve homeowners as well as store managers, business owners, and renters of that central Village location in efforts to come together and increase safety (Police Crime Bulletin 2015).

## Concluding Recommendations

Overall, we found Oakland Mills to have many strengths. Columbia is highly ranked in opportunities for education, and employment. The schools in the county draw in residents and help Columbia to keep families. Oakland Mills is no exception to this. Adding to the desirability of Oakland Mills is its proximity to major roads and highways, such as Routes 175 and 29, making it easy to access Baltimore and DC for those with jobs that require a commute. However, Columbia and Howard County are home to many large employers as well, making it easy to live and work in one community. Oakland Mills is less than a 10 minutes drive from the Columbia Town Center and The Mall in Columbia, as well as numerous other shopping centers, restaurants, and conveniences.

As for the community itself, Oakland Mills has great walkability as residents can easily walk to the village center, ice rink, and faith center. It boasts the only walk-only schools in Columbia. The layout of Oakland Mills is very logical, with larger single family homes being farther from the village center, as those residents are the most likely to have vehicles, then as you get closer in you have the smaller single-family homes, followed by town homes, and finally apartment complexes being in the closest proximity. The varied housing types and styles give the neighborhood unique character, and with great walkways lined with trees it is a pleasant place to visit and explore.

The main areas of concern that presented themselves while observing this neighborhood included the high percentage of low income families living there, especially when compared to other Columbia neighborhoods; the fact that test scores for Oakland Mills Middle and High Schools were lower than area schools and the perception that this was leading families to leave Oakland Mills; and an increasing minority population leading to perceptions that the neighborhood was unsafe. What seemed to be the common theme in these concerns were issues of race. When James Rouse created Columbia, he envisioned it being a place of diversity and inclusion, with all races and socioeconomic types coexisting, and where people could both live and work. Today it seems that this vision may not be as clear. Many of the concerns surrounding Oakland Mills' schools are the number of children on free and reduced lunches, however, in a community as expensive as Oakland Mills, it is not surprising that it may be a struggle for some families to afford this lifestyle. This does not mean that the quality of the schools is poor because that is not the case. These schools are part of one of the best school systems in the country. Also, the community plan seems to call for luxury apartments and a desire for a Village Center with high-end shops and restaurants, making it a destination for Columbia. Unfortunately, this sort of plan feels a lot like gentrification and would likely push out and displace the lower income residents. It is

important to ensure that any plans for Oakland Mills put emphasis on diversity, consider the residents that are living in the community currently, and are not racially biased.

We recommend that an effort be made to reinvigorate the community's commitment to diversity and accessibility, and go back to Columbia's roots as an intentionally inclusive and diverse community. Racially integrated suburbs pave the way toward racial equality in the US, as they provide the opportunity for equal access to good schools and living wage jobs for all residents (Orenfield & Luce, 2013). Research by Orenfield & Luce (2013) found, however, that racially integrated suburbs are often unstable and vulnerable to resegregation: only 40% of suburbs that were racially diverse and integrated in the 1980s remained so in 2010, while 56% of those once integrated suburbs becoming predominantly minority (>60%). Resegregation occurs due to a number of intersecting social and political reasons that are the manifestation of unspoken racism that remains in this country. Maintaining diversity in suburbs requires proactive efforts and a strong commitment to policies that support fair and equitable housing practices, in addition to an active commitment to valuing diversity and inclusion as a community (Orenfield & Luce, 2013). Getting people talking about racism is never easy, and it is generally an uncomfortable and awkward topic, particularly for those in the majority, but ignoring it only allows it to continue. A good way to get started on facing issues of diversity would be to ensure that minority members are a part of the Oakland Mills Community Association as well as various community-planning efforts. Black, Native American, Asian, Hispanic and Latino are all races that combine to make up the majority of residents in Oakland Mills and it is important that their voices are being heard. Following a model similar to that of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative would be a good place to start to see a model of how a diverse community was able to come together to find ways to serve the needs of everyone. This is particularly important in ensuring that changes made to the Village Center are done in a way that benefits the people living in Oakland Mills that use it. A high-end café may not be what would be most beneficial to residents. Additionally, a grocery store such as Food Lion or Giant may not be the anchor the community needs. It is possible for a commercial area to be successful while meeting the needs of its residents, even if that means that high-end restaurants and stores are not the solution for Oakland Mills. Being a destination for Columbia should be of lesser importance than serving the residents living there and creating a space for the community to come together.

As Oakland Mills works to find new balance and dig into issues of racism that are present, we would also recommend that they lend their support and commitment to the Baltimore Regional Plan for Stable Development. Being in such close proximity to Baltimore, as well as DC, there is an opportunity to be a regional partner in workforce development, affordable housing, and access to superior education.



Columbia, and by extension Oakland Mills, should embrace the opportunity to lead and integrate with Baltimore. Oakland Mills is one of the most accessible neighborhoods in a city that is very far out of reach to many Baltimore residents. Working to be a model and accept other minorities and working class residents is an important opportunity and task for Oakland Mills. Oakland Mills has the option of how to present itself to Columbia and to the region, and it can do so in a way that it is a wonderful neighborhood for young and new families to get their start and to enter into Columbia, MD -- a city of opportunity.

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