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toward building a new society on the vacant lots of the old . . .

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On Saturday, October 18th the Save Middle East Action Committee (SMEAC) held a rally at the John Wesley AME Zion Church in East Baltimore. The rally, attended by about 200 residents and supporters, was yet another chapter in the multi-million dollar nightmare that is the Johns Hopkins Bio-Tech park development/urban revitalization project—a partnership between the City of Baltimore and Johns Hopkins University that is managed by East Baltimore Development Inc (EBDI).

Fed up with one broken promise after another from EBDI, residents being displaced by the project got assembled in response to an agreed-upon deadline for a “House for a House” program that would allow existing Middle East homeowners to purchase fully rehabilitated houses within the EBDI project area using the official EBDI Relocation Benefit. According to the plan, no new mortgages would be created and homeowners would not be in greater debt after the move than before it.

EBDI had agreed to complete the first 10 of these houses by October 31st. That deadline was never met and as of Saturday the 18th a contract had still not been signed with a builder.

Following a series of testimonies by residents and community leaders in Middle East, the assembly marched to the front steps of EBDI’s offices just blocks from the church and demanded answers from EBDI president Jack Shannon.

Shannon addressed the crowd taking full responsibility for what he called, “promises he should never have made.” He claimed that the time frame initially agreed upon was unrealistic and that the project would move forward.

Residents were not sympathetic and demanded that from now on SMEAC meet face to face with EBDI's board to address any problems, and that a contract with a developer for the “House for a House” program be signed in within one week.

That week has passed and SMEAC has learned that EBDI signed a contract with the Michaels' Group to build the model house for the “House for a House” program, and a contract will be signed soon for an additional 21 units.

According to SMEAC, the EBDI board of directors has agreed to meet with them, but a date has yet to be confirmed. SMEAC President Donald Gresham says that he intends to have a meeting between the development corporation’s board members, his organization, and most importantly, the residents of Middle East Baltimore.

“They (EBDI) need to understand that its time all parties come to the table and have a voice,” says Gresham. “We had to fight to get to the table in the first place and they thought if they gave us a couple seats, they could just keep us quiet.”

According to SMEAC director Nathan Soy, the fight is far from over, and residents will be setting up a picket at the EBDI offices on a regular basis until construction begins and the funding of “House for a House” is properly handled.

Gresham says, “We won’t celebrate anything until we see hammers and nails working. The pressure is on.”

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