Inaugural Chesapeake Connect trip to Cleveland provides delegates with fresh perspective on regional cooperation

A group of more than 40 of the Baltimore region’s leaders joined the Baltimore Metropolitan Council (BMC) for Chesapeake Connect, a 3-day regional delegation trip to Cleveland, in early November.

The intent of the program is to highlight best practices in transportation planning, community development, economic development, and workforce development from a peer region.

“Through Chesapeake Connect, our goal was to expose the delegation to new ideas, challenge current perceptions, and foster new relationships among fellow leaders,” said Michael B. Kelly, BMC executive director. “If we want to strengthen the Baltimore region, we need the buy-in of those who are committed to its prosperity.”

The delegation included a sampling of the Baltimore region’s key stakeholders and decision-makers - elected officials, presidents, CEOs and advisors of nonprofits, banks, universities, local governments and private businesses.

“We hope that this is the first of an annual program that will strengthen our region by offering new perspectives and encouraging cooperation across sectors and jurisdictional lines,” said Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman, who serves as the chair of the BMC Board of Directors.

In 1940, the City of Cleveland was the sixth most populous municipality in the nation, followed by the City of Baltimore. Like Cleveland, Baltimore faced significant losses in population and employment during the latter half of the 20th century. Today, with a population of nearly 2.1 million residents, Cleveland is the 32nd largest metropolitan area in the United States.

Bolstered by the optimism of a 2016 Nation Basketball Association championship, the “Rock and Roll Capital of the World” is experiencing a renaissance in the post-industrial era. With downtown redevelopment bolstered by transit and anchor institution investment, a renewed focus on growing the region’s manufacturing sector, and innovative partnerships reimagining both urban and suburban neighborhoods, Cleveland’s successful rebirth presented the group with many lessons to bring home.

The delegation spent Sunday, November 5, through Tuesday, November 7, touring greater Cleveland - from the recently redeveloped Public Square downtown and the Van Aken District in Shaker Heights, to the up-and-coming neighborhood of Ohio City on the west side of the city. The delegation traveled throughout the region with the guidance of the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Association (RTA).

In addition, Chesapeake Connect included several panel discussions - from the impact of the Healthline, a 10-mile bus rapid transit project, and the coordination between anchor institutions and philanthropic investment, to attracting, creating, and growing employment opportunities in the region.

For Will Anderson, director of the Baltimore County Department of Economic and Workforce Development, Chesapeake Connect showed him how the partnerships in greater Cleveland brought workforce and economic opportunities to the region. Baltimore County has similar opportunities, with powerhouse names such as McCormick & Company, Stanley Black & Decker, PayPal, and with support from the Social Security Administration and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, five regional medical centers, and the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) and Towson University. Major redevelopment projects in downtown Towson and Sparrows Point are generating billions in private investment.

“It takes a great deal of creativity for a region to attract and retain anchor institutions and businesses, as well as to redevelop older commercial and industrial properties,” Anderson said. “Chesapeake Connect has been an opportunity for us to see how a region similar to Baltimore worked together for decades to make the most of its assets. The redevelopment surrounding Cleveland Clinic and the Healthline corridor was particularly inspiring.”

BMC worked with local partners in Cleveland, such as: the Cleveland Foundation; Cuyahoga Community College Tri-C; Cuyahoga County Land Bank; Edwards Leadership & Restaurant Institute; First Suburbs Consortium; Fund for Our Economic Future (FOEF); Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Association (RTA); Group Plan Commission; Healthline; Magnet (Manufacturing Advocacy Growth Network); the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland (MOCA); NewBridge Cleveland; Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA); Ohio City, Incorporated (OCI); Public Square; Team NEO; and University Circle, Inc. (UCI).

“Why Cleveland?”

In 1930, Baltimore City and Cleveland were, respectively, the sixth and seventh largest cities in the United States. Steel production was driving the economy in both cities and new suburbs and highways were expanding our infrastructure well beyond the city lines.

What followed, in both regions, were decades of urban population loss, economic shifts away from manufacturing and the near complete decline of the American steel industry. While suburban communities grew and thrived, both cities struggled with the economic and social realities of the times. Baltimore City lost nearly 400,000 residents, while in Cleveland, without the economic anchor of the federal government, that number is nearly 600,000 people.

Today, both Cleveland and Baltimore see similar signs of an urban renaissance built largely on redevelopment projects and world class health care institutions. Meanwhile, our inner ring suburban communities are beginning to face, for the first time, both aging infrastructure and an aging population.

Many of the challenges Cleveland faces today mirror those we are attempting to address at home. Our hope is that Chesapeake Connect will provide leaders from the Baltimore region with insight into both successes and challenges. Northeast Ohio has experienced in their attempt to build a post-industrial economy.”