

From Temple to Trump: Philly's middle neighborhoods go to Washington

Freshman Rep. Dwight Evans tells *Billy Penn* he's becoming a "squeaky wheel" with colleagues on the Hill.

A stretch of Germantown Avenue in East Mt. Airy, which is considered a middle neighborhood along with Olney, West Oak Lane, East Oak Lane, Mayfair, Wynnefield and many others.

Mark Dent/Billy Penn

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In early February, Temple University hosted a small gathering where urban development experts Ira Goldstein and Paul Brophy told politicians [about Philadelphia's middle neighborhoods](#). These neighborhoods are where about 45 percent of our population lives, mostly-stable areas at risk because they're not getting privately developed like Center City and not so blighted that they receive government funding.

Months later, middle neighborhoods have gone national, slowly becoming a conversation topic in Washington, D.C. The issue of middle neighborhoods has reached the Office of Housing and Urban Development; Philly Congressman Dwight Evans hosted a Congressional briefing on them last week. The concept has even crossed the desk of President Donald Trump.

"I want to heighten it," Evans told *Billy Penn*, "from a national perspective."

Last week, Evans was joined by two other Congress members, Elijah Cummings, D-Maryland, and Dan Kildee, D-Michigan; as well as Brophy,

Baltimore community development leader Mark Sissman and Catherine Califano, deputy director of planning and development for the City of Philadelphia. They spoke to a few dozen Congressional staffers and community development lobbyists.

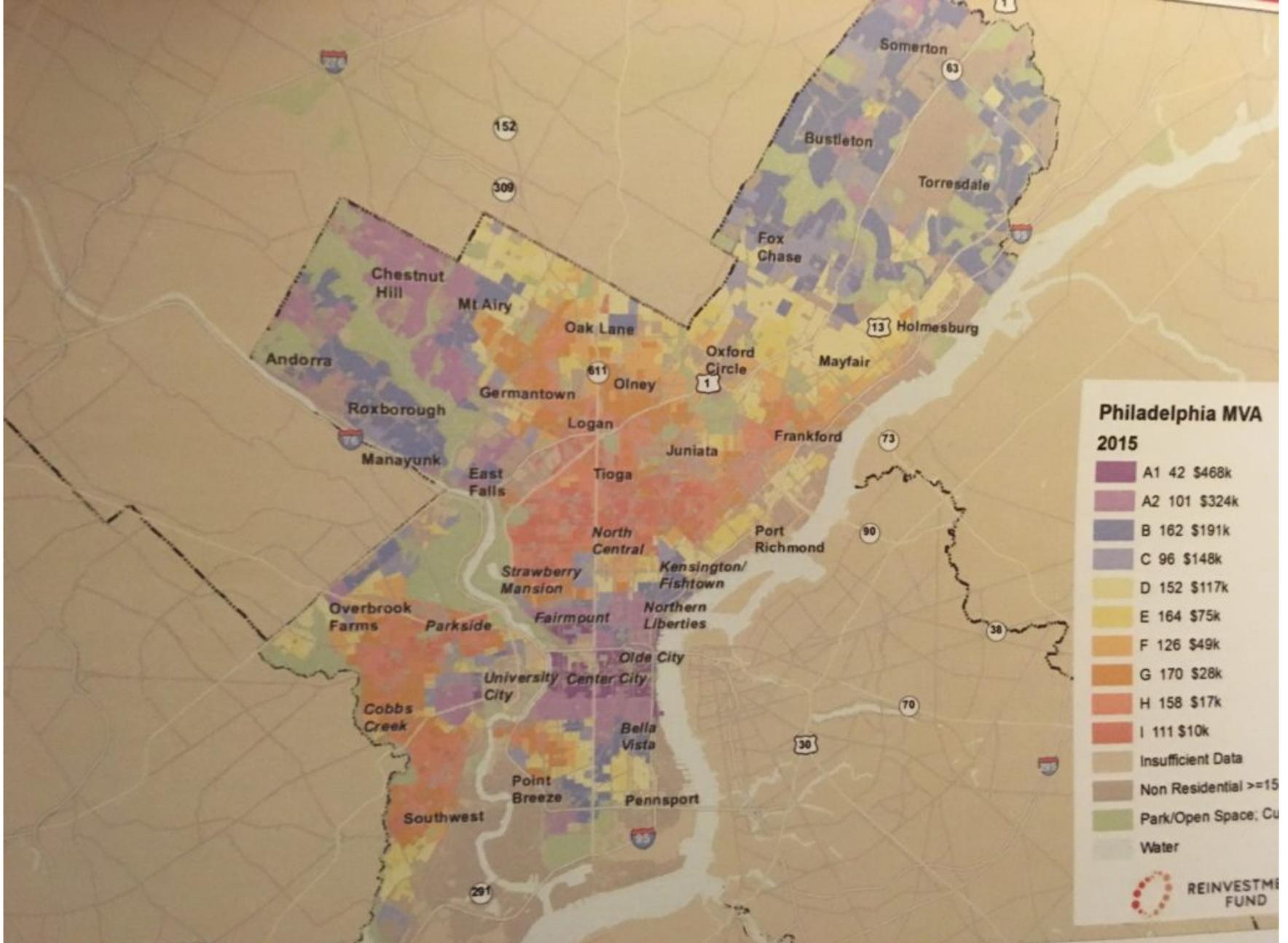
It was the second big moment for middle neighborhoods in Washington. The first came in late March in the Congressional Black Caucus' report ["We Have a Lot To Lose: Solutions to Advance Black Families in the 21st Century."](#)

On page 34, among solutions for addressing economic disparity and lifting Americans out of poverty, was "build and strengthen middle neighborhoods across the country." The report [was presented to Trump.](#)

During last week's Congressional briefing, the conversation mostly focused on two areas. For one, the experts spoke about community development block grants, and how when they were started under Richard Nixon they could be used in a wide range of areas. Over time, those grants became more income-restrictive. They can mostly now be spent only on specific lower-income neighborhoods. Brophy, a Hunting Park native and principal of the economic development firm Brophy & Reilly, said they want Congress to consider giving mayors more flexibility on use of those funds so middle neighborhoods could benefit.

They also want Congress to consider a demonstration program. This would entail awarding grants to cities that come up with the best visions for helping middle neighborhoods.

"When the federal government is working well it is often creating models that many cities would ultimately use," said Sissman, president of the Baltimore nonprofit Healthy Neighborhoods.



Areas shaded in yellow and light orange are Philly's middle neighborhoods.

Reinvestment Fund

Most of the research surrounding middle neighborhoods has centered on improving them from the local level, with investments from municipal governments and work from nonprofits and CDCs. In March, Ninth District Councilwoman Cherelle Parker introduced a resolution calling for a hearing on the subject.

But Evans and others have contributed to turning them into a national issue as well, Evans having been outspoken about middle neighborhoods in Congress since giving the keynote address at the Temple event in February. He said most other members of Congress were not aware of the concept, and he has been educating his colleagues.

“Part of what I’m trying to do is raise the consciousness of it,” Evans said,

“(and) drive budgetary priorities in this direction.”

That could be difficult. Several aspects of Trump’s budget [could have a detrimental effect on these neighborhoods](#), such as the potential gutting of Neighborhood Advisory Committees. Neighborhood Advisory Committees serve many roles, including informing homeowners of choices they can make when faced with foreclosure. Still, Brophy is optimistic about the concept of middle neighborhoods in Congress and the Trump Administration.

“The general thrust of the program, which is to build home equity in these neighborhoods so that American working class and middle class people can see their property values be stable...these are not Democratic or Republican values,” Brophy said. “I think with the right understanding of this it can be a bipartisan issue, and we can get some attention from this administration.”

He’s also been pleased with how much more awareness middle neighborhoods have received since the discussion at Temple. In addition to Congress last week, HUD has been looking into the issue, and Brophy has presented to the Brookings Institute.

Evans hopes his colleagues and Trump listen, even if it takes time. He likens the experience to progress he made on food deserts during his time as a state representative through the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative. It took over a decade for many of the program’s goals to come to fruition.

“You gotta be a squeaky wheel in this process,” Evans said. “That’s been my whole experience. You gotta stay with it.”