

Philly's forgotten middle: Places like West Oak Lane, Tacony endangered

Expert says 'we're watching neighborhoods decline because we're not paying attention.'

West Oak Lane is one of several middle neighborhoods in Philly at risk of decline.

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In Philadelphia, everybody knows about the success of Center City and the adjacent areas. And though poverty continues to linger, local programs and federal funding are employed in the city's most troubled locations. But what about those in the middle? The neighborhoods doing...pretty well?

Community development experts Paul Brophy and Ira Goldstein have a name for them: middle neighborhoods. They are reasonably stable neighborhoods where nearly a majority of the city lives, where home ownership rates are some of the highest in Philadelphia and where diversity is the norm. But they're also not distressed enough to qualify for federal grant dollars or likely to attract private investment the way Center City does. And so, they argue, these areas are in danger.

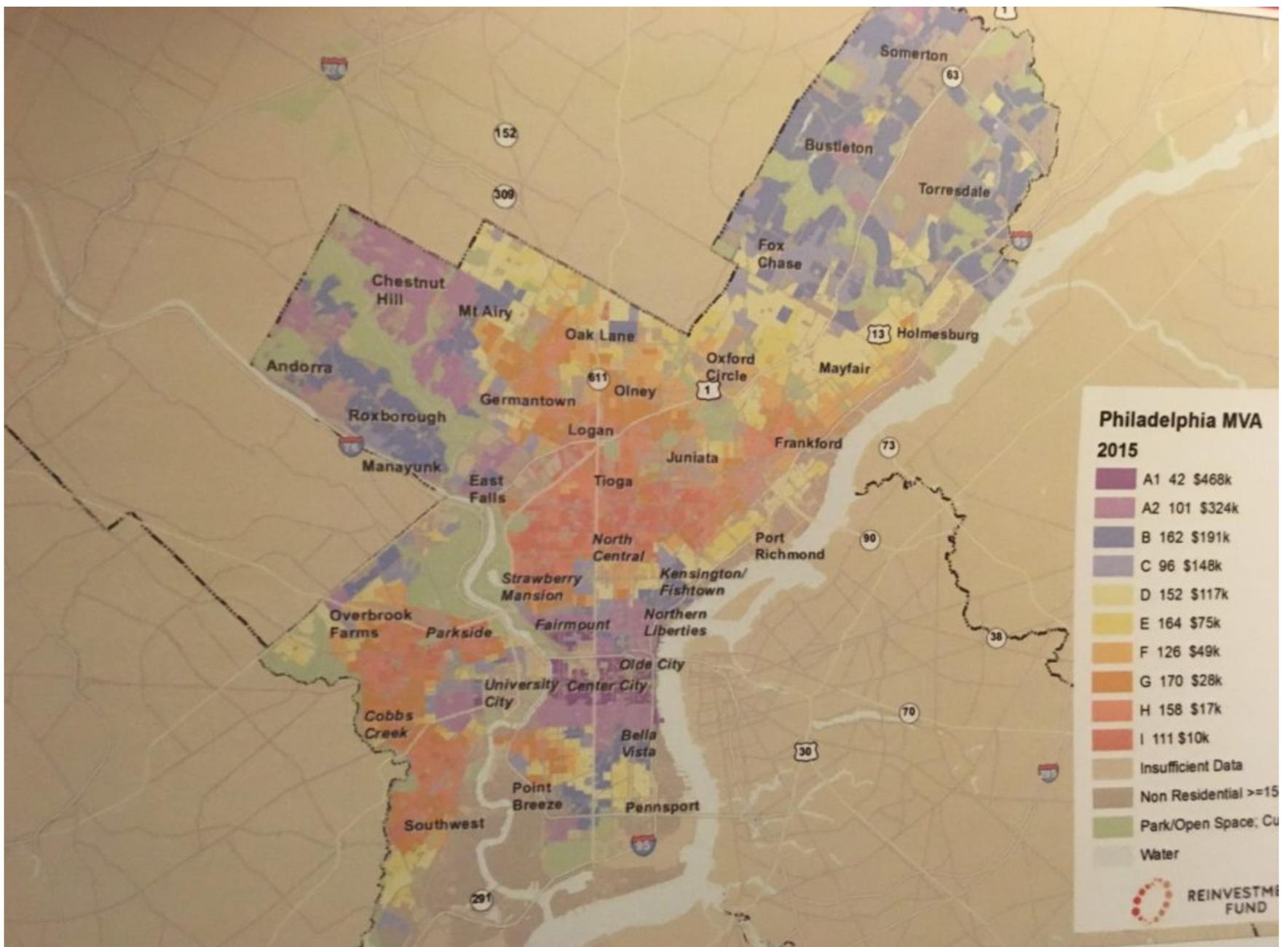
The two academics and Congressman Dwight Evans discussed them at Temple University Tuesday in a room full of politicians, city employees and community leaders — warning that middle neighborhoods need to be recognized or Philly would face the consequences.

“It really is painful to me,” said Brophy, a Hunting Park native and editor of [*On The Edge: America's Middle Neighborhoods*](#). “We're watching neighborhoods decline because we're not paying attention.”

The concept of a “middle neighborhood” is still mostly unknown to politicians

and community leaders. As mentioned above, they are average, lacking the cache of developing or downtown areas and at danger of falling into disrepair despite signs of being stable. They are especially prominent in cities that experienced significant population loss in the last half of the 20th century, like Philadelphia. Here, middle neighborhoods are places like East Mt. Airy, West Oak Lane, East Oak Lane, Rhawnhurst, Germantown, Mayfair, Tacony, Wynnefield and Olney.

The map below highlights areas of Philadelphia through a Market Value analysis by the Reinvestment Fund. Spots shaded in yellow and light orange are the middle neighborhoods. The purple areas are the most economically healthy areas of Philly and the red the least.



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

In Philly, about 40 to 45 percent of the population — a large portion of the tax base — lives in what would be considered a middle neighborhood. Residents' incomes in them are generally near Philly's median or higher, and there tends to be less income segregation and racial segregation than in other parts of the city. In Philly, the middle neighborhoods have homeowner rates hovering around 70 percent. The residents are also more likely to be frequent voters.

So on the surface, the quality of life is pretty good, and neighborhood engagement appears to be strong. But there are problems. For one, nearby jobs are less plentiful in these areas. The houses are outdated, not matching the desires of prospective new buyers, and the market for those homes has declined in many middle neighborhoods the last few years while it's gone up in Center City. The relative wealth of residents also affords them the ability to move; they could leave as new developments go up in other parts of the city or in the suburbs. Experts contend drain from middle neighborhoods filters down to adversely affect already-distressed neighborhoods, too.

Although a middle neighborhood could conceivably see quick and significant increases in property values and new developments, Goldstein said the main concern for them is decline and not so much gentrification. Middle neighborhoods aren't the Fishtowns or even Point Breezes of the world. Those neighborhoods, Goldstein said, experienced a "downtown pressure," where the success of Center City expanded outward. The middle neighborhoods, farther away from downtown, don't get that.

"In 80 percent of conversations around cities these days, people are talking about gentrification," said Goldstein, president of policy solutions for the Reinvestment Fund. "These are not gentrifying areas."

In the 1970s, community-driven efforts to strengthen these neighborhoods were common and attracted funding and attention from local and federal governments. Brophy said that began to change in the 1980s, as Presidents Ronald Reagan and George HW Bush cut funding for cities and what was left was mostly targeted to the homeless and to depressed communities. The onus

had shifted to shoring up problems rather than maintaining a status quo in average neighborhoods.

Brophy compares what's needed for places like Mayfair, East Oak Lane to taking vitamins. The neighborhoods need attention and investment so they won't fall off and require serious work. This vitamin regimen could come in many forms, including better allocations of city tax dollars and nonprofit work, and the city enforcing its codes better to reduce blight. Brophy also gave an example of an organization called Live Baltimore. It's like a Visit Philly for residents, providing information on all the city's neighborhoods and homebuying incentives and tax credits.

But before the middle neighborhoods get any of that, Brophy and Goldstein argue, they need attention. Planners and leaders need to know about the concept, period.

“Without that,” Brophy said, “they’re going to be in this kind of limbo.”

Their discussion was attended by Councilwoman Cherelle Parker, Councilman Derek Green, state Rep. Joanna McClinton and staffers for other local politicians. In response to a question from the audience, Brophy noted there's no national push to assist middle neighborhoods, nor a push yet in Philadelphia.

“Here's another opportunity to focus on these neighborhoods,” he said.

“Who...can become the advocate?”