

A LIVING CHARETTE IN LAUREL, DELAWARE: USING THE "BETTER BLOCK" MODEL TO PROMOTE COMMUNITY REDEVELOPMENT

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What started as a Chesapeake Bay water quality initiative took a strange twist when community members in Laurel, DE asked the University of Delaware's (UD) Sustainable Coastal Communities Initiative to "...help us bring people and jobs back to downtown Laurel!" In response, UD led a community visioning process focusing on the Broad Creek waterfront in Laurel's commercial district. When asked to reimagine a viable waterfront area twenty years in the future, a stakeholder committee offered a grand vision, which included elements, such as a pocket-style neighborhood, mixed-use development, a kayak launch, a children's play area, and a brewpub just to name a few, all of which might be found along a beautifully landscaped river walk.

Subsequently, a unique partnership with the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation and an Assistant Professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Delaware resulted in a conceptual plan and artist renderings offered in a sustainable waterfront redevelopment plan called "The Ramble." This proposal was enthusiastically endorsed by the Laurel Town Council as well as the Laurel Chamber of Commerce and numerous local business and civic organizations. While the technical phases of plan implementation proceeded, which included a feasibility study and Phase I environmental assessment as well as development of construction drawings for storm water management, the project partners sought to maintain community engagement in the continuing planning process. In collaboration with the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation and the Town of Laurel, UD and a stakeholder committee organized a Better Block event. Better Block demonstrates how temporary sustainability improvements can build momentum for long-term financial, social and environmental advancement. The Better Block model has been used in over one hundred cities around the world to illustrate rapid street changes and community revitalization. Laurel's Better Block event called "Fall Ramble Along Broad Creek" was part block party and part living charrette. It involved temporarily transforming the Broad Creek waterfront to demonstrate the possibilities for a revitalized downtown area. Artists, musical performers, local vendors, paddling activities, a nature-based children's play area, and pop-up businesses, including a brew pub, were all featured along a temporary, landscaped river walk to mimic the proposed redevelopment design and showcase the potential vitality of the Broad Creek waterfront. As a result of the "Fall Ramble Along Broad Creek," Laurel's community and business leaders began to develop and organize their economic assets and new, productive relationships emerged across the public, private, and civil sectors to further implement "The Ramble" plan.