

POLITICS

Wes Moore promises at Baltimore gubernatorial community forum to prioritize housing, jobs; Dan Cox decides not to attend

By Cassidy Jensen, Baltimore Sun, Oct 16, 2022



More than a thousand Baltimore and Prince George's County faith and community leaders filled the James Weldon Johnson Auditorium at Coppin State University on Sunday to hear Maryland's gubernatorial candidates respond to their calls for state investments in housing, jobs and health care.

But despite an agenda listing time slots for both Democratic nominee for governor Wes Moore and Republican

Del. Dan Cox, Moore was the only candidate onstage at the action organized by Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development and its sister organization, Prince George's Leadership Action Network.

Event organizers said Cox withdrew from the event Friday, after saying in July and in early October that he would participate.

"We received news on Friday afternoon, after we printed the agenda, that Delegate Cox had decided not to attend our action," said Dr. Daryl Kearney, co-chair of PLAN. "His staff did inform us that he had a plane to catch to attend another event out of state."

A spokesperson for the Cox campaign did not respond to a request for comment.

Moore opened his response to the coalitions' questions by referencing Cox's absence. "I hope you paid attention to the fact that I'm here," he said. "I hope you paid attention to the fact that I'm going to be here."

Later, Moore told reporters that Cox was on a flight to former President Donald Trump's



Florida estate, Mar-a-Lago. “Obviously he’s going down to meet with Donald Trump and he thought that was more important than going to talk to community members in Maryland,” he said.

BUILD, founded in 1977, is a nonpartisan coalition of Baltimore congregations, nonprofits and schools. Leaders sporting bright blue T-shirts held signs aloft with the number of people from their congregation or group who had turned up.

Deborah Jones of Zion Baptist Church said she came to Sunday’s event to hear Moore speak about his plans for housing and jobs, along with how he would address crime and violence. Jones was disappointed that Cox was not there. “We wanted to hear what his response would be,” she said.

Along with requests to prioritize employment and access to health care, community leaders asked Moore to sign on to a \$3 billion plan to transform 10,000 of Baltimore’s estimated 15,000 vacant properties by creating a state-chartered nonprofit corporation. The proposed special purpose entity would aim to buy and redevelop the city’s vacant buildings over the next seven to 10 years.



BUILD called on Moore to use state money to match local funds for a total public investment of more than \$1 billion and to support the creation of a special purpose entity that can acquire large numbers of properties without displacing residents, one of the coalition’s core priorities in redevelopment.

Moore agreed that the state should work in partnership with local organizations and cities to address vacant homes.

“You cannot address the issue of economic growth and economic vitality if we continue to have not just pockets, but absolute deserts, deserts, of economic blight,” he said, echoing a call from the Rev. George Hopkins of Sowebo Community Church for attendees to make a new way through the “desert” of unaffordability and violence surrounding many Baltimore residents.

In a white paper on its vacancy plan, the coalition pointed to its [use of a similar model](#) to reduce the number of vacants in East Baltimore neighborhoods like Oliver, Broadway East and Johnston Square, as well as Greenmount West in North Baltimore.

Since its work with ReBUILD Metro in Broadway East and Oliver began in 2010, the vacancy rate in both neighborhoods has declined 85% while population and median home prices have risen and the homicide rate has fallen by nearly 50%, the white paper said.

The approach used in East Baltimore has relied on the leadership of community groups, a commitment to not displacing residents and ensuring that neighborhoods are right-sized, or that housing supply is built for the city's current population.

"The neighborhood leads all the progress," said Regina Hammond, executive director of Re-Build Johnston Square. Hammond said her group has solicited feedback by holding listening sessions during which residents wrote down their priorities on Post-it notes.

A 38-year-resident of Johnston Square, Hammond began organizing with her neighbors nine years ago. Since 2013, her organization has renovated homes, built new multifamily housing and started the first phase of a redevelopment of Greenmount Park.

Before the event Sunday afternoon, Hammond said she had not yet made up her mind about Moore. "I want to hear from him more," she said.

BUILD leaders also called on Moore to help open up well-paying public jobs for Baltimore's unemployed residents. [Turnaround Tuesday, the coalition's jobs program](#), has helped thousands of people, many of them formerly incarcerated citizens, find employment.

Moore said that he would visit Turnaround Tuesday and work to make sure returning residents in Maryland had access to job opportunities.

"We cannot make every sentence a life sentence by restricting where you can live and where you can work, from where you can go for higher education, what kind of aid you can get," Moore said. "The focus is going to be rehabilitation and reentry."

Bishop Dr. Kevin Daniels of St. Martin Church of Christ spoke about the need to curb Baltimore's economic blight and violence for the sake of his mother, a West Baltimore resident who stood beside him onstage.

Daniels said after the event that he was satisfied with Moore's commitments to work with BUILD and PLAN on housing and other issues impacting Baltimore.

"I'm excited about all the things that potentially could happen here. We want the federal, the state and the city to work together," Daniels said. "We want to make sure this gets done — in my mother's lifetime."