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## A new brand for Dundalk

Local group aims to overcome stereotypes of Baltimore County community

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A sign on Dundalk Avenue welcomes visitors to the blue-collar community. (Barbara Haddock Taylor, Baltimore Sun / June 3, 2014)

By Alison Knezevich, The Baltimore Sun  
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When Jeff Shaney and his wife bought their historic home last year, he says, his friends from Towson all asked the same thing.

"Why did you move to **Dundalk**?"

The waterfront community in Baltimore County has long suffered skeptics and detractors — it's been derided by some as "Dumb-dalk," and when a survey was conducted three years ago, people in the area described it in terms that were not pretty: Rats. Crime. Filth.

"If you've never been here, you may think the town is a dying steel plant — or now, a dead steel plant," said Amy Menzer, executive director of the nonprofit Dundalk Renaissance Corp. "It has a legacy as a working-class steel town. There's a lot of pride in that heritage, but also challenges."

Menzer's organization is trying to break stereotypes and attract families like the Shaney's to the community. In a new marketing campaign, the Dundalk Renaissance Corp. touts the community's 43 miles of waterfront, its history and its proximity to city attractions: It's a 10-minute drive to the **Canton** Crossing retail development, 15 to Camden Yards.

The \$1.3 million campaign, funded by Baltimore County and the state, features grants to lure new homeowners, a website to help newcomers learn about Dundalk's 24 neighborhoods and a slogan intended to pique curiosity: "Live the unexpected."

"We want people to scratch their heads," Menzer said.

Patricia Paul, a local activist, says the campaign is out of touch with the community.

The website, unexpecteddundalk.com, features pictures of children playing near the water. But "the bottom line," Paul said, "is the water around here's not clean."

"They're selling our waterfront for the people who are ... more well-heeled than the people around here," she said. "I would hope that we're not setting the stage for more development along the waterfront."

The community of 63,000 suffers from poverty, environmental pollution and other challenges, Paul said. She wishes that more energy were being devoted to helping people who have lived in Dundalk all their lives.

"These other problems are very difficult to solve," she said.

The campaign's supporters say they hope to spark growth in Dundalk by capitalizing on its location and its affordable housing stock. They say Dundalk offers a difficult-to-find sense of community.

"It just has a feel almost like a Mayberry-type community where you see your neighbors and you know them by name," said Barbara Stokes. She bought a stucco house in Old Dundalk for \$137,000 in 2008.

"I have the neighbor I can borrow sugar from," Stokes said. "You don't find that everywhere."

Stokes, an office worker at a commercial cooking equipment company, plans to become a "neighborhood ambassador" for the marketing campaign. The Dundalk Renaissance Corp. has hired marketing consultant Tracy Gosson, the former executive director of Live Baltimore, and former Baltimore City Councilman **Jody Landers** for the campaign.

The nonprofit hired an out-of-state consulting firm several years ago to ask area residents their perceptions of Dundalk.

Ian Symmonds & Associates of Portland, Ore., discerned "a palpable pride in the community." When people think of Dundalk, the consultants said, they think of hard work, the annual Fourth of July parade, and the community's long-running Heritage Fair.

But there was also the other side.

"Dundalk is thought of as being polluted and dirty with rats, drugs and a high crime rate," the consultants wrote in their 2011 presentation. "Perceptions of crime, pollution, lack of retail services and shopping, and the status of the education system, are very problematic for the community."

Bob Staab, a former state delegate from Dundalk, said the community has always been the butt of jokes.

"People in Dundalk were kind of looked down at because they were blue-collar," Staab said. "But it just made them that much stronger. And it made them stick together more."

He said many longtime residents have grown frustrated with blight, litter and a decline in home ownership. But he said the community has a lot to offer families, including active recreation councils and "shoreline after shoreline."

The Shaney's bought their big old house — it was once a hotel — as an investment. But they decided they wanted to move in themselves.

"We kind of fell in love," said Shaney, 40, a commercial real estate appraiser.

He sees other advantages, too. The taxes are lower than in the city, but it's still close to urban amenities.

Tom Maddux, a principal of the commercial real estate firm KLNB, said the perceptions cited by the consultants of Dundalk as "polluted and dirty" likely come from its industrial past — for decades, it was neighbor to the **Bethlehem Steel** mill in nearby Sparrows Point.

But for retailers, he said, the question of whether to invest depends not on perception, but hard numbers: population and income levels.

"The retailer won't necessarily have an opinion about the community," Maddux said. "Everybody in Baltimore has opinions about everything, but the retailer's just going look at the scientific view. They're not going worry about the reputation."

According to the most recent census figures, the median income in the community is \$48,440. The county median is \$66,068.

For Dundalk to attract upscale retail development, Maddux says, its population must grow.

"Retailing follows demographics and follows market demand," he said. "The **Harris Teeter**, Target, all the retailers at Canton Crossing would not have come there if the population on that side of town had not changed over the past 20 years."

The Dundalk Renaissance Corp. hopes incentives can help change the community. It plans to sponsor a housing fair in September at which prospective buyers can take narrated bus tours through local neighborhoods, talk to real estate agents and renovation contractors, and learn about the campaign's \$5,000 Golden Key grants, which are intended to help people buy homes.

To qualify for a grant, applicants must agree to live in their home for at least five years, and earn more than 80 percent of the median income in the Baltimore region.

County officials have tried to highlight new development in the area, such as the Greens at Logan Field, a senior housing community, and renovations at Merritt Park Shopping Center and Merritt Manor Shopping Center.

The North Point Government Center is slated for redevelopment. Vanguard plans to build Merritt Pavilion with stores, offices and restaurants on Merritt Boulevard. The county school system opened the \$101 million Dundalk High and Sollers Point Technical School at the start of the school year.

Developer Larry Rosenberg says the area's greatest asset is its "magnificent waterfront."

"I've always felt that this a tremendous amenity in Baltimore County that was not being utilized properly," said Rosenberg, president and CEO of Mark Building.

The company's new Village of Bear Creek features 39 townhouses, with amenities that include a marina, two-car garages and "sky top decks."

The gated community has attracted Dundalk natives, empty-nesters and some who have moved from Baltimore.

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