

**Social Justice in a University-Community Interaction: A Case Study on
Brandon Avenue**

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Introduction

Zoning ordinances lay out how a city is developed. In most cases they are designed so the vision the city leaders have for the layout of the city can become a reality. “A zoning ordinance is a written regulation and law that defines how property in specific geographic zones can be used” (Kenton, 2018). Cities or regions are divided into zones and in these zones the city defines the land uses allowed or prohibited. Zones are typically classified under three categories: residential, commercial, and mixed use. In a more basic sense, it is an attempt by the city to structure neighborhoods and separate residential properties from commercial. Zoning ordinances are not perfect and as a result are constantly changed. A change in zoning has potential to destroy communities. If a residential neighborhood with single family dwellings is rezoned to mix used commercial residential it would make it illegal to build single occupancy housing but it gives developers the authority to buy houses and build large commercial spaces in their place. This power dynamic gives residents little power and results in the loss of residential space and a sense of community.

In 2003 the City of Charlottesville passed a new zoning ordinance that featured new university specific zones near grounds. University High Density (UHD) is one of the university specific zones included in the ordinance. UHD is defined as” areas in the vicinity of the University of Virginia in which high-density residential developments, including multifamily uses, are encouraged” (Residential Zoning Matrix Update, 2010). These zones enable the expansion of the university by permitting construction of high-density apartment buildings. University expansion has forced residents to relocate and has reshaped communities (Brandon Avenue Master Plan, 2016). As the university continues to grow it will continue to alter communities in the city. Creating systems that ensure university expansion is mutually beneficial for the university and the residents of

Charlottesville will limit the disruption of existing communities while promoting the preservation of the university.

This paper seeks to understand the power dynamics between UVA and the local community in the redevelopment of Brandon Avenue, a recent project that expands the academic and residential space of the university. This will be accomplished by defining the stakeholders involved in the redevelopment and their role in the procurement and planning of the project as well as analyzing previous green redevelopments to determine how the Brandon Avenue redevelopment will benefit each stakeholder.

Literature Review

Public Documents

The Office of the Architect of the University at UVA and City of Charlottesville Planning Commission Meeting Minutes proved to be useful resources for finding information on the reports and policies concerning the development of the Brandon Avenue project and details about the existing properties on the avenue before construction. The UHD zoning has allowed for the development and construction of the Brandon Avenue redevelopment. The redevelopment is an attempt to make a model green community by creating a green urban space where students and faculty will live, work, and learn. The vision of this green urban design is to create a culturally vibrant, happy, and inclusive community within the university. (Brandon Avenue Master Plan, 2016). However, in the process of procuring this redevelopment the university demolished all of the existing property it owned on Brandon Avenue, forcing the residents to relocate, and also petitioned the city to vacate all its public interest in the avenue. Since the 1970's UVA has been purchasing the lots on Brandon Avenue. They have been successful in acquiring all of the lots with

the exception of two privately owned properties. The two non-UVA properties on Brandon Avenue are currently still standing through the ongoing construction, see Eunoia and The Monroe in Figure1 (City Council Agenda, 2017).



Figure 1: Proposed Redevelopment Vision for Brandon Avenue, (Brandon Avenue Master Plan, 2016)

Looking through the City Council Agendas led to evidence of letters explicitly stating the private properties support of the closure of Brandon Avenue to allow for the redevelopment. The letters from the property owners all stated “The vacation of Brandon Avenue will not create an inconvenience for our property” (City Council Agenda, 2017). However, the street closure did create an inconvenience for the properties. It closed the church parking area and required a detour to access the apartment building. If these properties risked these inconveniences, which could have potential hurt their business and attendance, to allow for the construction of the project, what risks would they face post construction?

Theory

The demand for the development of sustainable infrastructure has been steadily increasing because of the environmental and economic benefits. It protects the environment and natural resources through use of renewable materials and environmentally sensitive designs. The Brandon Avenue redevelopment includes sustainable buildings and stormwater management systems. These are designed to be highly resilient and efficient in energy and material use, as a result the construction and Operations and Maintenance costs are lower than what is traditionally seen. These costs lower the environmental and economic impact because of the reduced use of resources and energy during their lifetime. Knowing the environmental and economic benefits of sustainable infrastructure it is easy to understand why the university would want to invest in it.

However, there are three pillars to sustainability: Economic, Environment, and Social. In regard to the sustainability of the Brandon Avenue redevelopment and future university expansion, the economic and environmental benefits are easily measurable. In order to grasp social sustainability, one must look at it from a sociotechnical perspective. A sociotechnical approach recognizes the

manners in which technology and people interact and affect one another, accounting for the impact of technology on values, beliefs, perceptions, and other sociocultural agents. (Neeley, 2010).

Methods

To evaluate the social sustainability of the Brandon Avenue redevelopment I will use the SCOT framework to define the stakeholders and their role in the preconstruction and post construction of the development and analyze the implications of their actions. Taking a sociotechnical approach will help to understand the equity of the development and underlying problems of social inequality and inclusivity.

University Stakeholders.

University of Virginia Executive Leadership

The Office of the Provost is responsible for setting the university's priorities and the Office of the President is responsible for developing a strategic plan to maintain a level of excellence at the university. In 2008 the university, guided by the OAU, labeled Brandon Avenue as a redevelopment zone. Redevelopment zones were evaluated based on their ability to accommodate planned growth of the academic, residential, and infrastructure needs of the university while adhering to the sustainability principles set forth by the provost (2008 Grounds Plan, 2008). The university commissioned a study to identify a redevelopment vision for Brandon Avenue that benefits the University (Brandon Avenue Master Plan, 2016). The study, completed by Perkins+Will with help from the OAU and university faculty, was published in 2016 and presented to the Master Planning Council (MPC). The MPC, through the OAU, advises the President, Executive Vice President, and Chief Operating Officer on mid-term and long term planning of the

university. They are defined by the university as the general stakeholders in the development of precinct/area plans and general infrastructure plans. It is their duty to review plans and offer feedback to make sure they align with the priorities set by the university.

After the plan was presented to the MPC and the comments and questions were addressed, representatives from the OAU and Perkins+Will presented the plan to the Building and Grounds Committee, a subcommittee of the Board of Visitors. The Board of Visitors is the governing body of the university, it advances the universities mission and goals, assures the proper stewardship of the University's resources and assets, and monitor the implementation of institutional strategy and policies (Building and Grounds Committee, 2016). On behalf of the Board of Visitors, the Building and Grounds Committee determines whether a project should be added to the Capital Projects Program. The project is evaluated to see if it aligns with the strategic goals of the university, complies with current land use master plans, and provides value to the university (Capital Program, n.d.)

Government Stakeholders

Charlottesville City Planning Commission

The City Planning Commission is a group appointed by the City Council that is charged with guiding development within the city to align with the city's comprehensive plan. The comprehensive plan is a vision for the city in matters of land use, housing, and transportation. (City Council Agenda, 2017). Members of the planning commission are part of the Master Planning Council at UVA, their duty is to advocate for the city's interest in university development projects. In the MPC meetings regarding Brandon Avenue, Planning Commission members suggested adding a bridge over the railroad tracks to connect Brandon Avenue with Valley Rd and having

retail shops on the first floor of the proposed buildings. The university has not made any steps to pursue these suggestions to date.



Figure 2: Proposed uses for Brandon Avenue Green Street (Brandon Avenue Master Plan, 2016)

Apart from the MPC meetings, the Planning Commission held a meeting to discuss handing over public right-of-way to the university for the project. In 2017 the UVA Foundation and UVA petitioned the City of Charlottesville to close all of Brandon Avenue, and a portion of Monroe Lane/15th Street to the general public to create a new private street to be owned and maintained by the University. The city's Planning Commission held a meeting to examine the benefits and drawbacks of the redevelopment project from the City's perspective and vote to approve the street closure (City Council Agenda, 2017). In their examination the city looked at city utility

infrastructure and services, consistency with the city's comprehensive plan, and budgetary impact. The city ultimately voted to allow for the closure because the project aligned with the city's comprehensive plan, specifically the Bicycle Vision Network and Green City initiative. The agreement included the stipulation that the city remain the water and sewer provider for the street so that the annual revenue of \$805,000 from the utility service is not lost (City Council Agenda).

Critics of the agreement stated that the university should have to pay for the land because there it has value. The city vacated 44,475 ft² on Brandon Avenue and 14298 ft² on Monroe Lane. Mayor Walker has said that the city should consider selling land to the University if it holds value (Tubbs, 2018). Majority of the parcels on Brandon Avenue are owned by the UVA foundation and as such are taxable, once these properties are transferred to the University, they are no longer taxable because UVA is a state entity. Universities own large amounts of property that is not taxable, Stanford holds about \$8 billion worth of property and receives a tax break of around \$80 million per year (Mendelsohn, 2016). Like Stanford, UVA also owns a significant amount of property that is not taxed which results in a loss of tax revenue for the City of Charlottesville. This loss of revenue could be considered the value Mayor Walker is referring to in her statement.

Citizen Stakeholders

University of Virginia Students and Faculty

Several UVA faculty members contributed to the Brandon Avenue Master Plan as interviewee's or advisors and students completed surveys. The students and faculty provided input about the academic and residential needs of the university so the designers could include them in the master plan. The students and faculty stand to benefit most from the project because the purpose of the project is to increase academic, residential, and community space to make the university more

appealing to current and potential students and faculty. This is part of the larger strategic plan by the university to strengthen the foundation of the university and create a more vibrant community in higher education (Brandon Avenue Master Plan, 2016).

Charlottesville Residents and Businesses

The residents and businesses of Charlottesville did not participate in the development of the Brandon Avenue project from the records of the MPC meetings and Planning Commission meetings. The existing properties on Brandon Avenue were involved in authorizing the street closure in 2017 but that appears to be the extent of their involvement. (City Council Agenda, 2017). Representatives from the Planning Commission served to advocate for the interest of the city and its residents in MPC meetings. The project includes community amenities that benefit residents such as increased open space and expanded bicycle networks, but other attempts made by Planning Commission members to benefit the community such as the bridge over the railroad tracks or retail shops on the first floor were not included in the plan (Brandon Avenue Master Plan, 2016).



Figure 3: Brandon Avenue Study Area (Brandon Avenue Master Plan, 2016)

Analysis

From the identification of the stakeholders and their role in the project there is a clear hierarchy of power that exists within the university. At the top is the strategic plan for the university laid out by the Office of the President. This plan is the guiding force of the university and it is the duty of the Building and Grounds Committee to make sure any development at the university aligns with

the strategic plan. This is evident when looking at the stakeholders associated with the university and their motivations for the project. The current strategic plan consists of four strategic goals: strengthen our foundation, cultivate community, enable discoveries, and commit to service. The Brandon Avenue Project was developed with the objective of utilizing the space in a way that benefits the university and aligns with the strategic goals (Brandon Avenue Master Plan, 2016).

However, when looking at how the project benefits the City of Charlottesville there are conflicts that arise. From looking at the City Council Agendas, Brandon Avenue Master Plan, and statements from city leaders there are three prevailing conflicts: alignment with the Comprehensive Plan, loss of space and tax revenue, and housing affordability.

The Planning Commission stated that the project aligned with the Comprehensive Plan because it expanded the bicycle network of the city and contributed to the Streets That Work initiative, an initiative to make streets more accommodating to pedestrians and bicycles. However, part of the Comprehensive Plan is the Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan. In this plan, Brandon Avenue is envisioned as the “spine of the network”. To facilitate their vision the Planning Commission suggested the addition of a pedestrian bridge over the railroad tracks to connect Brandon Avenue to Valley Rd and another east-west connection between Valley Rd and Monroe Dr. Both of these connections would be a safer alternative to cycling on JPA and create more connections from the surrounding communities and UVA. Despite the benefits to the community these connections would offer the university has not included them in the plan to date.

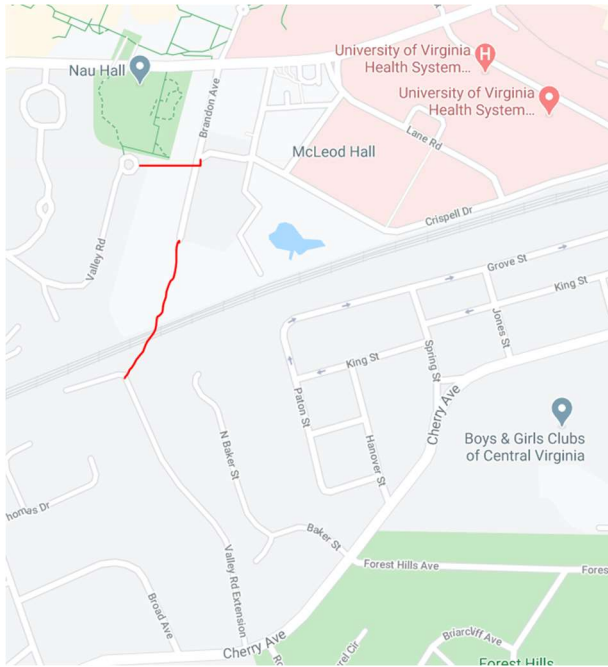


Figure 4: Figure 4: Map of potential connections in red. (Professional Map that includes Valley Rd. does not exist), (<https://maps.google.com>)

The second conflict is the loss of tax revenue and space the city experiences as a result of university expansion. Because UVA is a public university all of its land holdings are considered public land by the city tax code and are therefore exempt from the personal property tax. In recent years the property tax in Charlottesville has risen due to an increase in land value. The increased property tax results in more revenue for the city. However, in instances like Brandon Avenue where private property owned by the UVA Foundation is transferred to UVA, a public entity. This combined with the city gifting public right-of-way to the city results in a serious potential loss of revenue. The university owns 67 properties in the city that are worth an estimated \$50 million (Entzminger, 2012). The property tax rate in Charlottesville is \$4.20 per \$100 of land value (Charlottesville.gov, n.d.). This results in the loss of \$2.1 million in potential tax revenue from UVA's land holdings.

The city has allowed this because according to city council member Mike Signer the university has made financial commitments to fund city projects such as the West Main Street Scape project (Tubbs, 2018). However, the university has not commented on its funding commitment and the project is still in the preliminary stages. There is a power imbalance that exists because of this in which the university receives more than it contributes to the community.

The third conflict is the issue of affordable housing in the city. As the university expands its academic space the student population will increase which results in higher demand for on-grounds and off-grounds housing. The Brandon Avenue Master Plan calls for the construction of at least 2 residential dormitories to alleviate some of the housing demand but the project only adds about 500 beds (Tubbs, 2018). Of the 24,000 undergraduate and graduate students at UVA, only a small portion live on grounds. The UHD zoning code has allowed the development of high density residential buildings near the university to handle the demand for off-grounds housing. These high density developments have increased the property values in Charlottesville and made it difficult for residents of the city to find affordable housing. (Tubbs, 2018). To address this UVA has announced its goals to support the development of between 1,000 and 1,500 affordable housing units in Charlottesville and Albemarle County on parcels owned by the university and the UVA Foundation (Woods, 2020). Although this is a step in the right direction, more needs to be done to bridge the gap between the university and the community.

Conclusion

There is a clear imbalance of power between UVA and the City of Charlottesville. This imbalance can be due in large part to the 2003 zoning ordinance which created the UHD zone. This allowed for the expansion of the university and development of high-density on-grounds and off-grounds

housing. The city has created an affordable housing crisis, lost out on potential tax revenue, and created conflicts between the city's comprehensive plan and UVA's strategic plan. The new strategic plan by President Ryan calls for more community engagement and service. I think that emphasizing UVA's role as servants to the community is an excellent way of establishing a better relationship with the community and giving the city more power. In future developments I think the city should have more representation in the MPC and there should be more focus on integrating UVA with Charlottesville. As the university expands there should be more of an effort to include the city's plans in future development. As a public university the space and amenities should be able to be used freely by everyone and not seen as exclusive to UVA. The way in which the university has used its resources and power has been socially unjust for the City of Charlottesville and the University should share its resources for the purpose of social justice.

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