



FOCUSED ON THE FUTURE

Statement of Interim CEO, Reginald Davis on 9/21/2020

Strong City's Board of Directors, leaders and I carry with us daily the weight of knowing that our actions, or perhaps more accurately our inaction at times, could have added any measure of strain to the lives of those running, working for, or benefiting from the uniquely powerful work of the organizations with whom we partner. We also carry daily, a firm resolve to do everything in our power to restore trust in Strong City so that we continue to be a place where people and organizations can accomplish their vision, empower Baltimore communities, and thrive.

I came to this organization after a career in non-profit advocacy and management, capacity building and leadership development focused on community based organizations, working to create more opportunity for underserved and underrepresented communities like the one I grew up in and to cultivate black-led leadership in community-based initiatives and nonprofits. I am an example of what someone can accomplish in this city with the right mentorship and a little bit of hope. My work today with Strong City is a logical extension of that dream.

We are proud to be neighbors and partners in East Baltimore. The Hoen building where we now stand tells its own story of leadership and commitment to investment in underdeveloped and unfunded parts of our city. It is a testament to Strong City's work to build meaningful partnerships among non-profits, for-profit companies, and governmental agencies to build stronger neighborhoods. Contrary to the assertion of some, every dollar in this project was hard earned through project-specific community development grants and other subsidies that make economic development possible in neighborhoods that have experienced decades of disinvestment. Among the many organizations that considered this building, we were alone in committing our future to it. Since construction began here in the Spring of 2018, at least two dozen blighted row homes within a 2-block radius have been renovated as workforce and affordable housing –something that should be celebrated.

For more than 50 years through direct services and programs, partnerships and the fiscal sponsorship of hundreds of budding advocacy organizations, Strong City has been a catalyst for stronger and more empowered communities. We have helped disrupt broken systems, ignite social movements, and address equity and social justice issues across Baltimore City.

More than a network of people and programs, we consider ourselves and our partners a family of extraordinary humans in all our real, powerful, raw, driven and at times, flawed glory. We are neighbors, organizers, business leaders, entrepreneurs, social activists, mentors, and facilitators. Our individual experiences, motivations, and daily lives are as unique as the neighborhoods we serve. And this allows our clients, funders, and service recipients the benefit of collective input, expertise, resources, and action.

The rapid growth of Strong City's fiscal sponsorship program is a testament to the power of our work. It has also been our greatest challenge. In addition to external factors outside of our control that impacted the timely release of project grants and other funding, and more devastating impacts of the pandemic, it became clear to us over the last year that the internal systems, policies, procedures and controls in place to manage sponsored projects had not evolved as quickly as they should have. Our accounting practices, established and maintained within common and accepted financial and accounting principles, fell short of meeting our client's growing needs and the standards we set for ourselves. What has never fallen short, without exception or equivocation, is the integrity and accountability with which we have carried ourselves and executed our work.

Our Board, leadership and staff have been working tirelessly to identify, isolate, and address our challenges. We are in the process of developing and implementing new systems, onboarding new staff and carving a path forward that not only meets but exceeds national standards and best practices for fiscal sponsorship. This work is not easy, nor does it happen instantaneously. But we are confident that these changes will allow us to continue innovating, disrupting, advancing, and empowering Baltimore City. Our efforts to-date include:

- Increased internal capacity, expertise, and training specifically in finance, grant management, customer service and communications. We recently onboarded an Accounting Manager with more than two decades of industry experience and a Grants Coordinator with the expertise and experience to successfully coordinate with projects and funders to ensure proper stewardship, reporting and management of grant funds. We are actively seeking a new Director of Fiscal Sponsorship who will be responsible solely for managing the fiscal sponsorship program.
- A detailed financial audit is underway, in addition to our work with expert consultants to inform and guide the implementation of best practices in the fiscal sponsorship program specifically and in grant management, accounting and finance systems generally.

- Working with internal and external communication experts to significantly increase regular engagement between our staff, leadership, projects and funders to ensure that our path to repairing existing issues is **fully** transparent, informed by our stakeholders, and reported on regularly so all parties are up-to-date on exactly how our efforts are improving accountability and results.
- Reviving the Project Services Council, which includes internal and fiscally sponsored project leaders as a vehicle to providing clients oversight of and direct engagement with internal finance and reporting systems and staff.
- Continued exploration and deployment of new processes, technologies and platforms for payroll processing, accounting, reporting and financial management. This is just a beginning of what will be an ongoing, collaborative, and well-communicated approach to right-sizing the organization and exceeding client expectations and addressing community needs.

I am in awe of and completely humbled every day by the grace, humility and work ethic of my Strong City colleagues who persevere in service of our mission – giving all their time and energy to our future. In what has often felt like very dark times not just for Strong City, but for our entire city, our country, and our world, they keep me hopeful, energized, and galvanized. So too has the commitment and loyalty of so many partners, programs and sponsored projects – all rooted firmly behind our purpose and united in the belief that there is no obstacle we can't overcome when we bring our hearts and collective resources to bear on this city's **toughest** challenges. I speak for all of my colleagues when I say that we will never stop listening, sharing, and finding ways to be better. We look forward to the day we can say without hesitation that Strong City Baltimore is stronger than ever. Until then, we will continue in the pursuit of stronger and more resilient communities and systems in this strong city that we love.