

Harborplace owner presents redevelopment plan



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Baltimore Sun

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Large neon signs presented as part of Harborplace redevelopment proposal

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Large neon signs would top sleeker, awning-free Harborplace pavilions under a redevelopment plan presented to the city Thursday by the owner of the Inner Harbor facility.

Ashkenazy Acquisition Corp. said it wants to clean up the buildings, stripping additions such as greenhouse areas on the first floor and improving their appearance on Pratt and Light streets. The hope is to restore them as a destination for area residents, officials said.

"We are thrilled about revitalization and trying to bring Harborplace back to the city and citizens of Baltimore," said Stephanie Mineo, senior vice president of leasing for Ashkenazy, a New York firm that paid nearly \$100 million for the properties in 2012 and also owns The Village at Cross Keys.

Mineo said the firm hopes to start renovations in February 2016 and expects about 20 percent of the pavilion space to see new tenants. She declined to disclose a budget for a project, saying to do so would be premature because design is still in development.

The city leases the Inner Harbor land occupied by the pavilions to Ashkenazy and has pressed the owners in recent years to make improvements. As part of a lease agreement signed in 2012, the city required the owners to undertake a significant capital improvement plan within three years, such as upgrades to the awnings, lighting and street landscaping.

The plan presented Thursday by Seattle-based architects from MG2 proposes eliminating the interior mall in the Pratt Street pavilion and allowing the public to enter stores from both sides of the building. Changes to the Light Street pavilion are more constrained by existing tenant

agreements, said Mark Taylor, associate principal at MG2.

A preliminary landscaping plan showed more trees and a bike path.

The two proposed rooftop Harborplace signs, which have yet to be designed, would brand the properties on a much "grander scale" and recall other large-scale signs such as the Domino Sugars logo, Taylor said.

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"What we're thinking is Opening Day baseball, 6 o'clock news, they're hovering over, what are they going to show that's quintessential Baltimore?" he said. "This is the heart of Baltimore. That's what we're trying to communicate."

Members of the city's Urban Design and Architecture Review Panel said they like the idea of the signs, but urged the architects to consider bolder moves — cutting one pavilion in half to increase access to the water, for example — if they want to really remake the properties.

"Everything you're presenting today is totally fine," said panelist Pavlina Ilieva. "It's all good, but I'm starting to question whether it actually meets the goals that you set for the project. ... It really depends on how ambitious you are."

Harborplace's pavilions, developed by the Rouse Co., helped spur the redevelopment of Baltimore's waterfront upon opening in 1980, despite being initially controversial because some favored a waterfront park. In more recent years, critics have focused on the faded infrastructure, the presence of chain restaurants and large trash compactor on the street.

Waterfront Partnership President Laurie Schwartz said she believes Ashkenazy's plan is a good start. Her organization is also working on plans for the amphitheater and other landscaping.

"Harborplace really in the redevelopment of the Inner Harbor set Baltimore on a whole new trajectory for growth," she said. "It's so important now to be coming back to the origin ... and to make sure we've got a strong core. I think the investment and plan Ashkenazy [presented] is really going to help celebrate the Inner Harbor again."

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