

Honoring black baseball pioneers

Our view: A new Negro league baseball museum could revitalize Pennsylvania Ave.

Baltimore, long a center of African-American culture on the East Coast, is a natural home for the region's first Negro league baseball museum, and from a historical perspective, the Pennsylvania Avenue corridor is the perfect place to put it. The area was the center of a lively black arts and entertainment scene in Baltimore for decades, and a \$4.1 million plan moving forward with the city's blessing calls for the museum to be built next to a refurbished Sphinx Club, the legendary nightclub that once hosted such celebrated jazz artists as Billie Holiday and Cab Calloway.

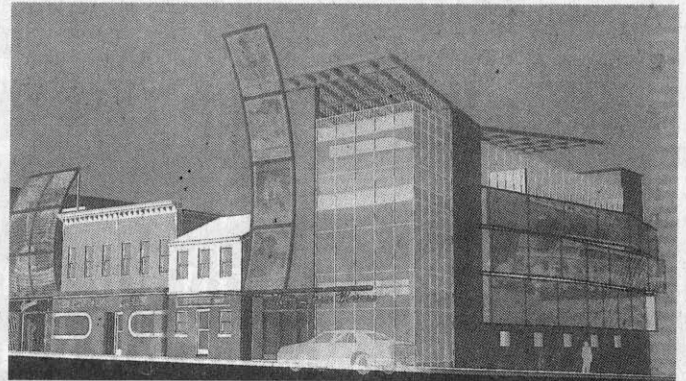
We have to wonder, though, whether the proposed location isn't something of a risk from a marketing standpoint. Much of the area was destroyed during the riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, and the neighborhood has never fully recovered. During the 1980s it fell into further disarray with the arrival of the crack cocaine epidemic, which brought drug dealing, prostitution and violent crime to its streets, and with them blight and neglect.

Dedicated members of the community have been working to revitalize the Pennsylvania Avenue corridor, but their efforts remain very much a work in progress. The area was one of the city's hardest hit by the recession, and it may be years before things begin to turn around.

A Negro league museum located downtown, near Camden Yards, the Sports Legends Museum and the Babe Ruth Birthplace & Museum, would be a natural as a way of tying the achievement of the nation's great early black ballplayers to the larger history of America's favorite pastime, both geographically and thematically. We have little doubt a museum situated there would be a smash hit from the start that would attract flocks of tourists from around the region.

But getting those fans up to Pennsylvania Avenue is going to take enterprise as well as some extremely clever marketing. It would be a shame if the Negro league museum ended up in the same situation as Baltimore's Great Blacks in Wax Museum on East North Avenue, which has a fabulous collection of black history artifacts and documents but still struggles to attract tourists away from the Inner Harbor.

Still, plans for the new museum, slated to open in 2011, represent one of the most hopeful developments in years for residents of the Pennsylvania Avenue corridor, and if it catches on, the project could provide the seed around which further revitalization efforts in the area can take root. That, along with the recent reforms in Baltimore's live music regulations aimed at



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Developers want to turn the Sphinx Club into a restaurant and build a Negro league baseball museum next door, as pictured in this artist's rendering.

encouraging a more lively night life around town, could help restore the area to its former glory.

But for that to happen, the city must expand its commitment to the area by improving shuttle bus access from downtown and making parking available. It should also enlist marketing partners such as the Orioles, the Maryland Historical Society, the Baltimore Visitors Center, the Reginal F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African-American History and Culture, and others. With some help, the museum can be another showpiece for Baltimore and an anchor for a redevelopment that's long overdue.



Readers respond

There is no reason why the Pennsylvania Avenue corridor can't come alive as a national showcase for African-American entrepreneurialism, and the Negro Baseball League museum would be a great place to start.

Sean Tully

Great idea, wrong location. Pennsylvania Avenue is just too dangerous to lure tourists.

Jay

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