

BUSINESS MARYLAND



ARCHPLAN INC. RENDERING

An architect's rendering shows the proposed Negro Leagues baseball museum on the far right and the restored Sphinx Club in the two buildings to the left.

Negro League baseball museum eyed for city

Historic Sphinx Club on Pennsylvania Ave., other properties would be redeveloped

By Edward Gunts
ED.GUNTS@BALTSUN.COM

Baltimore would become home to the first East Coast museum devoted to Negro League baseball teams and players, under a \$4.1 million plan that has been approved by the Dixon administration.

The plan calls for redeveloping Pennsylvania Avenue's historic Sphinx Club and adjacent properties with a sports-themed museum, entertainment and dining complex designed to draw tourists and help rejuvenate the corridor.

The largest part of the project would be a three-story BALL House museum, which stands for Black Athletes and Lost Legends, at the northeast corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and Bloom Street. The museum would contain displays about Negro League teams that played before major league baseball admitted African-Americans, including the Baltimore Elite Giants, as well as interactive exhibits such as a batting cage.

The museum would be connected to the Negro League Cafe at the Sphinx Club, a sports bar, restaurant and performance venue that would be created inside the once-vibrant Sphinx Club at 2105-07 Pennsylvania Ave. Planned by restaurateur Donald Curry, the cafe would feature autographed baseballs, photos and related Negro League memorabilia and host performances by jazz musicians and other entertainers.

Additional elements of the project, designed by Klaus Philipsen of ArchPlan Inc., would be "incubator" office space for start-up companies and an outdoor dining area. The Sphinx Club's facade would be restored to its 1940s appearance, while the 5,375-square-foot museum would be housed in a new structure designed to stand out from its neighbors.

The proposal was submitted this fall by a group led by the Druid Heights Community Development Corp., a nonprofit that works to revitalize communities along Pennsylvania Avenue. Other team members include Curry, who ran a Negro League-themed cafe and bar in Chicago's Bronzeville district for five years; the Pennsylvania Avenue Redevelopment Collaborative; and the Black Athletes and Lost Legends Association Inc., a Maryland-based nonprofit that collects and exhibits artifacts related to Negro League baseball. The project is expected to create the equivalent of 37 full-time jobs.

"This is a museum that is going to hold some incredible history," said David Thomas, vice president and communications director for the BALL Association.



BALTIMORE SUN GRAPHIC

"This will be the first of its kind on the East Coast. There is a Negro League Museum in Kansas City, Mo., but there is nothing like this one. ... It will be a destination that will 'draw people into the city.'"

"It's ... a wonderful jumping-off point for the revitalization of Pennsylvania Avenue," said Linda Richardson, executive director of the development collaborative.

Pennsylvania Avenue was a hub of African-American entertainment in Baltimore from the 1920s until the late 1960s, when much of the area was destroyed by rioters. The private Sphinx Club, open from 1946 to 1992, was known for after-show parties with jazz musicians and other luminaries, including Billie Holiday and Cab Calloway.

The city owns the Sphinx Club, which is vacant, and adjoining property at 2101-03 and 2109-11 Pennsylvania Ave. On behalf of the city, the Baltimore Development Corp. and its Main Streets Program sought proposals in July and received one response, the plan for the sports-themed development. The BDC's board recommended to Mayor Sheila Dixon this fall that the city enter into an "exclusive negotiating privilege" period with the developers, to give them 90 days to finalize plans for the project, and the mayor approved the recommendation this month. The negotiating period is expected to begin shortly.

Many of the museum's artifacts will come from the collection of Ray Banks, a Negro League historian who founded the BALL Association in 2008, and the late Hubert "Bert" Simmons, a former Negro League player who established the Hubert Simmons Negro League Baseball Museum



BALTIMORE DEVELOPMENT CORP. PHOTO
The Sphinx Club closed in 1992 and is now city-owned property.

of Maryland. BALL's collection, considered one of the largest assemblages of Negro League memorabilia in the country, has been featured in a traveling exhibit that has gone to schools, libraries and stadiums throughout the Mid-Atlantic.

Kelly Little, executive director of the Druid Heights CDC, said his group hopes to begin construction next year and open the museum by late 2011. He said the CDC has a line of credit for community development from State Farm Insurance Co. that can be used for the project and that he plans to pursue other funding sources, such as tax credits for preservation of the Sphinx Club. It also has asked that the city donate the Pennsylvania Avenue properties as an "in kind" contribution.

In addition, the BALL museum group has its own board of directors and fundraising capabilities, and Curry said he plans to use funds he received after he was forced to close his Chicago restaurant when the city moved to acquire his property this year as part of its bid for the 2016 Olympic Games.

Thomas said Pennsylvania Avenue is the "perfect location" for the museum because the corridor has long been a center of African-American history, and the reborn Sphinx Club and additions would make a strong attraction there and help trigger more development.

The Negro Leagues were active from the 1920s to the 1960s. Although the museum will tell visitors about life on the Negro League teams, Thomas said, it's also intended to provide inspiration for visitors.

Athletes in the Negro Leagues "played for the love of the game," not big salaries, he said. "You can't find a more driven bunch of people. The museum will be about the Negro League. But it's also about inspiring people to go beyond the obstacles that face them ... because that is what these Negro League players did."

Condo sale breaks record

Ritz-Carlton penthouse goes for \$12.6 million; largest sale in area

By Jamie Smith Hopkins
JAMIE.SMITH.HOPKINS@BALTSUN.COM

The developer of the Ritz-Carlton Residences said it sold a huge penthouse unit for \$12.6 million Wednesday, an important deal for the struggling Inner Harbor project — and one that smashes previous records for Baltimore condo sales.

The nearly 12,000-square-foot residence was originally three separate penthouses, combined by developer RXR Realty at the buyer's request. RXR declined to name the purchaser.

"It's somebody local and it's a name that you'd recognize," said Mitchell Hochberg, RXR's managing director of residential and hospitality.

The Daily Record reported on its Web site Wednesday that novelist Tom Clancy is the purchaser.

Buyers have settled on 23 of the 190 condos since the Ritz-Carlton opened a year and a half ago. The project, which is managed by the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Co. and has a concierge, indoor pool, maid service and spa, has suffered from the economic difficulties buffeting the housing market in general and luxury properties in particular. But Hochberg said he sees Wednesday's sale as a statement about "the vitality of the project and probably of the market in Baltimore."

"We think it's a signal of the value and of increased interest at the very high end of the market," he said.

The penthouse has four bedrooms, six balconies with harbor views and 6½ bathrooms. Its features include a private theater and three "semi-private" elevators, and it's as big as five typical new U.S. houses.

The Greater Baltimore Board of Realtors, searching through the sales history on the multiple-listing service, said it could find no city condo deal that comes close. The previous high point was just under \$2.5 million last year — for another Ritz-Carlton condo.

Agents said it struck them as a record price for any Baltimore house.

"In my 25 years in the business, I've never seen a sale this large for residential property," said Cindy Conklin, a partner at Yerman, Witman, Gaines & Conklin Realty, who represented the developer during pre-construction but is no longer involved in the project. "It's a wonderful thing for the city of Baltimore."

The sale set agents buzzing — and trying to guess the buyer. "I don't think there's many local people in Baltimore that have that kind of money," said Barry R. Glazer, broker at Century 21 Downtown.

Margaret Rome, an agent with Home Rome Realty in Baltimore, was amazed by both the size and price. The market isn't easy for any condo, let alone penthouse condos, she said. She's representing sellers of a penthouse unit in Inner Harbor East who bought for \$750,000 but have had to drop the listing price to \$499,000.

"People who move to a condo are moving from [a] big house, normally, and if they're not able to sell the house, the condo is not something they have to have right away," Rome said.

The Ritz-Carlton's units start in the mid-\$600,000s. Much of the looking has been in the \$900,000 to \$1 million range, said Joseph Graziose, the company's senior vice president.