

URBAN LAND – JUNE 2004

THE NEW WEST SIDE STORY

By Richard T. Burns

All-but-forgotten department stores, financial institutions, and office buildings from the end of the 19th century are once again contributing to an urban district on Baltimore's West Side – this time housing city residents, university staff and students, and new retailers and offices.

The West Side initiative, one of the most ambitious plans for revitalization of downtown Baltimore since redevelopment of the Inner Harbor three decades earlier, has as its goal to revitalize what was once a single-use, commercial area into a multiuse urban neighborhood.

The city's interest, couples with initial and continued investment of private stakeholders has attracted other developers and the infusion of more than \$500 million since the city council adopted a strategic plan in 1999, at least \$300 million more in new development is on the drawing board.

Baltimore's historic retail district is a 24-block area within the roughly 100-block West Side. The plan for the 450-acre site recommends adaptive use of more than 250 historic structures; 2,400 residential units; 700,000 square feet of higher education and medical system facilities; 400,000 square feet of office space; 250,000 square feet of retail and entertainment space; and 850-room convention headquarters hotel; and public transportation, open space, infrastructure, and streetscape improvements.

The plan calls for specific catalyst projects in main locations:

The Hippodrome Theater. The opening of the renovated Hippodrome Theater this past February represented a milestone in the West Side's transformation. The strategic plan identified the potential to restore the historic vaudeville theater and adjacent bank buildings on Eutaw Street into the France-Merrick Performing Arts Center. The \$67 million, 2,220-seat theater has been restored to its original grandeur and is expected to draw more than 400,000 visitors per year.

The Centerpoint. The entire block across from the Hippodrome is being converted into a mixed-use residential development by Bank of America Corporation and the Harold A. Dawson Company of Atlanta. The Centerpoint project includes the adaptive use of the historic Town Theater, the old Paramount Hotel, and several historic cast iron buildings, together with new selective infill development. In response to the strategic plan's recommendations, the city of Baltimore acquired the block, relocated existing businesses (some within the new development), selected the developers through a public request for proposals process, and approved a 20-year PILOT (payment in lieu of taxes) tax credit program for the project. The \$60 million mixed-use development began construction in March 2003 and is currently pre-leasing the more than 400 luxury rental units expected to be ready for occupancy before the end of the year.



The Stewart's Building. The adaptive use of the former Stewart's Department Stores, which sat vacant for 20 years, is gaining prominence, not just as an important project on the West Side, but also as an environmentally friendly endeavor. The development won a Preservation Project Award from the Maryland Historical Trust and has been certified under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program. The \$24 million renovation, funded by the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, blended the historic preservation and sustainable design in creating 250,000 square feet of Class A research, academic, technology, and telecommunications, offices, plus 30,000 square feet of ground level, neighborhood oriented retail space to support area residents, office workers, and visitors.

The Zenith. Soaring above the busy intersection of Pratt and Paca streets, the Zenith will welcome visitors and residents to the West Side. The 22-story glass curtain wall and masonry tower, scheduled to open in summer 2005, will house 200 luxury rental apartments, a 253-space parking garage, and a 24-hour ground-floor restaurant.