

**Developer buying prime Inner Harbor site
Pa. company scouting potential uses, designs for Light Street parking lot
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A Philadelphia-based developer of mixed-use projects is buying one of the last undeveloped parcels in Baltimore's Inner Harbor, considered among the city's premier development sites.

ARC Wheeler Group has signed a contract to purchase the nearly 2-acre site on Light Street, near the Harbor Court Hotel, the Baltimore Convention Center and Camden Yards. The property's owner, Central Parking Corp., operates a parking lot on the site where a McCormick & Co. Inc. spice plant once stood.

ARC Wheeler is looking into potential uses and designs for a project and expects to unveil plans this summer, Robert Ambrosi, a partner in ARC Wheeler, said yesterday.

"What we plan to do there will be something world class," probably involving a mix of uses, Ambrosi said during a visit to the Inner Harbor to meet with architectural planners and engineers. "People are gravitating back to the cities again to be part of culture, art, music, and the Inner Harbor offers all of that."

Biff Porter, senior vice president of real estate for Nashville, Tenn.-based Central Parking, confirmed yesterday that the property is under contract to ARC Wheeler, but he said he could not disclose the purchase price or comment on when the sale will close.

The Light Street site is one of two undeveloped sites in the Inner Harbor core. It has been used as a 250-car parking lot since the McCormick factory was razed in 1988, and has long been considered for a hotel or mixed-use development. The other undeveloped site, the former News American site on Pratt Street, is being considered for an apartment building.

Industry experts said the site would be appropriate for a project on the scale of the Renaissance Hotel and Gallery mall downtown, which includes a hotel, offices and shops. Others said housing - possibly condominiums - would be viable in a housing market where demand has outstripped supply and driven up home values.

"It's the gateway to the Inner Harbor from Conway [Street], as well as the gateway to Camden Yards from Light Street," said Rich Burns, a partner in Baltimore-based Design Collective architecture firm, which worked on the Inner Harbor master plan. "I would hope that any development there would be a lively mixed-use project with good active ground-level retail and entertainment uses."

The Light Street project would be the first in Baltimore for ARC Wheeler, a joint venture of Clifton, N.J.-based ARC Properties and Philadelphia-based Wheeler Group.

ARC Wheeler is building a 33-story luxury condo tower in the Rittenhouse Square section of Philadelphia. It is also in the early stages of developing a 400-acre mixed-use project in Stafford County, Va., that will include housing, a hotel, offices and industrial space.

Under the urban renewal plan governing the Inner Harbor, a developer could build about 1 million square feet of space and a range of uses, including a hotel, offices, shops, housing and garage parking, said M.J. "Jay" Brodie, president of Baltimore Development Corp.

Brodie said he has met with representatives of ARC Wheeler.

"They said they would be examining all of those uses to see what's feasible and desirable," Brodie said. "They need to come back with a use or mixture of uses that they would think is appropriate and works both architecturally and economically. They have a range of possibilities that they could consider."

Brodie said he and others at BDC encouraged the developers to consider including ground-floor retail to lend a sense of liveliness at the street level.

He said downtown would not be able to support a hotel aimed at convention business in light of the city's plans to build a 750-room convention headquarters hotel adjacent to the Convention Center. Brodie also does not see a market for additional Class A office space because of several large office vacancies downtown.

Some consider the site one of the city's best development sites.

"It's right on the water, it's right off the interstate and it's surrounded by all of the Inner Harbor's premium development projects," said J. Joseph Clarke of J.J. Clarke Enterprises Inc., which is working on two

hotel projects in the city, including one on Light Street. "It's on what, in effect, is the main drag in Baltimore. Light Street is our Main Street today."

Development would be subject to city Planning Commission review and must meet the urban renewal plan standards.