

Harbor may get tallest building

\$300 million project has hotel, condos, spa

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A Philadelphia developer plans to build what would be the tallest tower in Baltimore on one of the last undeveloped parcels along the [Inner Harbor](#), a multimillion-dollar project to include luxury condominiums, a boutique hotel and retailers such as a spa and a gourmet grocer.

ARC Wheeler Group, a joint venture of Clifton, N.J.-based ARC Properties and Philadelphia-based Wheeler Group, is scheduled to make its first formal presentation of plans for the Light Street tower Feb. 16, when the project will go before the city's Urban Design and Architecture Review Panel.

Company representatives said yesterday that the developer hopes to close on the 2-acre site, in a prime location between the Hyatt Regency and Harbor Court hotels, within two months and begin construction this summer, with completion by 2009. The site, once home to a McCormick & Co. spice plant, is now a parking lot operated by its owner, Central Parking Corp.

The developer envisions a tall, slim tower, with 200 to 250 luxury condominiums, shops and a hotel that could compete on a national level as destination lodging. Though it has not been determined how tall it would be, the developer expects it to soar higher than any other building downtown, said Jon Laria, an attorney at Ballard, Spahr, who is representing ARC Wheeler. At a projected 1.2 million square feet, the project would dwarf nearby structures.

The 529-foot, 35-story Legg Mason Building at 100 Light St. is the city's tallest, followed closely by the art deco Bank of America building at 10 Light St. Along the [Inner Harbor](#), the T. Rowe Price headquarters at 100 E. Pratt St. has the most space, with about 656,000 rentable square feet.

The nine-story Montgomery Park, the sprawling, redeveloped Montgomery Ward catalog warehouse in Southwest Baltimore, is the city's largest, with 1.194 million square feet.

An 'elegant building' The ARC Wheeler project will be designed by New York architect Robert A.M. Stern and probably will be tall and slim as opposed to shorter and broader, Laria said.

"That's what the harbor deserves," he said. "It will be a very elegant building." Laria said ARC Wheeler has strong relationships in the financial community and is confident it would get funding for the project.

A spokesman for Mayor Martin O'Malley said the project, with an estimated cost of about \$300 million, would represent a huge private investment in the downtown.

"We would welcome that kind of private development on a long-vacant piece of land," Rick Abbruzzese said yesterday. But he cautioned that the project, which is at a preliminary stage, would undergo thorough review during the design and approval process.

M.J. "Jay" Brodie, president of the Baltimore Development Corp., who met with representatives of ARC Wheeler last summer after they signed the contract to buy the property, declined to comment on the project yesterday.

Brodie has said previously that under the urban renewal plan governing the [Inner Harbor](#), a developer could build about 1 million square feet of space for a range of uses, including a hotel, offices, shops, housing and a garage. He and others at the BDC encouraged the developer to consider including ground-floor retail space to lend liveliness at street level.

Kirby Fowler, president of the Downtown Partnership, said the developer's plans mesh with the goal of creating a 24-hour downtown.

"Every project we've been working on in the last two years has been a mixed-use project, and we continue to encourage developers to have mixed-use projects," Fowler said. "I feel like we've crossed an important threshold in downtown, where more and more people will begin to move in, and it will feed on itself.

"One of the benefits of allowing for greater height is the possibility of getting some high-quality architecture, and I believe this project could deliver on that potential," Fowler said.

Baltimore is primed for an upscale, signature project as waterfront condo development is booming and hotel/condo projects by Ritz Carlton and Four Seasons are under development, Laria said.

"There is room in this market for all of these projects," he said. "The idea that you could have projects of this prominence, a Ritz and a Four Seasons, indicates that Baltimore is ready for this quality of development. We think it's here."

Laria said market studies show a deep market for luxury condos. "It's a reflection on Baltimore as a place to live, and on people's willingness to come here and be part of the city," he said. "The idea is to create an extremely upscale condo environment with all those other services."

ARC Wheeler is in discussions with several hotel operators. Laria said the developer envisions a destination hotel that could compete nationally with luxury hotels in other cities.

"It would have a strong urban feel and is a product that doesn't exist in Baltimore today," he said.

The developer is studying the market to determine the best mix and type of retailers, which would probably be a mix of national and local stores, Laria said.

"We have to make sure the retail makes sense to support the uses on the site as well as to provide the amenities" for the condo residents and hotel guests, he said.

A few hurdles Though zoning allows commercial uses, the city's planning commission must approve the design. After the nine-story McCormick building was razed in 1989, the city agreed to allow a new building to rise higher there, as long as it met other restrictions on the site, including a standard known as "floor area ratio."

The former McCormick site, similar to many commercial properties in Baltimore's central business district, has a floor area ratio of 14-to-1, which means a structure may rise 14 stories if the entire lot is covered, or 28 stories if 50 percent of the lot is covered, or a variation on that formula.

As a result, city planners say, the maximum allowable height of a replacement building on the McCormick site would depend on the lot coverage, the number of square feet proposed and other factors. The city's Board of Municipal and Zoning Appeals can vote to waive the restriction.

Requirements in the [Inner Harbor](#) West urban renewal plan have led to buildings of similar height facing the [Inner Harbor](#) along Pratt and Light streets.

"Any way you look at it, it's probably true that what the market can absorb in the uses they put on the project will govern the height more than the zoning does," said Martin Millspaugh, a former chief executive of the BDC's predecessor, the Charles Center - [Inner Harbor](#) Management, which oversaw early [Inner Harbor](#) redevelopment.

A new building on the McCormick site would be subject to setbacks established in the [Inner Harbor](#) West urban renewal plan and subsequent amendments. Under the restrictions, the building would have to be set back from Light Street, rather than rise along the property line.