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4 development teams to vie for arena project

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Four development teams will compete to build a sports and entertainment venue to replace Baltimore's aging 1st Mariner Arena, with their proposals envisioning added twists such as a seven-screen movie theater, a hotel, concert hall, offices or street-level shops, city officials said yesterday.

The proposals unveiled yesterday were submitted in response to an August request for bids.

State and city leaders want to tear down the 46-year-old arena and replace it with a larger, 18,500-seat venue that could draw big concerts and acts, and potentially attract a professional basketball or hockey team.

The city expects to make a decision about whether to select one of the four teams by mid-2009, said M.J. "Jay" Brodie, president of the Baltimore Development Corp. An advisory panel of state and city officials will review the proposals.

Still to be determined is how much of the project - expected to cost \$300 million for the arena alone - would be publicly financed, Brodie said.

"We said we wanted maximum private financing, and there are a lot of ideas floating out there," he said. "The driving force here is to get a top-quality arena for Baltimore City and the region and state. We encouraged people to be creative and think about mixed use."

Each proposal calls for an 18,500-seat arena on 1st Mariner's West Baltimore Street site on the city's west side, near the Inner Harbor. And each team includes a company that would operate the arena for the city. But proposals differ in the mix of added uses.

The plan from Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse includes two public parks - one atop the arena - and a 300-room hotel.

"We've tried to present a design approach that is very contemporary and looks like a civic building," said Janet Marie Smith, a vice president for planning for Struever Bros.

The complex would be "bright and energetic," she said, and would include street-level retail space. "The intent is for the building to be alive 365 days of the year."

Under the Struever plan, the arena's upper levels could be closed for smaller events so the facility does not "feel empty," she said. The Struever team includes Live Nation, a national concert promotion firm. ESmith Legacy Inc., which includes ESmith Legacy and Dallas-based Garfield Traub Development as the developers, would incorporate a seven-screen movie theater, a 1,000-seat concert venue, 20,000 square feet of shops and a garage. The team would include AEG as arena operator.

"We think [the proposal] is reflective of the city's master plan and reflective of the west-side renaissance," said Vernon Marrow, chief operating officer of ESmith, which has offices in Baltimore, Philadelphia and Dallas and includes as one of its principals Emmitt Smith, the former Dallas Cowboys running back. "It's complementary to other [development] taking place over the last several years, from the Hippodrome to development at Hopkins Place."

A third proposal, by The Arena Development Group, calls for a garage as well as 100,000 square feet of shops. The team includes A&R Development, J Street Development and Accent Development Co. as developers and SMG, the current arena operator, as operator-promoter. Sean MacCarthy of Accent declined to comment.

And in a fourth plan, Cormony Development is proposing a 400-room hotel, 240,000 square feet of offices, up to 20,000 square feet of shops and a garage. The team includes Cormony Development, which is building the Gateway South development of office, retail and sports-themed entertainment south of M&T Bank Stadium, and Harrison Development as developers, and either AEG or SMG as operator. A Cormony representative could not be reached for comment yesterday.

The city said it expects to choose next month from among four teams of consultants to help with financing.

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