

## Real Estate

### A new Chinatown for Baltimore?

ROBBIE WHELAN  
Daily Record Business Writer  
February 11, 2008 6:48 PM

When most people look at the area surrounding the intersection of North Charles Street and North Avenue, they see vacant row houses, a few large condemned buildings, a fried chicken restaurant and cracked, buckling pavement.

When Tony Cheng looked at it, he saw Chinatown.

The Washington-based restaurateur and businessman, who once owned a restaurant near Mount Vernon Place, has been buying up property in the Station North area of the city with the intention of attracting Chinese and other Asian business owners to a redeveloped arts and entertainment district.

Cheng, who owns two Chinese restaurants in Washington, has purchased 10 properties so far, according to his Annapolis-based attorney, Dennis McCoy.

The list includes the former Bank of America building on the corner of North Avenue and North Charles, an ornate stone structure that once housed state Sen. Catherine Pugh's campaign headquarters.

McCoy declined say how much Cheng has paid, but according to tax records, the properties are worth at least \$2 million. And that does not include several parking lots that Cheng has also acquired.

"Mr. Cheng has decided to invest a not inconsiderable amount of money in the area," McCoy said. "He has a number of projects in mind, including the development of an Asian community expanded beyond the small Korean community that is already there, and perhaps to establish more of a Chinatown than Baltimore has had for some time."

In December, Cheng's son, Anthony Cheng Jr., opened MVP Bus, a "Chinatown bus" service that offers discounted rates between Baltimore, New York and Washington, in the Hyundai Plaza building at 1910 N. Charles St.

Buses bound for New York and Washington will leave from the parking lot facing the ticket office, meaning that if Cheng's plans go through, Baltimore's Chinatown would be directly connected to those of Washington and New York.

Most Chinatown bus lines that pass through Baltimore now stop at the O'Donnell Street Travel Plaza in Southeast Baltimore.

The bus station shares the building with a Korean takeout restaurant, but Cheng plans to move a new, white tablecloth Chinese restaurant, called Tony Cheng's, to the site.

Other plans include the conversion of the Bruning paint supplies store at 2011 Maryland Ave. into an art gallery, several more Chinese restaurants and an Asian grocery store.

Cheng's vision is meant to dovetail with the nearby development of the Station North Arts District.

"What I understand he's thinking about is not so much a community that focuses on Chinese customers, but Chinese merchants," McCoy said. "Since this is an arts and entertainment district, I think he has in mind developing some Chinese restaurants, some art galleries that have a Chinese flavor, and drawing in some other types of art businesses ... and maybe blending in some high-tech startup businesses."

The former Bank of America processing center, a hulking, six-story concrete structure at North Charles and 21st streets, could house "an incubator for art-type businesses, or a place that would facilitate hi-tech or biotech type business in an artistic setting," McCoy said.



Paul Dombrowski, the Baltimore Development Corp.'s project manager for Station North, said Cheng's project would help encourage reinvestment in a neighborhood that had fallen prey to vacancy and neglect, but that in the last two or three years has begun to attract attention for developers.

"We have to remember that there is already a really strong Asian community within that area," he said. "To my knowledge, most of that Asian heritage is Korean, but we would like to encourage development any way we can ... to establish a new identity."

Kapyoung Park, president of the Korean Liquor and Grocery Store Association of Maryland, said there are about 20 Korean-owned businesses, including at least five restaurants, in the immediate area, and about 500 Korean-owned businesses in Baltimore.

"I think [a Chinatown] would be helpful because we can get more attention from the local government if we're all in the same area," he said. "But when they say they're going to create a Chinatown, where are the business owners going to come from?"

Cheng's son said his father has been courting Chinese business owners from as far away as New York and Virginia, but that they will reach out to local Korean-American business owners as well.

"A lot of the Chinese he's talking to are immigrants and they need a place to plop their feet down, and my father thinks that Baltimore is a hidden gem," he said. "Development is creeping up at a snail's pace and coming to a dead stop at North Avenue. ... We need to see that neighborhood pop a little bit."