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A new Port Covington

Homes, shops, even a trolley line envisioned

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Developer Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse hopes to transform 17 acres in South Baltimore's Port Covington into a community that could include homes, shops and offices, along with a promenade and even a trolley.

Struever Bros., working with the owner of the adjacent Tidewater Yacht Service Center, envisions a 2 million-square-foot development with 2,010 housing units, some of which could be built on reconstructed piers.

Early concept plans, presented yesterday to the city's Urban Design and Architecture Review Panel, shows three residential towers, one as tall as 38 stories, as well as smaller housing units that wrap around parking garages. The project also includes retail outlets on the street level and a waterfront promenade for pedestrian and recreational use. The yacht service center, with its 400-slip marina, would remain.

The developer also re-imagines Cromwell Street as a four-lane boulevard with parking on both sides and a median for a transit line, possibly a trolley.

"We believe Port Covington is an absolute jewel for Baltimore's future and a key to revitalization," said Tim Pula, senior development director at Struever Bros. "Port Covington is a magical site in Baltimore."

City officials have been pushing to transform vacant or unused swaths of the formerly industrial Middle Branch of the Patapsco River. A master plan for the Middle Branch, adopted late last year by the city's Planning Commission, designated Port Covington as a high-density development area. Projects along the Middle Branch include a massive mixed-use redevelopment of the Westport waterfront, on the opposite side of the water, with the first buildings to get under way next year.

Struever Bros. owns about 10 acres at Port Covington, while Tidewater's owner Bob Brandon owns 7 acres south of Cromwell Street and east of a faltering shopping center where a Sam's Club recently closed and a Wal-Mart remains.

Other property owners at Port Covington include Locke Insulators Inc., a manufacturer of porcelain electrical insulators; Tribune Co., which owns the 60-acre site of the Baltimore Sun's printing plant, and Finmarc Management and Kodiak Properties LLC, which is seeking to redevelop the shopping center.

Finmarc and Kodiak hope to remake their 56-acre retail site into a \$2 billion Harbor East-style

community and want to work with adjoining property owners on a cooperative plan.

Marc F. Solomon, a Finmarc principal, said yesterday that redevelopment at the Port Covington site should be reviewed comprehensively "as opposed to piecemeal."

"It's such a wonderful opportunity to have the premiere development in the East Coast," Solomon said.

Struever Bros. previously had been in talks with Finmarc and Kodiak about possibly forming a joint venture or putting together a combined master plan, Pula said. The Baltimore developer plans to meet with the owners of the shopping center possibly Monday, he said, noting that it considered how its project would fit in with the rest of the Port Covington site.

Members of the urban design panel expressed support for some ideas, including reconfiguring Cromwell Street, but they encouraged Struever Bros. to come up with alternative plans with less density and work with other property owners.

Struever Bros. did not give a timeline for its project, saying it largely depends on a rebound in the real estate and credit markets. The amount of development and mix of uses would be dictated by the market, Pula said.

"There is no immediate plan to put a shovel in the ground," Pula said in an interview. "We're in a down cycle of the real estate market. It's not necessarily the time to break ground on this type of stuff. ... We're trying to get approval for the overall structure of something that could come to fruition in the future."

Several development projects in the city are in limbo or have been recast amid the nationwide housing slump and economic slowdown, including a Struever plan for a luxury condo building in Charles Village, which is on hold and likely to switch to apartments.

The Port Covington site is part of a 130-acre parcel formerly owned by CSX and previously used as a rail yard by Western Maryland Railway.

In the mid-1980s, the city had envisioned the area as a future home to about 3 million square feet of offices, with a hotel and some retail. But the office market faltered, and those plans never materialized. About 60 acres were subsequently sold for *The Sun's* printing plant, which opened in 1992.

The city is looking at options for mass transit ranging from a trolley to a water taxi service in the area to handle growth and connect with downtown.

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