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## Local

Hope alive in South Baltimore

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### **BALTIMORE -**

From the north side of Cherry Hill, in South Baltimore, Alvin "Skip" Lee gazes across the Middle Branch of the Patapsco River, where the future seems to be arriving at last.

He's waited a long time, and heard a lot of talk, but maybe the real thing's finally coming along.

Lee's past 60 now and still living in the modest Cherry Hill row house where he grew up and made a big name for himself when he and Ernie Torain were carrying the football as Poly's fabled Gold Dust Twins in the early 1960s.

Lee still looks as if he could flatten a linebacker if the spirit moved him.

Or light a little fire under a real estate developer.

We now find ourselves one week away from election day in Baltimore City.

Down in this part of South Baltimore, below the Hanover Street Bridge in neighborhoods such as Cherry Hill and nearby Westport, they've watched a succession of mayors and council members come and go without an ounce of impact on their communities.

You can see the downtown skyline from here, but the nearby neighborhoods have always felt isolated from the action.

Barely a mile from the glittery Inner Harbor, it feels like the distant side of the moon.

Poverty lingers through the generations, housing's often decayed, drug abuse a longtime depressant.

Now, as Lee looks out from a hill high atop the Patapsco, he sees change in the air.

Here's a guy who left Poly and played for Maryland.

He's been a successful businessman.

He's been a community activist.

He's worked hard to get college scholarships for a lot of minority students.

But one constant in his life has been the scruffy state of this section of South Baltimore, which finally seems poised to change.

Riding through Cherry Hill and Westport, Lee runs his hands over a 102-page Middle Branch Master Plan, issued this summer by the city's Department of Planning.

It looks like something Lee's awaited for a lifetime.

It's what the report calls "major rebirth. ... The Middle Branch has not experienced this many opportunities for change since the 1800s," a chance to "create a new waterfront community that is completely unique from the Inner Harbor, yet equally as vital to the City of Baltimore and the region."

Much of this has been written about during the past year or so – the prospect of high-end housing and commercial development instead of outdated industry, water pollution and trash – but much of it is perceived by suspicious residents as projects not quite touching their lives.

As Lee rides through nearby Westport, for example, they're shooting scenes for HBO's "The Wire."

It's art imitating life imitating hell.

You couldn't build a soundstage anywhere to resemble surrounding streets in such a state of woe.

As such, they're a mirror image of some of the most troubling history of neighboring Cherry Hill, which tries to recover from decades of drug traffic and housing problems and City Hall neglect.

Time was, you could stroll into the Cherry Hill Shopping Center and make a drug deal in the pool hall – located two doors away from a police community relations center.

That's why the Middle Branch Master Plan is so important.

This isn't just about developing another waterfront delight for the tourist types.

It's about possibilities for Cherry Hill and Westport, as well, and a chance for the longtimers such as Lee, who have hung in through so many tough years, to see the kind of transformations so long overdue.

In Cherry Hill, for example, the master plan calls for new properties within the price range of existing residents.

It calls for upgrading existing infrastructure – roads, storm drains, lights – that is falling apart.

It holds out the promise of new jobs – and job training.

In Westport, it calls for new houses, stores and parks, maybe doubling the number of existing housing units.

It calls for rehab assistance programs to existing property owners, and aid for first-time homebuyers.

It calls for a comprehensive youth center.

It holds out the promise of jobs.

Plans also call for new transportation connections to the two neighborhoods: light rail, new roads, water taxis and shuttle buses.

It sounds quite promising.

One week from election day, with a campaign in which most candidates are hollering about street crime, it's uplifting to slip through long-depressed areas of South Baltimore with a guy like Alvin Lee, to anticipate a healthier future.

And to realize: The city of Baltimore is more than the sum of its crime.

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