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From Wednesday's Sun

BDC entertaining ideas for new arena

Plans include a sports and concert facility to replace 1st Mariner Arena

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Many of the city's most prominent developers propose building Baltimore's new indoor sports and concert arena outside of downtown and pairing the facility with ambitious waterfront projects or struggling areas in need of a boost.

Ed Hale wants the new arena in Canton, near his growing empire. Patrick Turner suggests Westport, where his \$1.4 billion development is under way. Struever Bros. proposes a site north of Penn Station or keeping the current location downtown. Also possible is an 11-acre parcel south of the Orioles and Ravens stadiums, where state lawmakers are considering putting a slots casino.

In all, seven development groups have submitted plans to replace the 45-year-old 1st Mariner Arena, Baltimore Development Corp. officials announced Tuesday, signaling significant interest in developing a new facility to attract minor league sports teams and top-flight artists.

"We need a new arena today," said J. Kirby Fowler Jr., president of the Downtown Partnership and a member of the committee that will review the proposals. "In order for us to compete with other great cities, we need to have an arena that mirrors our ambitions."

The proposals differ most significantly on whether a new arena should be built on the site of the current arena or elsewhere in the city. Building on the present site means the arena would go dark for at least two years, leaving the Baltimore Blast and other acts without a home.

Also unresolved is the size of a new arena. A report commissioned by the Maryland Stadium Authority this year proposed a 15,000- to 16,000-seat arena. That assumes Baltimore will never lure a major league basketball or hockey franchise, which would require at least 17,000 seats.

But several development groups said it would be unwise to close off such options, and they are proposing a major-league-size arena.

All seven proposals, which come from well-known local and national developers, including Hale Properties, Turner Development and Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse, will be reviewed by a panel formed by the Baltimore Development Corp. Many have hired architects well known for their work in sports arena and stadium design, including RTKL Associates and HOK Sport, both of which worked on

Camden Yards.

BDC officials said they hope to have narrowed the list by spring. The state, city and Maryland Stadium Authority would be involved in making a final selection and working out financing. A new arena would cost about \$200 million, funded with a mix of public and private money.

The developers and their proposals include: •Hale Properties LLC and Greenberg Gibbons Commercial Corp. The group proposes a 17,000- to 19,000-seat arena on 28 acres adjacent to the 1st Mariner Bank headquarters in Canton.

Edwin F. Hale Sr., president and chief executive officer of First Mariner Bancorp, said he is negotiating with Exxon to purchase the 28-acre site, which is off Boston Street and close to Interstate 95. The location would make the arena easy to reach from the suburbs, Hale said.

He said building a new arena on the current arena site is unworkable because the Baltimore Blast indoor soccer team, which Hale owns, and other acts would have nowhere to go during construction. "What happens to [the Blast], and what happens to Ringling Bros. and Disney on Ice?" Hale asked. "There is literally no place around here to go. We would just be damaged." •Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse and Capital Venture Group LLC. The group proposes four possible sites for a new arena: the current location, Port Covington, on Eutaw Street near Maryland General Hospital, and the parking lot north of Penn Station.

Struever is most interested in building an arena in or near downtown, taking advantage of transit in place and capitalizing on the city's revitalization. Janet Marie Smith, Struever's vice president of planning and development, said that the current arena location is "ideal," and that an alternative venue could be found for the Blast and other acts during construction.

But if that's unacceptable, she said the Penn Station location is intriguing. It's close to mass transit and the Jones Falls Expressway and could help spur development in that area.

"With the Station North Arts District being as burgeoning and vibrant as it can be, we'd love to be able to fuel that," Smith said. "And whether an arena's the right thing or not, I don't know, but it's one idea."<

The Port Covington location, in an industrial area south of Federal Hill, would allow for development beyond the arena. But Smith said an urban location is more appealing, following the model of Oriole Park. "This city has pioneered the whole movement of putting urban entertainment facilities downtown as part of rejuvenating the city," she said. "It would be such a shame to go against that grain."

The size of the Struever arena is undetermined, but Smith said the group is open to a project in the 17,000- to 19,000-seat range. •Cormony Development LLC, Harrison Development LLC and Team 52 Development LLC. This group is already developing Gateway South, an 11-acre sports- themed project from Russell Street to the Middle Branch waterfront, and proposes putting a new arena there.

The location is close to I-95 and Route 295 and links to the city's football and baseball stadiums, said Samuel Polakoff, managing director of Cormony Development. He plans to break ground next year on Gateway South, which would feature two large office buildings, shops, and a 90,000-square-foot sports complex with playing fields, indoor golf, a fitness center and swim club.

An arena would be a perfect fit, Polakoff said. But the city and state are also considering Gateway South as a potential location for a slots facility, which could complicate an arena proposal. Polakoff said he has

not been involved in any slots discussions and is moving forward with the Gateway South master plan approved in September. •Turner Development Group. The proposal would put a new arena on the northern end of the \$1.4 billion Westport development, also on the Middle Branch of the Patapsco River in South Baltimore. The arena would have its own light rail stop, as well as close access to highways, said Patrick Turner, president of Turner Development Group. He said the arena would enliven the nightlife in Westport, and the development already planned would make the arena "a more exciting place." Westport has been approved to build 3 million square feet of office space, 2,000 residential units, a 500-room hotel and 300,000 square feet of retail.

He said the parking planned for the offices could be used by arena patrons at night. •Arena Development Group LLC. The proposal suggests a new arena west of Lexington Market, in a block occupied by a parking garage. This proposal would also redevelop the current arena site as a mixed-use project with a hotel, retail and office space. The sale of those development rights would help pay for the new arena.

The group has hired the same architect and general contractor that built the MCI Center in the Chinatown neighborhood of Washington and says the revival of that neighborhood is a model for what a new arena could do in the Lexington Market area.

Efforts to reach two other groups -- Pinnacle Properties & Development LLC, Garfield Traub Development LLC, and AEG; and White Rhino Development LLC -- were not successful Tuesday.

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