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BDC seeks 40 acres of South Baltimore land for development

Baltimore Business Journal - by [Daniel J. Sernovitz](#) Staff

Baltimore City's economic development arm is hoping to condemn a large swath of waterfront land in South Baltimore, including three established businesses and several homes, to consolidate the site and sell it to private developers.

The **Baltimore Development Corp.** may consider condemnation or quick-take, a speedier version of condemnation that gives the city near-immediate ownership of the properties, but cannot move without adoption of a Baltimore City Council bill introduced in December granting the BDC the right to pursue those methods.

The city's planning commission -- charged with reviewing all city council bills, considered the plan Thursday evening but delayed action until Feb. 21 because several of the property owners, businesses and nearby residents said they were not given enough time to familiarize themselves with the proposal. Councilman Edward Reisinger and members of the South Baltimore and Sharp Leadenhall community associations also sought more time.

"I think we need to just step back and communicate with some of these property owners," Reisinger said.

The 40-acre site is bounded by the Middle Branch of the Patapsco River to the west and south, Hanover Street to the east, and Interstate 95 to the north.

M.J. "Jay" Brodie, president of the BDC, told the commission he believes the city needs to evolve beyond its industrial past and accept the notion that mixed-use developments are a far more efficient use of the city's waterfront land than what is now in the area.

"This is, in my judgement, one of the most important proposals dealing with the future of economic development of the city to come before this commission," Brodie said. "We can't turn back the clock to where it was. ... The future of this city... is taking former industrial property that is on the waterfront or near the waterfront and converting into mixed-use properties."

Complicating matters, one of the potentially impacted businesses, Atlantic Forest Products LLC, has a contract to sell its 14 acres to **Ruppert Homes**, which wants to develop that land privately and did not learn about the BDC's plans until mid-December. Allied Waste and the **Schuster Concrete Co.** also operate businesses within the project area.

The BDC wants to acquire, combine and sell the land to private developers because it believes the properties are less likely to be developed as a cohesive development based solely on market forces if the properties were to be sold off and built upon individually. Brodie declined to say whether the BDC has a specific developer in mind for the redevelopment. When asked about that by commission member Wilbur E. Cunningham, Brodie said that "You never know."

The property also includes Swann Park, a contaminated city-owned site shut down last year due to contamination issues stemming from its former use as an **Allied Chemical Corp.** manufacturing site. Dusky Holman, an attorney for Ruppert, said the housing developer has submitted a voluntary cleanup plan to the **Maryland Department of the Environment** to clean up Atlantic Forest's land, and planning commission Chairman Peter Auchincloss said he suspects more of the properties the BDC is seeking may also be contaminated with arsenic or other contaminants.

In an interview, Holman said he believes there is already private interest in the area and he does not believe the city needs to step in to entice developers to build there. He said Ruppert has had a contract to buy Atlantic Forest's land since December 2004 but held off closing on the deal because city officials said they wanted City Council to adopt a larger Middle Branch Urban Renewal Plan for the area. That bill, which would have given Ruppert the right to develop homes on the industrially zoned property, died before City Council could act when its last legislative session ended in December. A new version of that bill has not been reintroduced.

Representatives from Owings Mills-based Schuster Concrete said they were not anxious to be relocated either, and owner Daniel Schuster said he does not believe there are any other comparable sites in the city he could move to that would not hurt his company's operations. Schuster employs between 750 and 900 workers and does about \$70 million in Baltimore City projects a year.

"I would ask you to have the courage to look to protect my company and other companies who are vibrant, successful companies, who need to be in close proximity of the city," Schuster said.

While what is now Swann Park could be sold to private developers as part of the proposal, the city council bill requires that 11 acres of land, which is the size of Swann Park now, be set aside as open space. Brodie said he does not know what the boundaries of that space will be yet.

The project's boundaries include two other properties that the city is not seeking to acquire, those being the National Aquarium's planned 14-acre Center for Aquatic Life and Conservation and a smaller, six acre site the aquarium split off from that property and sold to developer Patrick Turner last year.

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