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Waterfront plan worries residents in Canton

Lighthouse Point project includes 30-story high-rise

By JILL ROSEN
SUN STAFF

A developer's vision for energizing Canton's waterfront includes changing a sleepy shopping area into a full-blown destination with hip restaurants, a hotel and condos - all punctuated by a landmark high-rise that would jut 295 feet above Boston Street, a height along the harbor now reached only by South Baltimore's HarborView tower.

But where the developer sees signature architecture, a soaring edifice that will make people think "Baltimore," residents only see a looming threat to their neighborhood's character and too much density for the increasingly desirable community to handle.

"This development is just overwhelming," Cindy Ordes, vice president of Canton Square Homeowners Association, said this week. Her group has already voted to oppose the project.

Adds Steven Strohl, president of the Canton Community Association: "It's going to be completely out of place."

Cignal Corp., a Maryland firm that has made its mark in Southeast Baltimore with upscale residential projects like the tony North Shore pier homes, has turned its sites on Lighthouse Point, a nondescript retail nook sandwiched between waterfront apartment buildings. It bought an interest earlier this year in the development, which sits across the street from the busy Can Company plaza.

On land used as a parking lot, Cignal, as part of Harbor Marine Center LLC, wants to build a 30-story high-rise to house luxury condominiums. In front of the tower would be a 15-story hotel.

Both the tower and the hotel would be built atop levels of parking and a row of street-level shops and restaurants.

Finally, on the water behind both of those buildings, the developer would con-

struct about 50 townhouses. The nearby Bo Brooks crab restaurant would remain.

"We're trying to raise the quality of the development at Lighthouse Point, which was developed before Canton was cool," said Marco Greenberg, vice president of Cignal.

Before any of this could happen, the developer would have to convince Mayor Martin O'Malley and the Baltimore City Council to allow what's called a "major amendment" to Lighthouse Point's "planned unit development," or PUD.

The amendment would allow Harbor Marine Center to build more on the property than what the city permitted for the original developer.

Baltimore Planning Director Otis Rolley III said he thinks the plan has potential.

Rolley, an advocate of using density to revitalize urban areas, has no objections to high-rises. Though residents don't generally panic over townhouses the way they do skyscrapers, Rolley thinks the low-slung buildings steal more views.

"I'm open to something that's well-designed," Rolley said of the plans. "I would hope that what's designed is not something townhouse-esque that cuts the community off from the waterfront."

Rolley said that if Harbor Marine Center keeps the 50 townhouses in its plan, his department would probably oppose that aspect of it.

The Lighthouse Point project is designed to complement work that Harbor Marine Center has already started on the property and nearby, Greenberg said.

The firm recently won city approval to make major changes to the adjacent "boat hotel" building, a four-level structure now used for boat storage, apartments and a handful of shops including a bagel restaurant and a Blockbuster video.

They're replacing the boat storage with 57 condos and parking. And they're dressing up the building's warehouse-like exterior.

At Lighthouse Point, between the boat hotel renovations and the proposed new construction, Greenberg's goal is to change the area from a forgettable errand stop to a shopping and dining hot spot anchored by a building "that Canton will be known for."



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City planner Laurie Feinberg said the project, particularly its promised enticing eateries and stores, could be what Baltimore needs to keep its harbor promenade interesting for strollers as it winds from Federal Hill past downtown and Fells Point and into Canton.

"Tree-lined shops to take you from Boston Street to the water - that would really go a long way," she said.

While Canton residents might like the idea of fancy retail, they're having a hard time getting past the height of the tower and worrying about the extra traffic and parking hassles it might bring.

Carolyn Boitnott, the leader of the Waterfront Coalition, a watchdog group that has fought intense harbor development for years, calls the Lighthouse Point proposal just the latest round in a battle she's finding ever harder to win.

"To my knowledge, no one in the community who's seen this thinks it's a good idea," she said. "We've been very concerned over the years at the cumulative effect of all the traffic and density. This is just another example."