Bill would let county librarians unionize
Delegation approves of measure offering the choice; raise for sheriff opposed

By Blair James
Baltimore Sun Media Group

The Howard County delegation approved a bill last week that would offer full-time employees with the Howard County public library system the opportunity to form a union without an endorsement by the library's board of trustees.

The bill, which was requested by the county administration, must be approved by the General Assembly.

The library's board of trustees has decided to remain neutral on the proposal because it was submitted by the administration, according to Christie Lassen, director of public relations for the library system.

At the delegation meeting on Jan. 30, Del. Guy Guzzone said this bill is about choice.

"There is no requirement to form a union; they just now have the ability," Guzzone, a Democrat, said. "They can certainly choose not to do it!"

Republican Sen. Allan Kittleman voted against the measure, saying he was disappointed that the library board did not take a position on the bill.

"Through conversations with some board members, Kittleman said, he believes trustees oppose the proposal, but are afraid to speak out, fearing repercussions from County Executive Ken Ulman."

"There's no question, the board of trustees does not think this is a good thing for the library system," he said.

Kittleman was joined in voting against the bill by Republican Dels. Gail Bates and Warren Miller.

The delegation also, for the second time, delayed action on a bill that would increase the salary of the Howard County sheriff in 2016 and tie any future raises to those of lieutenants. In the Howard County Police Department.

Requested by Sheriff James Fitzgerald, whose salary is $86,000, the bill would increase the sheriff's salary to $82,000 in 2016, equivalent to the pay of a 20-year lieutenant.

If the salary of lieutenants in the Police See BUSINESS, page 9

NEW PROPOSAL FOR COLUMBIA

'Inner Arbor' would include elevated walkway through woods

By Arthur Hirsch
The Baltimore Sun

Decades ago, developer James W. Rouse looked at a rundown industrial waterfront in downtown Baltimore and saw the makings of an attraction called Harborplace at the Inner Harbor.

Now a former Rouse employee looks at an expanse of woods in downtown Columbia and sees the possibility of an "Inner Arbor!"

That's the name Michael McCall has given his proposal to turn 34 acres of woods surrounding Merriweather Post Pavilion into a place meant to celebrate both the arts and nature, a combination performing arts center, sculpture garden and elevated arboreal walkway.

"I was just talking to my wife, and I heard those words come out of my mouth," says McCall, recalling how the name Inner Arbor came to be. "And I thought, 'That's it, that captures the import of the place.'"

This rendering of McCall's proposal shows the plan to recreate Symphony Woods as an arts and nature destination and regional tourist attraction.

McCall's is the latest proposal to emerge over the past 20 years for an area often described as Columbia's Central Park. It is a natural refuge amid what planners have envisioned as an urban downtown. The park and downtown were part of Columbia founder James Rouse's aspiration to transcend suburbia and build what he called a "real city."

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Another set of brothers in New Orleans for Super Bowl

Tickets or not, Ellicott City siblings say they wouldn't miss the journey: 'We're still going to have an incredible time'

By Brent Kennedy
Baltimore Sun Media Group

It was supposed to be a one-time thing. So, alongside his older brother and three close friends, Ellicott City's Bobby Blasen made the trip to New Orleans for the AFC championship game last year.

"The amount of fun we had in New England, I felt like I had to find a way to keep it going," he said. "That's why the 26-year-old is in New Orleans this weekend, ready to cheer his beloved Ravens on to NFL championship glory, exploring their city's food and nightlife.

"And a real treat: Sharing the trip with my brother, who's a New England Patriots fan."
Planting a new vision for Columbia

COLUMBIA, From page 1

About 45 years after Columbia’s first residents moved in, construction on a long-range plan to improve the city that has recently begun, and with it comes greater focus on Symphony Woods. Until now, the undeveloped enclave has served chiefly as a place for people to stroll among the trees, perhaps have a picnic, and, since the early 1990s, attend wine in the Woods in the spring and Symphony of Lights at Christmas.

“This is where we can differentiate Columbia the most,” said McCall. “The idea of an escape in the heart of the city.”

At the moment, McCall’s notion of supplanting the Central Park comparison with the Inner Harbor exists only on a map drawn up as no expense to the Columbia Association by McCall’s firm, Strategic Leverage. But two planning sessions have been held on the plan, yielding mixed opinion, and views range from enthusiasm to caution on the Columbia Association board, which has to approve the plan for it to go anywhere.

The CA is expected to discuss the subject at its meeting Feb. 14. One member said it could be voted on then, but others urge more time to answer questions from the public and board members. In any case, McCall indicated that he would take to heart what’s been said and work on a plan to “turn Symphony Woods into the world-class cultural and arts space that Columbia and Howard County deserve.”

But so far, nothing has been submitted for approval to county agencies and there’s no formal estimate of the cost or a detailed plan to pay for it.

Evolving vision

The Inner Arbor plan adapts, a few notions that have been floated over the years, and adds new ideas. The biggest structure inside the bounds of Symphony Woods would be built into a hillside slope with three levels, housing Toby’s Dinner Theatre, a children’s theater, a space for events, Columbia Association offices and a few restaurants.

An elevated walkway would lead to this “arts village” from the existing garage and transit center just to the east of Symphony Woods, where Toby’s now stands.

Swinging over the pedestrian bridge, past the arts center and curving a few hundred feet to the north would be an element that has not been proposed before — a walkway raised into the trees, steps 40 feet off the ground. Braced along the way by seven “treehouses,” the structure would amount to a smaller, woodland version of the High Line, a mile-long “linear park” built on a portion of an old elevated track in lower Manhattan.

An embankment with seating under the trees would be next to the elevated walkway. At the southern end of the woods, a sculpture garden and walking paths would be developed along the existing man-made lakes and ponds.

This plan encompasses a bigger portion of Symphony Woods than several proposals offered since 1994, only one of which made it even halfway through the 16-step process for downtown Columbia development. That plan, focused only on the northwestern 10 acres of the woods, called for three pedestrian plazas and a park once in the center and in the northwest and northeast corners.

The central entrance — part of a cruciform paved walkway — led to a fountain plaza and eventually to the edge of the Merriweather pavilion.

Last July, the Planning Board approved this design as a Final Development Plan — a misleading term, as it’s only Step 9 of 16 — and suggested a few changes.

In its 17-page decision, the board suggested that some way be found to remove fewer trees, to create more interesting paths and to coordinate efforts with the operators of Merriweather.

That’s what McCall was “encouraged” to draft another design, said Phil Nelson, president of the Columbia Association.

This set up a rivalry of sorts, as the approved design was crafted by former Bosco planner Cy Pauwiler and four other former Bosco employees.

Price of paradise

A park designer with decades of experience, Pauwiler, who also worked on one previous Symphony Woods plan, wonders if McCall’s proposal makes sense, both in design and expense.

“I’m appalled that intelligent people who sit on the [Columbia Association] board are not able to see what they’re buying into,” said Pauwiler, who worked for Bosco planning Columbia’s downtown area between 1986 and 1972. “The whole plan is really not very realistic.”

In his view, the point was to establish an entrance from Little Patuxent Parkway, where most people are likely to walk into the park. The McCall design shows a small entrance at the northeast corner, leading to a large sculpture plaza, but the main entrance is on the east side, at the garage.

Pauwiler said engineers he has talked with estimate that the McCall proposal would cost between $45 million and $50 million for the garage, pedestrian walkway and the elevated tree walk alone.

In his experience, he says, that would be all public money, as private funds are not usually devoted to such purposes.

Nelson said the association hasn’t yet estimated the cost of the project. He said the CA wants to establish a trust that could raise money, as the CA’s tax status now does not allow it to pursue private grants.

The notion of the trust worries CA board member Alex Helikson, who represents the Village of Oakland Mills.

“There was never any discussion about a trust,” said Helikson. “That’s a big deal. That has major implications because then a lot of the decisions would be out of the public’s view.”

He said that while the proposal has created “excitement in the community,” he’s also heard from a lot of people who are concerned that decisions are being made too quickly.

The McCall plan was first presented to the public in January and now may come to a vote in February.

“I’m sensitive to that,” Helikson said. “I do think there are a lot of questions. The plan is way more ambitious than anything that has been presented before.”

Columbia resident Alan Klein said he feels the board is moving too quickly to approve a plan he considers too expensive, as it involves so much construction. He favors the Pauwiler group proposal, adding that he wants to see a project that “benefits the community as much or more than it benefits the developer.”

Association Vice Chairman Andrew Stock of Owen Brown calls the McCall proposal “a very exciting plan,” and is not concerned about things moving too quickly. If the Planning Board agrees to pick up approval of the northern portion where things led off, that still leaves Step 9 to 16, and the rest would start at Step 1.

“I have a hard time believing that’s rushed,” he said.

Board Chairwoman Shari Zaret of Kings Contrivance said she wants to make sure the public has enough time to understand the plan. But she said she likes it. The name Inner Arbor, she said, "carries the message this is about preserving the beauty, but also enhancing the park that's a destination and an amenity for Columbia residents."