

## **Sheraton site eyed for new arena**

By Melody Simmons *Daily Record*, November 12, 2010

A plan to raze a portion of the existing Baltimore Convention Center, the Sheraton Inner Harbor Hotel and its parking garage and replace them with an expanded convention center and new downtown arena has been endorsed by the board of the Greater Baltimore Committee.

The panel has been exploring how to expand the convention center and locations for a new arena, said GBC President Donald C. Fry.

“This is the beginning of what is going to be a long-term project,” Fry said Friday. “It could be built in stages, but all connected. It would be all seamless.”

Willard Hackerman, owner of the Sheraton and president of Whiting-Turner Contracting Co., a Baltimore-based construction company, has held recent discussions with Fry about the demolition of the hotel, located at 300 S. Charles St., for the convention center expansion, Fry said.

“Mr. Hackerman said that this is something he’d be at least interested in talking about — that it would make sense to do,” Fry said. “He is very much open to it, and we have been involved in working with him for a couple of months looking at various concepts to have it come to fruition.”

Hackerman was unavailable for comment on Friday, his assistant at Whiting-Turner said.

Expanding the convention center has been a subject of discussion for city leaders. The 1.2 million-square-foot facility is, or will be, smaller than convention centers in competing cities of Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. Fry said the oldest portion of the center, on the east side, would be demolished under the plan to make way for the expanded center-arena building.

The Pennsylvania Convention Center in downtown Philadelphia will be 1.3 million square feet when an expansion is complete in early 2011, and the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington is 2.3 million square feet.

City Councilman William H. Cole IV, whose district includes the Inner Harbor, said Baltimore is losing convention business to the larger centers in nearby cities.

“We have fallen so far down in the competitive ranks,” Cole said. “We have added lots of parking and hotels, but our center has not kept up. We are now at the low end.”

In addition, city and business leaders have for years pondered how to replace the well-worn 1st Mariner Arena, home to Disney on Ice, the annual Ringling Bros. and Barnum

& Bailey Circus and rock concerts that draw iconic performers such as Bruce Springsteen and the Rolling Stones. The arena seats just over 14,000.

Fry said the GBC board's discussions centered on allowing the existing arena to remain open and functioning while construction of a new facility is ongoing, a process estimated to take up to four years. In the meantime, annual acts that book at 1st Mariner would continue to perform and the city would not lose revenue — or its bookings.

The city issued an RFP in August 2008 for a new arena to be built on the 1st Mariner site. But after getting proposals from four developers, the project was shelved because of the economic downturn.

When Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake took office in January, she said she had concerns over the decision to keep the arena at its current location.

On Friday, Rawlings-Blake said in a statement the process will be ongoing.

“Baltimore City is currently evaluating all aspects of the new arena project including potential locations,” the mayor said.

Ian Brennan, the mayor's spokesman, said such evaluation also includes the expansion of the Baltimore Convention Center.

Fry said he briefed the mayor on the idea to demolish the Sheraton and build a hybrid arena-convention center building, and that she requested more details and research on cost, design and development.

“Funding is an issue,” Fry said. “We have to determine what kind of a financing plan to put together. We have to figure out the best way. At this time, everything is on the table.”

That includes multiple sources such as local, state and private funding, he added.

Charles O. Monk II, chairman of the GBC's board, said the plan will now move into a research and development phase where funding will be addressed. A plan is expected to be ready by the spring.

“We're not in a position to say that the project goes forward, but to figure out how to finance it,” Monk said. “But what we've seen so far, the board is optimistic and asked us to continue down this path.”