

Cost of a clean downtown Baltimore is going up

By Nicholas Sohr, *Daily Record*, April 20, 2010

To keep their clean teams cleaning and make the city's green spaces greener, Downtown Partnership of Baltimore Inc. is seeking a nearly 50 percent bump in the property tax surcharges levied on downtown property owners.

The increase, which must be approved by the city's Board of Estimates, would boost the nonprofit's revenue stream, which has slumped along with the downtown real estate market.

"Nobody likes to increase taxes or surcharges, but in order to move downtown forward, the [Downtown Partnership] board voted to do so," said partnership President J. Kirby Fowler.

The 7-cent surcharge increase to 21.39 cents per \$100 of assessed value on commercial properties would go into effect July 1.

Many property and business owners said the added burden would be more than offset by the benefits of keeping the partnership afloat.

"The little bit I have to pay, it's worth it," said Bill Crouse, executive chef of Sotto Sopra, an Italian restaurant on Charles Street in Mount Vernon. "Hopefully it doesn't go up any more, but we've benefitted from it."

Crouse said the restaurant has cut about 60 percent of its advertising budget, relying more on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, and the publicity and business driven by the partnership. The group directs tourists to Sotto Sopra, includes the restaurant in events and helps Crouse land television spots.

"If we're still paying into the Downtown Partnership, it's obviously worth it for us," Crouse said.

Tarlow Furs LTD has survived on Charles Street for nearly seven decades as the area cycled through boom and bust, David G. Tarlow said.

"It was very, very upscale, then it went down like that," said Tarlow, his thumb pointing toward the floor, "and now they're finding out running to shopping centers isn't the answer."

The street wouldn't have been revitalized without Downtown Partnership, he said.

"They've done a hell of a job," Tarlow said. "It's worth it for everybody."

Without the surcharge increase, Fowler said the partnership would be forced to cut back on its wide range of services, many of which it has taken off the cash-strapped city's plate during its nearly 20-year existence.

The city reimburses the partnership for its cleaning services. The appropriation fell from \$510,000 in fiscal 2009 to \$220,000 this year.

"Even the \$510,000 was nowhere near reimbursement for our services," Fowler said.

And, as property values declined in the city, in recent years, the surcharges tied to those values fell, too, leading the partnership to project a \$400,000 hole in its \$7.3 million budget.

Fowler said the surcharge increase is expected to bring in between \$1 million and \$1.7 million, enough to make up for a flagging real estate market and leave some left over for projects around the city.

"In the past, we've been asking the city and state for capital funds. But that source of money is drying up rather quickly," Fowler said. "If we want to see more green space, more video cameras, better lighting downtown, our board decided to move forward with the surcharge increase."

The City Council is also considering legislation that would give Downtown Partnership more flexibility in setting its fees and ease borrowing restrictions to give it the ability to tackle larger projects.

Downtown Partnership's to-do list includes improvements to the Morris Mechanic Theater, removing the pedestrian overpass at Baltimore and Hanover Streets, maintenance of a dog park on Baltimore Street and tree plantings on some St. Paul Street medians.

"We can't act on any of these grand visions without money," Fowler said, "and these grand visions need to move forward."