

MARYLAND

THE SUN

Section B

Thursday, March 7, 2002

BALTIMORE CITY/COUNTY

New plan for Center Plaza is lively

Largely paved space
to be reborn as grassy,
pedestrian boulevard

'Reintroduce green'

By SCOTT CALVERT
SUN STAFF

Baltimore will never be Paris, but a team being unveiled today to overhaul downtown's stark and desolate Center Plaza has such high hopes that it likens part of its design to the City of Light's famed Champs Elysees.

Though it lacks an arch, Baltimore's version — projected to cost \$6 million to \$7 million — is envisioned as a block-long, bustling pedestrian boulevard with cafe tables, flowers, trees and park benches on the plaza's western edge.

A giant lawn would fill most of the city-owned plaza, now largely paved and often empty. It would be crisscrossed by footpaths and, possibly, a reflecting pool. In the middle would be a stage where musicians could perform for audiences lounging on the grass.

The winning bid, picked late last month, is the work of a team led by Baltimore architects Brown & Craig. The firm is also redoing neighboring Charles Plaza for developer David H. Hillman and plans to better link the two plazas.

A panel of design experts chose its Center Plaza plan from five entries solicited by the Downtown Partnership, a business advocacy group overseeing the spot's planned rebirth for the city.

"Not only will it be the front yard for thousands of employees and hundreds of residents, it will also provide a softer edge for what we hope will be a thriving shopping area," said Michele L. Whelley, the partnership's president.

Whelley said the cost would be divided among three sources: the city, adjacent property owners and, since the spot is a major transfer point for the Maryland Transit Administration, a mix of state and federal transportation enhancement money.

The goal in revamping a plaza that opened in 1970 as a model of urban design is to remake it as a place people want to be. "We really need a living room for this part of

downtown," said architect Bryce A. Turner, principal at Brown & Craig, taking note of the area's growing residential flavor.

"We think Baltimore sorely lacks green space," added Scott J. Rykiel, vice president at Mahan Rykiel Associates, landscape architects working with Brown & Craig. "Our broad concept was to reintroduce green."

Even if no snags arise, construction would not start for about a year, Whelley said. That would mean completion in late spring of 2004.

The plaza is tucked among office towers on the north side of Fayette Street, west of Charles Street. Owners of nearby buildings will play a key role in its rebound, Whelley and others said.

Peter G. Angelos is renovating his One Charles Center, the black tower designed by Mies van der Rohe. With plans for a ground-level restaurant, Angelos is interested in a livelier plaza. On the opposite side, Baltimore Gas and Electric Co. would like to put a restaurant or bookstore in its two vacant retail levels, Turner said.

A bus stop on Fayette would be expanded, with the rear portion housing a concession stand and public bathrooms.

Dan Biederman, an urban management consultant working with the Brown & Craig team, said his experience at Bryant Park in Manhattan has applications here. For example, he said, a janitor cleans bathrooms there every five minutes, making them clean and safe.

Unsuccessful bidders had proposed a variety of ideas. One wanted to fill the center of the plaza with a series of granite and metal platforms and steps that could provide casual seating or serve as an amphitheater for large performances.

Another suggested keeping the arc of mature trees and the oval design in the center of the plaza and adding a curving glass canopy.