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Elevator Going Upscale

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Developer plants the seed for luxury condos and offices in old storage structure at Silo Point

IS WATERFRONT real estate so hot in Baltimore that people are willing to live and work in an old grain elevator? Developer Patrick Turner and his partners are counting on it.

They plan to convert the former Baltimore & Ohio Grain Elevator, a Locust Point landmark, to luxury condominiums, offices and possibly a hotel by 2005. The conversion, called Silo Point, would be the anchor of a \$200 million mixed-use community that also would include about 135 low-rise residences on 7.5 acres just west of Fort McHenry.

The project, which needs City Council approval before construction can begin, is the latest sign of the gentrification of Baltimore's once-industrial waterfront. It would follow conversions of the former Bethlehem Steel Corp. Key Highway shipyard to upscale housing and the old Procter & Gamble soapmaking plant to a business campus.

Turner, known for his "edgy" conversions of such buildings as the McHenry Theater and the Southway Bowling Center, thinks the idea will have strong appeal. "This is such a prominent building," he said. "When you mention the grain elevator, everybody knows where it is. And this is the largest privately owned parcel in South Baltimore, unless they're going to sell Fort McHenry some day."

Locust Point is already in demand, he added. "People like this area. It's nice and safe. It's almost like living on an island, because you're surrounded by water. And you have a great national landmark right outside your front door."

Founder of the Henrietta Corp., Turner heads a separate group that has a contract to purchase the 15-acre grain-storage property off the 1300 block of Andre Street in Locust Point from Archer Daniels Midland Co. (ADM) of Decatur, Ill., for \$6.5 million.

The grain elevator dates from 1923 and ceased operating last year, after part of the state-owned pier that links it to Baltimore's waterfront fell into the harbor. Its previous owners acquired the surrounding land decades ago for construction of a second grain-storage facility, but they never moved ahead with construction.

Turner and five partners offered to purchase the property from ADM after learning that the grain operation had shut down, and they reached agreement with the company earlier this year. Their contract calls for the property to change hands in September.

The developers are seeking approval of City Council legislation that would change the zoning of the property - currently restricted to industrial uses - to allow commercial and residential construction as part of a "planned unit development."

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Turner said he is in the early stages of meeting with community representatives and prospective occupants and does not have a firm plan for the property. But he said he wants to preserve the 297-foot-tall tower and adjacent grain silo as the project's centerpiece. Christopher Pfaeffle of Parameter Inc. is the architect. Turner and Pfaeffle are exploring one plan that calls for the upper portion of the grain elevator to be converted to 130 to 150 luxury condominiums featuring panoramic views of the water, and for the lower portion to contain offices or a hotel or both.

The mid-rise structure that now contains 110 grain silos would be hollowed out and converted to a garage for 350 to 400 cars. Two levels of storage space above the silos may become 92,000 square feet of offices. Turner said he has long been intrigued by the grain elevator as a symbol of industrial Baltimore. He said he believes Silo Point would appeal to prospective residents because the grain elevator is one of the tallest structures on the waterfront - nearly as high as the 100 HarborView Drive condominium tower - but farther out on the peninsula.

"These are some of the best views because they're unobstructed all the way around," he said. "And these are views of the working waterfront, with ships coming in and out. It's very exciting, visually."

He wants to keep the industrial feel on the inside as well. "The building in its raw state is gorgeous," he said. "You don't have to do much to clean it up. ... It's like being in a loft building, but it's a high rise."

Pfaeffle, the architect, said he intends to let the building speak for itself. "The general idea is to open it up as much as we can and bring in as much light and air as we can," he said. Because the original building is so powerful, he added, the architect of the conversion doesn't have to be "too heroic."

Long known as a blue-collar neighborhood, Locust Point has changed rapidly in recent years, with construction of several townhouse developments with starting prices of \$300,000 or more.

Turner said the vacant land off Fort Avenue would work well as a setting for low-rise residential development, most likely townhouses that extend the existing street grid.

Early reports from environmental consultants indicate that the property is generally free of contaminants and toxins. That's no real surprise since it hasn't been used to store anything but grain for the past 80 years and ADM had strict standards for cleanliness.

Turner said he believes residential and commercial development is a sensible approach for the property because it's already next to a residential community.

He said the development wouldn't create parking problems in the area because the occupants of the converted grain elevator would all park their cars within the shell of the 110-foot-tall silo building, and it wouldn't add to congestion of narrow streets in Locust Point because most of the auto access will be from Fort Avenue, a wide street.

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Turner said the grain elevator qualifies for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and he intends to work with preservation consultants and adhere to federal restoration standards, so the project can qualify for tax credits for historic preservation.

The grain-storage property is cut off from the waterfront by railroad tracks, most of which would remain. The developers plan to remove five sets of tracks and create a linear park, accessible to the community, to serve as a buffer between Silo Point and the remaining tracks and industrial land.

Other development team members include Neil Ruther, Mark Sapperstein, Glenn Charlow, Joseph Haskins and Turner's wife, Jeanine.

Turner said he has no office tenants yet and no contractor. He also hasn't decided whether his group would build the low-rise homes or bring in others to do so.

The grain elevator was designed by John S. Metcalf Co. of Chicago and Montreal, an engineering firm that specialized in such structures. It was a marvel for its time, a Rube Goldbergian contraption that used long conveyor belts to transfer grain from rail cars into silos and onto cargo ships.

Turner said the building worked well for decades, but it has been rendered obsolete by newer technology. If ADM were to build a new grain-storage facility, he said, it most likely would do so closer to agricultural land, and it would use more advanced storage techniques.

At the same time, he said, the grain elevator is so solidly constructed, it would be difficult to tear down. Turner said he understands that the city needs industrially zoned land, but he believes his plan is a good approach for this property in particular and Locust Point in general.

Mayor Martin O'Malley said last week that he knew Turner was developing a plan for the property but was unaware of any specifics. The mayor said he was not opposed to the ADM property being rezoned, if the neighboring community isn't.

"It's a project that Baltimore has been waiting for - something that is unique and has a great location," said Bill Cassidy, sales manager for the Fells Point office of Long and Foster Real Estate.

"Federal Hill has gotten so dense and high-priced that Locust Point is almost a suburb of downtown," he added. "And the access to [Interstate] 95 is unbelievable. It will give Baltimore one more golden opportunity to attract more buyers from the Washington area."

"If it's a way to save [the grain elevator] and reuse it, I think it's great," said Donna Beth Joy Shapiro, a local preservationist who has fought to save other industrial buildings from the 1920s, including the McCormick spice plant on Light Street.

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"I have no problem with adaptive reuse," she said, "as long as you can still get some sense of what the building used to be."

On the 1300 block of Andre Street, some residents are apprehensive about Turner's plan. They doubt that everyone will park in a garage and fear that [the development] could cause their taxes to rise.

Others welcome it. "I think it's a good idea," said resident Gwen Backhaus. "It's not the prettiest thing. The neighborhood is developing. It would bring in more people."

"It'll be good, because this is an eyesore," said Colleen Rosenbach, who can see the dormant grain elevator from her front porch.

Rosenbach said she's glad to hear it would be fixed up rather than demolished. "I'm so used to seeing it, if they tore it down, I'd be lost."