

BUSINESS MARYLAND



ARCHPLAN INC. RENDERING

An architect's rendering shows the proposed Negro Leagues baseball museum on the far right and the restored Sphinx Club in the two buildings to the left.

Negro League baseball museum eyed for city

Historic Sphinx Club on Pennsylvania Ave., other properties would be redeveloped

By Edward Gunts

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Baltimore would become home to the first East Coast museum devoted to Negro League baseball teams and players, under a \$4.1 million plan that has been approved by the Dixon administration.

The plan calls for redeveloping Pennsylvania Avenue's historic Sphinx Club and adjacent properties with a sports-themed museum, entertainment and dining complex designed to draw tourists and help rejuvenate the corridor.

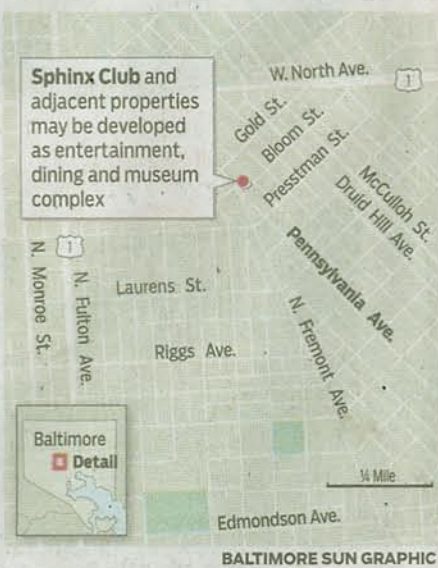
The largest part of the project would be a three-story BALL House museum, which stands for Black Athletes and Lost Legends, at the northeast corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and Bloom Street. The museum would contain displays about Negro League teams that played before major league baseball admitted African-Americans, including the Baltimore Elite Giants, as well as interactive exhibits such as a batting cage.

The museum would be connected to the Negro League Cafe at the Sphinx Club, a sports bar, restaurant and performance venue that would be created inside the once-vibrant Sphinx Club at 2105-07 Pennsylvania Ave. Planned by restaurateur Donald Curry, the cafe would feature autographed baseballs, photos and related Negro League memorabilia and host performances by jazz musicians and other entertainers.

Additional elements of the project, designed by Klaus Philipsen of ArchPlan Inc., would be "incubator" office space for start-up companies and an outdoor dining area. The Sphinx Club's facade would be restored to its 1940s appearance, while the 5,375-square-foot museum would be housed in a new structure designed to stand out from its neighbors.

The proposal was submitted this fall by a group led by the Druid Heights Community Development Corp., a nonprofit that works to revitalize communities along Pennsylvania Avenue. Other team members include Curry, who ran a Negro League-themed cafe and bar in Chicago's Bronzeville district for five years; the Pennsylvania Avenue Redevelopment Collaborative; and the Black Athletes and Lost Legends Association Inc., a Maryland-based nonprofit that collects and exhibits artifacts related to Negro League baseball. The project is expected to create the equivalent of 37 full-time jobs.

"This is a museum that is going to hold some incredible history," said David Thomas, vice president and communications director for the BALL Association.



BALTIMORE DEVELOPMENT CORP. PHOTO

The Sphinx Club closed in 1992 and is now city-owned property.

um of Maryland. BALL's collection, considered one of the largest assemblages of Negro League memorabilia in the country, has been featured in a traveling exhibit that has gone to schools, libraries and stadiums throughout the Mid-Atlantic.

Kelly Little, executive director of the Druid Heights CDC, said his group hopes to begin construction next year and open the museum by late 2011. He said the CDC has a line of credit for community development from State Farm Insurance Co. that can be used for the project and that he plans to pursue other funding sources, such as tax credits for preservation of the Sphinx Club. It also has asked that the city donate the Pennsylvania Avenue properties as an "in kind" contribution.

In addition, the BALL museum group has its own board of directors and fundraising capabilities, and Curry said he plans to use funds he received after he was forced to close his Chicago restaurant when the city moved to acquire his property this year as part of its bid for the 2016 Olympic Games.

Thomas said Pennsylvania Avenue is the "perfect location" for the museum because the corridor has long been a center of African-American history, and the reborn Sphinx Club and additions would make a strong attraction there and help trigger more development.

The Negro Leagues were active from the 1920s to the 1960s. Although the museum will tell visitors about life on the Negro League teams, Thomas said, it's also intended to provide inspiration for visitors.

Athletes in the Negro Leagues "played for the love of the game," not big salaries, he said. "You can't find a more driven bunch of people. The museum will be about the Negro League. But it's also about inspiring people to go beyond the obstacles that face them ... because that is what these Negro League players did."

"This will be the first of its kind on the East Coast. There is a Negro League Museum in Kansas City, Mo., but there is nothing like this one. ... It will be a destination" that will "draw people into the city."

"It's ... a wonderful jumping-off point for the revitalization of Pennsylvania Avenue," said Linda Richardson, executive director of the development collaborative.

Pennsylvania Avenue was a hub of African-American entertainment in Baltimore from the 1920s until the late 1960s, when much of the area was destroyed by rioters. The private Sphinx Club, open from 1946 to 1992, was known for after-show parties with jazz musicians and other luminaries, including Billie Holiday and Cab Calloway.

The city owns the Sphinx Club, which is vacant, and adjoining property at 2101-03 and 2109-11 Pennsylvania Ave. On behalf of the city, the Baltimore Development Corp. and its Main Streets Program sought proposals in July and received one response, the plan for the sports-themed development. The BDC's board recommended to Mayor Sheila Dixon this fall that the city enter into an "exclusive negotiating privilege" period with the developers, to give them 90 days to finalize plans for the project, and the mayor approved the recommendation this month. The negotiating period is expected to begin shortly.

Many of the museum's artifacts will come from the collection of Ray Banks, a Negro League historian who founded the BALL Association in 2008, and the late Hubert "Bert" Simmons, a former Negro League player who established the Hubert Simmons Negro League Baseball Muse-