

**Baltimore City Council
Economic and Community Development Committee**

**February 13, 2024
Hearing on Bills related to Inner Harbor Development
File # 23-0444, 23-0446, 23-0448**

OPPOSITION

As a Baltimore City resident who has had the privilege of living in Federal Hill and Otterbein for more than two decades, I submit the following written testimony in opposition to the three bills relating to the redevelopment of the Inner Harbor that seek to accommodate MCB Development's (alternatively, "the Developer") demands to, *inter alia*, amend the City Charter and Urban Renewal Plan to remove current height restrictions and allow luxury private residences with off street parking.

Let me say at the outset that I personally have been hopeful the Developer would propose a vision that is good for Baltimore residents, that preserves the public nature of the harbor and attracts visitors, and that is both sustainable and economically beneficial to the City as a whole.

But as David Bramble, head of MCB, is the first to admit, that is not his job: "I am a developer, and I do this to make money." So what the Developer is proposing, after having knowingly acquired the two pavilion buildings subject to height restrictions and limited to commercial/public use, is a reflection of what the Developer wants to ensure profits on this one individual project, not necessarily what is best for the city overall. It bears serious review.

Yes, the Developer tout the extensive "community engagement" it conducted. But the City paid the Developer \$1 million dollars for that engagement, without any apparent strings attached in terms of incorporating that community feedback. And to the extent that "the community" would prioritize public amenities that the Developer did not deem profitable, they would not likely be reflected in the Developer's plan.

All this is not to fault the Developer. He's just doing his job.

As a resident and voter in this City, I rely on the Mayor and City Council to analyze whether and to what extent what one powerful developer wants for the City's crown jewel will benefit all of us, sustainably, over the long run.

I oppose these bills because they would allow major long-term changes to "the beating heart of Baltimore"¹ prior to serious scrutiny and with several major questions unanswered.

Among the many questions that our elected officials appear to not have answers for include:

¹ David Bramble, October 30, 2023, available at <https://baltimorefishbowl.com/stories/500m-harborplace-redevelopment-plan-calls-for-two-residential-towers-offices-shops-restaurants-and-public-space/>.

1. **How *exactly* will the public financing of the (at least) \$400 million work?** I have asked this several times with no firm responses. I know the Developer is raising its own \$500 million from investors for his buildings and has said that he will not seek TIFs. But what is the plan for public financing for the other proposed changes to the City's land? Is the City seeking grants under the federal infrastructure bills? Have there been any commitments of funds other than the mere \$63 million from the state so far? Where is the definite commitment to ensuring this is covered by federal and state funds?
2. **As the Developer has said, the renderings are merely "concepts."** If the Developer can increase profits by tacking on another 1,000 luxury residences and expanding his buildings to cut off all views of the harbor, he will. He was asked about simply amending the height restrictions to raise rather than eliminate them, and he said that he will build as high as he can if profitable. Relatedly, there is no explanation for why the City needs to also eliminate the height restrictions all around the harbor, including the piers on the other side of the World Trade Center.
3. **Who has analyzed and what is the plan for the massive transportation and traffic pattern changes that this "concept" – if executed – will require?** The Developer's "concept" includes substantial reductions in car lanes on Light and Pratt. While I love the idea of more walkability around downtown, this requires serious consideration and a commitment to improved public transportation. In a "community engagement" session, the Developer suggested that cars can just take other streets. But anyone who has to drive in the City knows that Howard, Baltimore, and Charles are simply not suitable alternatives as currently comprised. Moreover, a substantial increase in public transportation seems unlikely with the massive cuts announced by the Department of Transportation. So again, where is the analysis of how these changes would be made?
4. **How will these changes impact commercial properties nearby, and where is an analysis of whether these changes will strain, rather than support or complement, retailers and restaurants surrounding the harbor.** At a community engagement session, the Developer promised that such an analysis is forthcoming. But a developer's analysis is not the unbiased analysis that residents deserve.
5. **Because the Developer only acquired the two pavilion buildings, what alternatives did he consider to high rise luxury apartment complexes with parking?** We have heard the Developer threaten several times that he won't do the project without the large-scale changes that these three bills will make. But such a hard ball negotiating stance ignores the fact that the Developer acquired those buildings and will remain their owner even if these bills get rejected. And it ignores the fact that the Developer *only* acquired the physical pavilions, not the entire inner harbor, which is on City land and currently dedicated for public use. Could the Developer come up with a Plan B that complies with current law while still earning a profit (albeit perhaps not *maximizing* it)?
6. **Why are the procedural changes to planning review necessary, which appear to limit citizen input and such review to the Urban Design Architectural Advisory Panel (UDAAP), stripping the Department of Housing and Community Development of its current power to approve of plans?** See, e.g., File # 23-0448, page 5, Section iv.

Because these bills would ultimately work massive long-term changes to the character of one of this City's main attractions, and, indeed, to Baltimore City as a whole, **I urge this Committee and the City Council to vote NO on these bills unless and until the City develops a tangibly funded, well designed, and carefully planned vision for the public aspects of the harbor (other than the buildings owned by the Developer) and/or completes a rigorous analysis of whether and to what extent the Developer's "concept" for the harbor is in the best interest of the City.**

If it turns out that – after rigorous neutral analysis – the Developer's plan to maximize its profits is coextensive with the City's best interest, then this Committee and the Council can appropriately take a well-informed vote in favor of the bills before it.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sally Dworak-Fisher". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Sally Dworak-Fisher
Otterbein