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Residents praise, question Inner Arbor plans for Columbia



By Luke Lavoie, llavoie@tribune.com

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Walking into the Inner Arbor Trust's presentation earlier this week on plans for Symphony Woods in downtown Columbia, Hickory Ridge resident Steve Sternheimer said he was a bit skeptical.

After a 90 minute presentation that revealed details of the park's unique architectural and landscaping features, Sternheimer had

changed his tune.

"I commend the group for laying to rest many of my doubts. Many of my questions have been answered, and the team should be applauded," said Sternheimer to the Trust during the public input portion of the Nov. 2 event held at the Rouse Student Services building at Howard Community College.

The presentation revealed details for phase one of the Inner Arbor plan adopted by the Columbia Association in February. Phase one focuses on 16-acres north of Merriweather Post Pavilion and proposes a guest services building called the Butterfly and made of glass and mirrors, an outdoor amphitheater called the Chrysalis and the Caterpillar, and an 800-foot long, 15-foot high tube dividing the concert venue and the park. The tube will have lights, irrigation and house plant life.

The larger master plan — "Merriweather Park" — is even more ambitious, calling for sweeping changes that would turn Merriweather and Symphony Woods into an integrated arts and culture park with multiple theaters, an arts village, restaurants, art galleries, a CA headquarters and ballroom venues.

While Sternheimer left the presentation feeling more confident about the project, he still had unanswered questions, mainly about maintenance and parking.

His response was typical of the nearly 20 people who spoke Monday; the majority praised the plan while simultaneously inquiring about logistics.

Overall, more than 100 people attended the presentation, including

state and county public officials, and largely appeared to favor the plans. Rounds of applause and casual laughter flowed were throughout the presentation.

"I thought it was a great turnout," said Michael McCall, president of the Inner Arbor Trust, which was created by CA to manage the development of Symphony Woods. "Hopefully, a lot of people have realized this is a great thing."

Of the concerns, residents seemed most fixated on park maintenance, parking, funding and security.

"The questions were very understandable questions," McCall said. "Those are very practical things that need to be sorted out. We just need to decide what it is we are trying to do before we figure out how to do those things."

Parking was a particularly hot issue, as the plan currently does not call for any structured parking to be built for the development.

"I don't see a drawing that shows where the people will park and how they will get to the facilities," said Jervis Dorton, an Oakland Mills resident.

McCall said parking will be addressed at a later date, and that building a garage is "way beyond the pay scale of the Trust."

"We are not in this alone," McCall said referring to Howard Hughes Corp., owner of Merriweather and the top developer and landowner in downtown Columbia. "Parking has got to be solved [downtown]. There's been a lot of energy put in already, and there's going to be more put into it. It's going to be solved."

Another criticism of the plan was that it lacked a cohesive theme and focal point. Among the critics was Cy Paumier, a Columbia resident and retired urban planner. Paumier led a group of designers advocating for an alternative plan for the park, which was the lead concept before the Inner Arbor plan was adopted.

"I commend you for your creativity. ... [but] there is no focal point at this park," Paumier said. "There is no there there at this park."

John Slater, a landscape architect based in downtown Columbia, expressed excitement "about the creativity displayed," but said the pathway system "lacked structure."

Slater, who also worked with Paumier on the previous plan also questioned how the Trust is going to finance the project.

According to McCall, the Trust, which is applying for 501(c)3 status with the Internal Revenue Service, hopes to fund the project through grants, donations and government funds.

: "That's a crystal ball and a shell game," Slater said. "I don't understand how he's going to do it."

Still, the plan received high praise from many residents

"I am wowed by the ideas and the visions you have," said Liz Henzey, Kings Contrivance resident and director of the Columbia Association's Art Center.

Hickory Ridge resident Lee Andersen said she is "thrilled" about the project.

"My question is: 'When can you start?'," Andersen asked the Trust.

According to McCall, the first piece of the plan, the Chrysalis amphitheater, could be completed as early as 2015. The next step for the Trust is to submit site development plans to Howard County's Department of Planning and Zoning, which the Trust plans to do by Jan. 28.