

Future of: Columbia presents 'unique opportunity'

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Developer James Rouse envisioned Columbia as an anchor for Howard County, creating it basically from scratch. Rouse wanted to use Merriweather Post Pavilion and the Mall in Columbia to build a strong Baltimore suburb. Today, Columbia is being transformed into its own city, with the goal of being another option for millennials and young workers, as well as empty nesters.

The topic was front and center at the Baltimore Business Journal's Future of Columbia event on May 20 at the Sheraton Columbia Town Center. The discussion was the second in the BBJ's "Future Of" series. The first, Future of South Baltimore, was held earlier this year.

Several leaders involved in Howard County's development gathered at the event to participate in a panel discussion about the changes in Columbia.

The panel, moderated by the BBJ's Melody Simmons, consisted of Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman; Asheel Shah, the president of multi-family housing at Kettler; Peter Garver, the president of Garver Development; Greg Fitchitt, vice president of development at **Howard Hughes Corp.**; and Karen Cherry, a vice president at Howard Hughes Corp. The wide-ranging discussion touched on the current construction in Columbia, the balance of attracting both millennials and baby boomers, and the potential impact this development will have on current residents. Here are excerpts from the discussion.

First off, for the county executive, you're a life-long resident of Howard County. What do you make of all the changes that have been going on?

Allan Kittleman: Columbia has been excellent, and I'm happy to be a part of it. As the county executive, I see my job as being the person who can make all of the infrastructure happen. The government can be the stove to provide the heat, but the businesses cook the meal. We shouldn't be the one cooking the meal, we should be the ones putting the infrastructure in place.

The same thing for you, Asheel, you grew up here. What have you been seeing?

Asheel Shah: I was born and brought up in Columbia. I was a product of the Howard County Public School System. Columbia has evolved so much since I've been here. It's not just the talk of the town, it's the talk of the region. The opportunity that exists in downtown Columbia is something that's unprecedented in



ANDREW WINDHAM

From left: BBJ reporter Melody Simmons, Asheel Shah, Allan Kittleman, Peter Garver, Greg Fitchitt and Karen Cherry.

Maryland. We're an owner, operator and developer up and down the East, and I'm really proud to say that Columbia really is a unique opportunity.

Howard Hughes has been in the thick of all of this. What's it been like to execute this 30-year plan to rebuild the city, and where do we go from here?

Greg Fitchitt: I didn't grow up in Howard County — I'm a newbie. But as a developer, you couldn't ask for a better place to be. Today, we have a fabulous suburb, but a real city hasn't happened yet. The City Council passed a bill a few years ago that really creates a new downtown, it's an incredibly ambitious plan. As much as you see happening now ... all of that, together, represents only 10 percent of that plan. We're doing big things, but it's really only a small part of it. We have a long way to go.

Now Peter, your group recently renovated the Rouse building, which now includes a Whole Foods. How did you approach that project?

Peter Garver: We didn't first know what to do with this building. It's kind of a single-purpose-built building. It would never really be a Class A office in this day and age. We looked at housing, looked at restaurants. Then in early 2011 we started the process, and 15 months later we were able to get a lease signed [with Whole Foods]. In terms of what it meant for Columbia, people were worried that we'd desecrate this monument to Columbia. But I look at it as giving that monument new life. There's still some office space available with beautiful views, so it's very much the heart and center of Columbia.

Karen, when you're going out and trying to pitch companies to move to Columbia, how are you pitching the city?

Karen Cherry: It's interesting, when I first got into real estate people were all worried about their space. How big the office is, how many parking spaces you have. In today's world, what we're seeing is that office users are worried about everything else. The space they can figure out. They want to know how to utilize the space to see what they can do to attract the best employees. They want to know where this is located, how far their employees' commute is, where they can walk from their office for lunch. Employers are really interested in the things that the county executive announced a few weeks ago, like the bike share program. While we talk a lot about walkability in Columbia, there's still some distance, but having that bike share program is going to make a huge difference.

Could you talk a little about what people always think about when there's expansion: Will it affect taxes?

Kittleman: There will not be a tax increase as long as I'm in office. I think what happens is that we will have new tax revenue because of all of this, and that's the way we can make it happen. You bring in new businesses and you get the revenue from that. We want to make sure we have the proper schools, that we have quality teachers. And that'll cost money. My goal is not to raise taxes, but to make you more successful. Because if you're successful, it make us more successful. We can work together in a cycle. I want to make sure that as this evolves, we work with the community. I find all the time, if you don't include people, you have an argument about process. And if you include them, you can have a discussion about action.

Kettler recently opened the Metropolitan near the mall. How is that project faring?

Shah: My breaking news is that its 98 percent leased. It's the most successful building in Kettler's history. The Met is blowing the doors off by our standards. We started leasing up in late December. And by January

or February we had hit our milestone. Everything today is about mixed-use, and everything is about experiences. It's all about, "What's my experience of where I'm going to be?" You'd be surprised how many people from western Howard County have left their homes and come to move into the Met in Columbia.

Peter, can you talk about the lifestyle that people are living in Columbia? What's the vibe out there?

Garver: I think currently it seems to be a mixture of the old and the new. I don't think the old is going to go away. The single-family homes, which there are so many of out here, aren't going anywhere. I think the vibe is great.

Gregg, can you talk about what's going on at Merriweather Post Pavilion. How's that factoring into all this development?

Fitchitt: Merriweather is an icon in Columbia, it's a treasure. It's what many people know Columbia for. It's an incredible brand, and we're building around that. The building we're constructing for MedStar is called One Merriweather. We're identifying the entire area as the Merriweather District. What we're focusing on is the next stage of the Merriweather District which is going to have a mixed-use project. Think of Reston Town Center ... think of Rockville Square. Those kinds of mixed-use town center projects that represent what people really want.

I was on a conference call the other day, and something that was being discussed is the need for more restaurants and national retailers. Are you all looking at bringing those things to Columbia, how's that going?

Fitchitt: Columbia does need a steakhouse, and we're working on that. What we envision in the Merriweather District is a mix of regional, local and some national [retailers and restaurants]. There's great restaurateurs in Baltimore and D.C. We want to bring those into downtown Columbia. We believe downtown Columbia should be the best of both worlds. We want to bring the best of Baltimore and D.C.

Is there a possibility that we're over-saturating? With Port Covington coming in Baltimore and the National Harbor expansion, do we have too much retailing and restaurants?

Cherry: I think what residents and employees are demanding is variety. I think we are over-saturated with chain restaurants and that kind of retail. What we're trying to do is look at something different. We're trying to bring variety, bring newness and freshness.

Shah: I don't know how many people are going to go to National Harbor once a week. National Harbor is a great thing to have for the region, but downtown Columbia is still in the second inning. There's a lot of runway left to expand.

What about affordable housing? Talk about that sector and what it contributes to the overall vision of Columbia.

Kittleman: I think affordable housing has been important for a long time. People in Howard County believe we should have affordable housing everywhere, not just in one place. The goal is to make sure that everyone in our community can live, work and play here and not have to drive here from Baltimore City to work. We don't want any place in our county where there's a void for people of all income levels to live there. I'm excited about what's happening. Some people are scared because frankly, change scares a lot of people. But I think it's important.