

Recreational, scenic wetlands planned for Inner Harbor



Artist's rendition of the planned wetlands habitat between piers 3 and 4, on the National Aquarium campus

(Ayers Saint Gross Architects)



Chris Kaltenbach Contact Reporter The Baltimore Sun

Imagine floating wetlands, bay grasses and terraced edges leading to the Inner Harbor.

Three years from now, a green oasis of floating wetlands, bay grasses and terraced edges leading down to the water will greet visitors to

Baltimore's **Inner Harbor**, under a plan unveiled today by officials of the **National Aquarium**.

The green space, phase 1 in a wide-ranging "campus revitalization" plan aquarium officials hope will see the institution through to the next century, would bring vegetation, interactive exhibits, kayaking, picnic spaces and other educational activities to the water and waterfront between piers 3 and 4, in the middle of the aquarium's campus off Pratt Street. The 2.5-acre area would be free and open to the public. Plans call for work to begin by the end of this year, with completion set for 2019.

"We see this as an opportunity for a second renaissance for Baltimore's harbor, by creating not only a commercially thriving place, but also one that is thriving in terms of its health and green space, and as a habitat for animals and humans to enjoy themselves," said John Racanelli, the aquarium's CEO.

The aquarium already has raised "about half" of the project's projected \$14 million cost, Racanelli said. The project would be paid for by a combination of public and private money, he said.

The plan was unveiled Thursday morning at a meeting of the city's Urban Design and Architecture Review Panel, an advisory arm of the Baltimore Department of Planning. The panel's eventual recommendation would be a precursor to acquiring any necessary approvals from the department or other agencies.



The National Aquarium in Baltimore celebrated the 50 millionth visitor and his family by giving them gifts, ice cream, and a tour of the attraction. (Kenneth K. Lam, Baltimore Sun video)

"Wow," panel member David A. Rubin said at the conclusion of the presentation. "Can it be done tomorrow? That would be great... . It's quite a compelling vision."

The plan for the space was designed to jibe with the aquarium's twin goals of conservation and education, said Jonathan Ceci, a landscape architect with Ayers Saint Gross Architects who leads the design team for the project.

"This effort has been all about maximizing the role of the waterfront campus that the aquarium has in meeting its mission," he said, "of protecting the world's aquatic treasures and educating the public about, in this case, particularly the Chesapeake Bay watershed."



The National Aquarium in Baltimore has been operating a 'soft opening' for its 'Living Seashore' exhibit, which officially opens Tuesday. (Barbara Haddock Taylor/Baltimore Sun)

Aquarium officials have been working closely with the [Waterfront Partnership](#), a group whose "Inner Harbor 2.0" plan calls for increased and greener open spaces in the area, as well as other enhancements that would build off the strengths of the aquarium and the [Maryland Science Center](#), which sits southwest of the aquarium off Light Street.

Laurie Schwartz, president of the Waterfront Partnership, said her group fully supports the aquarium's plans.

"We're excited about bringing the National Aquarium's conservation and educational components outside," she said. "It really helps advance the Inner Harbor 2.0 objective, of creating a more dynamic harbor front area."

While the review panel seemed receptive to the concept as presented, some members voiced skepticism over the scope of the plan and its orientation. "It's promising a lot," said panel member Pavlina Ilieva. "Whether all of these things are going to materialize, we don't know at this stage.

"There may be a few too many things going on," she cautioned, "to the point where it might become gimmicky."

Panel member Richard Burns said his feeling was, "Wow, maybe with some caution." Perhaps, he suggested, the plan was something of a forced-fit for such an urban area.

It "almost seems inauthentic and disrespectful of the history of the harbor as a working harbor," he said.

Rubin, however, was unswayed, lavishing praise on the proposal. "I think having a strong vision is really necessary," he said following the aquarium group's presentation.

Project planners are scheduled to appear before the panel again in the spring, aquarium spokeswoman Kate Rowe said.

Racanelli said the aquarium is taking its cue, in part, from similar efforts in other urban waterfront areas, including Brooklyn, N.Y., and [Charleston](#), S.C. But, he said, Baltimore's space would end up a lot greener and a lot more user-friendly than what has been developed in those cities.

"Nobody's really started with the idea that we are pursuing," he said, "which is to start with the water – to not only work to get the water healthier, but to put in the water living things that create both habitat and a healthier environment. ... We believe that an urban environment, and an urban waterfront, can be thriving, healthy and clean."

A small test strip the aquarium has been maintaining in the harbor for some six years has attracted turtles, egrets and ducks, he said. The harbor itself, he added, is home to some 18 species of invertebrates, fish and other creatures; water samples monitored by aquarium staff have revealed ghost shrimp, blue crab larvae, oyster spat and other life.

"It's healthier than everybody thinks," Racanelli said of the harbor, "but it's got a long way to go."

Schwartz said such a vision jibes perfectly with the partnership's "Healthy Harbor Initiative," which envisions a waterway so cleaned-up and organically revitalized that people would be able to swim in the harbor by the start of the next decade.

"Our stated goal is 2020," she said. "We may not meet that goal for 365 days a year, although we certainly do expect the harbor to be much cleaner."

The plan for a healthy green oasis in the midst of what was once a heavily industrialized port, one of the busiest on the East Coast, continues a remarkable decades-spanning transformation of the Inner Harbor area.

Although much of that industry has been dormant, if not gone entirely, for decades, many of the scars remain. The aquarium's initiative, Racanelli said, is part of a continuing effort to transform the harbor from heavily industrial to people-friendly. One of the most expensive components of the plan, he noted, involves cutting into decades-old bulkheads at the water's edge, to create terraces that will lead gradually down to the water.

"This harbor was a key industrial base; it was designed to provide a bulkhead for a ship to tie up to," he said. "It wanted to be harsh and hard-edged and not particularly accessible to fish or fowl or even humans. We're changing that, to both physically and symbolically bring people closer to the water."

chris.kaltenbach@baltsun.com

twitter.com/chriskaltsun