

Ox Hill Cos. eyes new concert hall and hotel in Old Town Fairfax, rekindling deferred 'dream concept'

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David M. Schwarz Architects Inc.

A new hotel in Old Town Fairfax, envisioned as part of a larger arts-and-entertainment destination.

A local developer is taking a second crack at building an arts-and-entertainment venue in the city of Fairfax, envisioned to become part of a larger, mixed-use development in the heart of Old Town.

Just before the pandemic, the Fairfax-based Ox Hill Cos. sought to build a mixed-use project, including a performing arts space, hotel, multifamily, office and retail, on roughly 1.8 acres on Main Street, just north of Fairfax County's judicial center. The developer subsequently pivoted to a mixed-used residential condo building called City Centre West at that location, instead — owing partly to the pandemic, but more to size constraints and road infrastructure requirements placed on the site, Chris Smith, Ox Hill's managing partner, said in an interview. But the firm didn't give up on what he called the "dream concept" of an arts-based destination. Now it's trying again, this time about a quarter mile to the east.

Ox Hill has under contract four adjacent parcels — 4020 University Drive and 4029, 4031 and 4057 Chain Bridge Road — about 3.9 acres in all, southeast of the

intersection of Chain Bridge Road and Sager Avenue. In a new early-stage proposal, the builder would put on the site's northern half a 4,000-seat concert hall and a 163-room hotel.

Smith sees the project, dubbed The Ox Fairfax, as a decisive falling domino, giving the city "a direction for future economic growth," namely, as an "arts, entertainment and hospitality" destination. That comports with the city's 2020 adopted Old Town Small Area Plan, high-level land use and transportation planning legislation, which "re-imagines" downtown as "a dynamic, mixed-use center with a deep inventory of cultural destinations."

Ox Fairfax, not near a Metro station but less than two miles of Interstate 66 and its recently opened express lanes, is intended as the first phase of what Smith said would eventually become a two-block "district for people to live and play in the same place," meaning it'd include a residential component. At full buildout, it would grow to some 1 million square feet, though Smith said it was too early to detail the final product.

In addition to the concert hall and seven-story hotel, the phase currently proposed would include about 18,500 square feet of ground-floor retail and restaurant space; an atrium; a "green gallery," or "basically an art gallery of plants," Smith said; 29,000 square feet for "other uses including a recording studio, and a conference center space to accommodate a wide variety of functions and events," according to an April 20 pre-application filing; and a 459-space below-grade parking garage.

The concert hall — which Smith called "midsize" and compared to The Anthem at The Wharf on D.C.'s Southwest Waterfront — would come under the management of "an internationally-known arts and entertainment operator," the filing says.

All in, the first phase would clock in at about \$250 million, including land acquisition, Smith said. He anticipates receiving rezoning approval by the end of 2023, with construction to commence in mid-2024.

The four parcels Ox Hill has under contract currently contain four office buildings totaling a little over 99,000 square feet. Three of those buildings would come down to make way for new construction. The fourth — a small, two-story brick bank building constructed in 1900 — would stay put and become "architecturally

integrated with the proposed buildings," per the pre-application filing.

The largest parcel, home to a five-story building and a surface parking lot, is owned by SunTrust Banks Inc., which became Truist Financial Corp. (NYSE: TFC) through a 2019 merger. Having followed that merger, and on the lookout for a new arts-and-entertainment site, Smith said he approached the players at the time and struck a deal to acquire their land and move the Truist branch up the road to Ox Hill's new construction at City Centre West.

Mackall Brothers LLC owns two of the lots under contract; the Humane Society of Fairfax County Inc. owns one.

Regarding the development's potential impact on traffic and congestion, Smith said the city already "has a lot of commuter traffic cutting through it," whereas the project would give folks reasons to "stay here and enjoy the place, and spend their money here, versus just driving through it on their way to their job in Alexandria."

As for not being near rail, he was sanguine, saying the venue isn't "an ideal use for Metro, necessarily," because it would host only "a couple of performances a week," not nightly shows. "Reston did really well for a long time without Metro," he said. "I'm pretty certain you don't need it."

Smith, who minored in music once upon a time, described the undertaking as a personal career bucket list item, saying he wanted to do something "that was going to meaningfully and significantly impact the quality of people's lives for a very long time after I'm gone." He hopes eventually to replicate this kind of project elsewhere, he added.

Chris Bruno, who heads the city government's economic development department, said of Ox Fairfax in an email he's "excited that the desirability of Fairfax City yields such dynamic proposals, and we look forward to working through the land review and use process."

The project has not received any public sector incentives, Smith said.

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