

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/howard/columbia/ph-ho-cf-michael-mccall-0314-20130313,0,6338134.story>



At an information session on the Inner Arbor Plan earlier this year, Michael McCall talks to residents about building an arts village in Symphony Woods Park. (Photo by Nate Pesce, Patuxent Publishing / January 30, 2013)

McCall invokes Rouse in design for Symphony Woods Park

By Luke Lavoie, llavoie@tribune.com

2:31 p.m. EDT, March 13, 2013

Michael McCall's first impression of Jim Rouse dates back to the 1981, when, on a trip to Baltimore as a young developer, he picked up a copy of *Time* magazine with the iconic Columbia founder on the cover.

A year later, after many phone calls and even more letters, McCall found himself sitting inside Rouse's office, interviewing for a position he would land as a developer with Rouse's newest project, the Enterprise Foundation.

Now, more than 30 years later, that same persistence and initiative has led McCall to the forefront of the evolution of Symphony Woods Park in downtown Columbia.

His Inner Arbor Plan, which is meant to invoke Rouse's [Inner Harbor](#) in Baltimore, would transform the serene, wooded landscape into a natural arts hub dispersed with buildings, restaurants and attractions.

"Jim Rouse shaped 14,000 acres in Columbia and thousands across the world," McCall said. "To be able to help reshape those 50 acres, just that one little piece, to help set that a new for the next 50 years, is an awesome responsibility."

And, although McCall, 56, who owns a consulting company called Strategic Leisure, has spent his career conjuring up ideas for all types of developments, the Inner Arbor plan isn't business as usual.

"I asked Jim several times over the course of years what was he most proud of, and it was always Columbia," McCall said. "So when I raised my hand for this, I thought, I don't know what I can do here, but I owe it to Jim because he changed my life."

Like his career with Rouse, who died in 1996, the Inner Arbor Plan was also born out of a happenstance encounter with a piece of journalism, a July 21, 2011, edition of *The Columbia Flier*.

"My wife, Barbara, hands me the paper and says look at this," McCall said about a story on the [Howard County](#) Design Panel's critique that the previous plan for Symphony Woods Park lacked vision.

The critique stuck with him, but it wasn't until after a conversation with his former Enterprise boss, George Barker, that McCall decided he wanted to do something about it.

The following July, after the County Planning Board approved the final development plan for the park, McCall was given his shot by CA President Phil Nelson.

"Phil comes back to me and says, 'We need your help,' " McCall said. "We reconfigured the plan into what you see today."

Nelson said the Inner Arbor Plan is a more comprehensive neighborhood plan, and is more in line with what the county is looking for within the neighborhood.

"We started thinking about how to build a park that takes six different generations of people into account," Nelson said in an email. "I think Michael's plan not only provides a nice walkable place, but it also gives people something to do, and it gives people, more than anything, something that they would want to come back to."

The plan, which critics malign for its conversion of the 50-acre park from serene retreat into curated arts hub, focused on creating an arts village on the eastern edge of the park between Merriweather Post Pavilion and South Entrance Road.

The arts village will include a new CA headquarters, a children's theater, the relocation of Toby's Dinner Theatre, three restaurants, a 1,750-space parking garage and a ballroom-style meeting house.

The portion of the park that fronts on to Little Patuxent Parkway will remain largely undisturbed, save for the northeast corner of the property, where an interactive sculpture, and possibly a county-owned library, is planned.

"We need to be aspirational for Howard County and for Maryland even," McCall said. "Everything we spend money on needs to be impactful. Everything needs to really contribute to the whole experience."

For Barker and the eight members of the CA board who voted in February in favor of the plan, it does just that.

"He is converting a passive place not greatly enjoyed into something that would be a real place for people," said Barker, who moved to Columbia in 1972, his first year at the Rouse company.

"Some people may disagree with me, but I think Jim would say this is terrific," he said. "Not to say that (the previous plan developed by Cy Paumier) was a bad plan; this plan adds another dimension to what goes on at Symphony Woods Park."

Some have drawn lines in the sand between the Inner Arbor Plan and Paumier's plan, which called for the development of a large fountain in the northern section of the park.

McCall and Paumier do not see it that way, however.

For McCall, the two plans offer two separate answers to two different questions.

"That big idea was connecting Symphony Woods to the Mall because all future life was

going to radiate from the Mall, and it's not without merit," McCall said. "(The Paumier Plan) is a good answer to that challenge, but I don't see that as the challenge.

"I see Symphony Woods as a magical environment," he said. "No one considered Symphony Woods could be a destination in and of itself in any significant way."

Paumier, a veteran park architect and former Rouse Co. employee, sees the Inner Arbor as a complement to his plan, and has requested that the CA board combine the two plans.

"We've been supporting the idea of a cultural arts district. Our argument is, you need a first-class park as a gateway to this entire district," Paumier said. "It's not an either/or, you need both."

Paumier is holding out hope that the plans can be matched up and that his proposed 8- to 10-acre park, which sits on land left relatively undisturbed by the Inner Arbor Plan, can come to fruition.

McCall says there are "good planning" reasons not to combine the plans, the foremost being that the Howard County Planning Board ruled a revision to Paumier's plan be submitted that removed fewer trees.

While the park, as it is designed by McCall, is years away from opening, the first steps have begun to make the Inner Arbor Plan a reality.

The CA board will begin setting up the Inner Arbor Trust, a 501(c)(3) organization that will manage the development of the park, at its March 14 meeting. Meanwhile, members of CA staff are preparing site development and final development plans that will be submitted to the County Planning Board for the three development phases of the park.

Funding for the park is still being solidified, although it is expected that the trust, which will be capable of generating money through grants and donations; the CA; and either the county government or [Howard Hughes](#) Corp., which owns Merriweather Post Pavilion, will split the bill.

Dear Walt Disney

Before McCall launched a letter-writing campaign to Rouse in his mid-20's, an even younger McCall tried to get the attention of another innovator, Walt Disney.

"When I was 12, Walt Disney was on the cover of National Geographic," McCall said. "I wrote a letter. ... I had ideas for him."

McCall said his obsession with creative spaces dates back even further, to when he was a

young boy growing up in Rochester, Minn.

Every Christmas growing up, McCall would visit a local Minnesota department store's interactive window display.

"As a little kid, this was magical. The idea of spaces and experiences intrigued me," McCall said.

After graduating with a degree in economics from St. Cloud State University, McCall took a job as the assistant to the chairman and founder of Wilson Learning Worldwide.

While the company was known for developing new sales strategies, McCall was charged with organizing the relocation of the headquarters from suburban Minneapolis into an old train station downtown.

The relocation never materialized, but McCall's interest in development did.

Out from the shadow

Although to some it may seem as though McCall came out of nowhere, he has spent the last three decades living in the shadow of the park, which is less than two miles from his Hickory Ridge home.

From 1982 to 1992, McCall worked at a for-profit subsidiary of the Enterprise Foundation called the Enterprise Development Co. During those years, he oversaw the development of projects, helped lead a clandestine collaboration between Rouse and Disney, and consulted on major projects at the [Field Museum](#) in Chicago and overseas.

"I started in development in 1978, and I've had the privilege to have worked for and with some of the best people in the world," McCall said. "The Inner Arbor plan has a lot of facets to it, but everything I've done to date professionally prepares me for this."

And although the colloquial occupational description for McCall is "developer," he views it differently.

"In Hollywood, you have the creative, or what I call the 'red-tennis-shoe guys' and the 'suits' or the guys with the MBAs. Both are pejoratives, but they have some truth," McCall said.

"Then you think about Jim, who wore these very garish plaid sport coats and the silly fisherman's hat. ... He's a lawyer and a mortgage banker, but he loved the creative side of things. He's a metaphor for the integration of creativity and business."

After his departure from EDC, McCall founded Strategic Leisure, which strives to

implement the integration Rouse believed in.

"The idea of the strategic designer, the combination of creative and analytical, aren't those the people who provide the greatest value to our society?" McCall said.

Bruce Laval, the former head of planning and development for Walt Disney Parks and Resorts, first met McCall while working on the secret collaboration known as "Rouse Mouse."

According to McCall, the 30-month joint venture began in 1985 and centered on the design, planning and conceptualization of three projects in Dallas, Chicago and Burbank.

As McCall wrote in a 2002 edition of *Entertainment Management*, "Disney and Rouse were attracted to each other out of mutual respect for the great places each had developed."

Although none of the three projects resulted in any development, Laval said it was a fruitful merger from Disney's perspective.

"Disney was considering doing some regional entertainment, so they decided to partner with Rouse," Laval said. "It was a good partnership."

Laval said McCall's greatest strength as a developer is his ability to blend different aspects into one "big picture."

"He's got the creative ability, and the business side of the equation, and he knows how to put the team together and get the best out of everybody," Laval said. "That's a rare talent."

Walt Disney Imagineering Director of Master Planning and Creative Development David Stofcik said McCall's practical and balanced approach doesn't hinder him from aiming high.

"That's key with Michael, he understands you have to present the big idea, and if you don't you are never going to have an impact in the community," Stofcik said.

Paumier also praised McCall for his creativity, but still has questions about how some aspects of the plan, specifically the construction of theaters and a CA headquarters on the park's inclined hill, can be brought from concept to reality.

"He's an idea man, he's all about good ideas. ... It is a brilliant idea, but it may not be buildable." Paumier said. "We need to raise questions."

Laval believes the skepticism comes with the territory.

"When you look at most great things that have been accomplished, people are always skeptical. Disney had a reputation of doing things that were crazy and couldn't be done,"

Laval said.

And as for the criticism that the plan is too costly or unfeasible, Laval's not buying it.

"I don't like it when people say it is too ambitious," Laval said. "If you want it to be great, you have to think big, and you have to think out of the box."