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Commercial Real Estate

Long-awaited Old Town Mall redevelopment kicks off



Image: Melody Simmons/BBJ

The former Old Town Mall retail hub in East Baltimore is now vacant and blighted — but a long-anticipated redevelopment has kicked off this year.

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Old Town Mall's \$131 million overhaul has begun in Baltimore.
- The project includes new retail, residential units, and a hotel.
- Dana Henson leads the redevelopment with private and public funding.

A \$131 million overhaul of Old Town Mall has kicked off in East Baltimore with the first new retail and residential units expected to open within a year.

The long-awaited project aims to transform the blighted former retail hub west of Johns Hopkins Hospital into a modern urban community anchored by a new hotel, residential units and a fresh wave of retail. Four leases are already in the works for the first phase, which is expected to open by September 2025, said Dana Henson, principal of the Henson Development Co., lead developer on the project.

Henson said she has long aspired to reshape the area that once attracted hundreds of shoppers a week to dozens of small, locally-owned shops. Today, the former mall resembles a zombie movie set with broken windows, vacant buildings and desolation.

"Revitalizing this historic area of Baltimore is not just about rebuilding structures, it's about reigniting the spirit of a community that has been overlooked for far too long," Henson said this week. "We're excited to restore its vibrancy while honoring its rich history."

The first phase of the Old Town project recently kicked off and will bring 11 one-bedroom apartments and four new retail spots to the property just off Gay and Orleans streets. Henson said the cost of converting the blighted structures in the initial phase will total \$11 million and will act as a catalyst for further redevelopment that will include more apartments and a hotel with at least 120 keys. A 50,000-square-foot marketplace with a parking garage, similar to Lexington Market, is also in the works.

Most of the funding for the first phase is private investment, she added. Public investment in new infrastructure at the site is needed for other phases to follow as the area has not been on the city's radar for decades.

The project is a part of the large-scale redevelopment of more than 200 acres near the Hopkins medical campus that includes the former Somerset Homes site, where Henson Co. and partners Mission First Housing have already developed three affordable housing towers that are fully leased. Nearby, the

transformation of the former Perkins Homes public housing project into a modern, mixed-use community is underway.

In all, the projects will inject about \$1 billion of new investment into the neighborhood and aim to jumpstart a new way of life in areas of the city that have been ignored for years.

The move to remake the Old Town Mall is the latest facet of the large-scale redo. Henson has partnered with Mission First Housing Group and the Tran Group and all are focused on making it happen. They are working off a multi-tiered master plan detailed in several public meetings over the past four years with city review boards. The first phase will also include incubator space in 7,000 square feet in the heart of the Old Town Mall.



A December 2021 rendering of the proposed redesign for the Old Town Mall in East Baltimore. THE HENSON DEVELOPMENT CO.

"I recognize that I'm creating a new neighborhood because none of these neighborhoods were places where people wanted to live in," Henson said, of the area.

She said work on a fourth apartment tower at the former Somerset site off Central Avenue that will be anchored by a Lidl is expected to begin next year.

In the meantime, she is focused on the first two phases of the Old Town Mall project, which will include the initial apartments and retail complex followed by development of a residential building with some townhomes and more apartments. Most of the units will be affordable, she added.

"I love taking on something like this," Henson said. "This is more than a development project. It's an opportunity to breathe new life into a treasured part of Baltimore's story. The excitement comes from knowing that we're creating a space where the community can thrive for generations to come."