

Rail yard renaissance

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A small city where more than 27,000 people will live and work is arising in what was once a vast 300-acre field of railroad ties and scrub grass between Arlington and Alexandria called Potomac Yard. The former historic Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad switching yard - one of the last pieces of high-value, undeveloped land in Northern Virginia - was bought by Crescent Resources four years ago to create a mixed-use mini-metropolis for more than \$100 million.

Stretching north from the Braddock Road Metrorail station to Crystal City and the Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, Potomac Yard is bordered by Route 1 to the west and George Washington Memorial Parkway to the east. Potomac Yard Shopping Center's big box stores divide the two jurisdiction's developments at Four Mile Run.

Without major investments in roadway improvements and transit, the new mixed-use communities could paralyze an area already choked by traffic.

In 2002, the yard was approved for more than 3,000 condos, town houses and single-family homes; two 600-room hotels, more than 4 million square feet of office space, 265,000 square feet of retail space and several parks.

"For these mixed-use developments to work, you needs lots of owners, lots of money and political will," said Dan Kohlhepp, president of the Crescent Potomac Yard, whose company is the master developer on the project and has been selling the yard to developers piece by piece.

Arlington's portion of the yard, the South Tract, is springing up "as fast as people can get their approvals and get going," Kohlhepp said.

Windows shine on the nearly complete brick and concrete exterior of the two 12-story office towers that shot up at Crystal Drive and 27th Street, west of the airport. The Environmental Protection Agency leased the majority of the towers for an estimated \$140 million and expect to move in by spring 2006.

At \$30 to \$45 a foot for office space, Kohlhepp said office space will move fast - even with the newly vacant space due to the Base Closure and Realignment Commission. The proximity of the nation's capital, the Pentagon, the airport and major highways make this hot property.

Comstock Homes have sold 70 percent of its 11-story building's 465 condos, said Bill Bensten, Comstock senior vice president. The project, which includes underground parking, gradually makes its way to ground level at the eastern extension of South Glebe Road. It is slated to open during the second half of 2006.

"[The condos] are certainly upscale and they are going to be more than comfortable," said

Bensten of the condos, which range in price from \$300,000 to \$1 million.

A Harris Teeter grocery store and 386 more residential units are also in the works next door.

The suburban big box stores that split the towers of Arlington's Potomac Yard and the Del Ray hybrid coming to Alexandria will be integrated into the whole plan for the yard - although no plans for redevelopment have been received, said Jeff Farner, Alexandria's Planning and Zoning division chief.

Alexandria's portion

The stalled development of Alexandria's portion of the yard have been kick-started by the property's new - and third - owner, Pulte Home Corporation, which plans on making some changes with public approval, like cutting the hotel size in half.

Alexandria's planned town center, just south of the Shopping Center "really doesn't fit the mold of a town center today," said Stan Settle, vice president at Pulte Home Corporation. "What we want to do is keep people living, working and shopping where they live."

After complementing the plan to bring more housing closer to jobs and aiming for a walkable community, Stewart Schwartz of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, said, "The shortcoming is there is not enough diversity in housing types and affordability."

Schwartz said providing more dense housing would allow for more affordable units for the mixed-income work force that will be needed in the new community.

Transit Targets

For Arlington:

- 60 percent of people drive by themselves
- 26 percent take public transit
- 14 percent carpool, bike or walk

For Alexandria:

- 70 percent of people drive by themselves
- 20 percent take public transit
- 10 percent carpool, bike or walk

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