

City eyes 'dating site' for developers, communities

Website would be tool to tout project opportunities

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Baltimore may soon attract more growth using a website one elected official compared to a dating site for developers and cities.

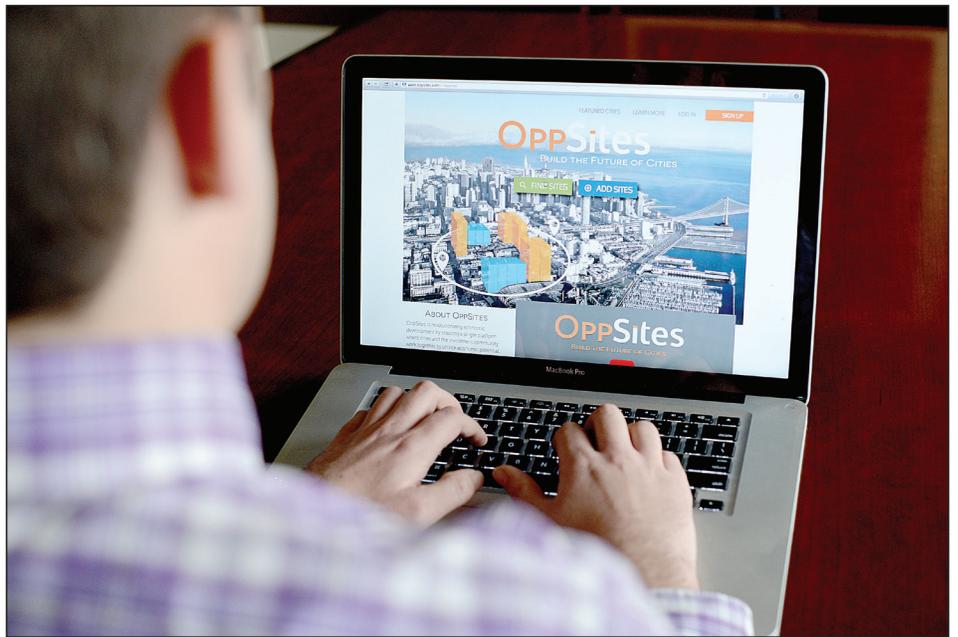
Councilman Bill Henry said he and Planning Director Thomas J. Stosur heard a pitch from OppSites.com about two weeks ago at the New Partners for Smart Growth conference and compared it to the popular dating website Match.com. OppSites allows cities to post information about districts and property detailing the kind of development a community is seeking, which allows investors to leverage that information to find "underexposed real estate opportunities."

"It's a free, and hopefully very effective, tool to recruit interested developers," Henry said.

Henry said the city is working through a process so that it and various communities can begin posting development opportunities on the website. Tania Baker, a spokeswoman for the Housing Authority of Baltimore City, said officials are still deciding whether to use the site and that if they did it would not require any special approvals.

Ian Ross, CEO and co-founder of OppSites, said cities and communities are allowed to place property — even private property not currently for sale — on the site because its public information being shared. OppSites also allows governments to post information that developers would need to abide by, such as a Request for Proposal process, associated with any public property listed on the website. So far about 130 cities have posted districts or property on the website.

"By adding a site to OppSites a city is not listing a site as for sale, not at all. They're simply spotlighting it and



MAXIMILIAN FRANZ

Baltimore could start posting development opportunities to the website OppSites in the near future.

communicating to the investment community that it's a good development opportunity," Ross said.

Ross and his team spent the previous 15 years helping communities put together plans outlining how they want to see their neighborhood develop. But he said he saw an opportunity through OppSites, which launched in September, to help bring those plans to life — and make some money.

Oakland-based OppSites allows any city to identify development opportunities and post them to the site and share the properties with developers and brokers they've previously work with for free.

But the website also offers a paid premium service that allows a city to send development opportunities to the website's national database of investors and brokers. Ross declined to discuss the prices for a city becoming a premium member because the fee has shifted a few times in the past couple of months. The company's board is discussing a sliding pay scale that would charge a small town less than it would a major city.

"We're just basically providing a marketing service, if you will, that cities pay for, which is a sliver of the cost that a city would pay to market

it by virtue of running ads in all the papers around the country or out of their websites. So it's a targeted marketing service," Ross said.

Once the Baltimore gives the OK, Henry knows what area of the city he wants to market using OppSites first.

Henry, who has been working with a group called the York Road Collective that consists of Loyola University Maryland; Notre Dame of Maryland University; Govans Ecumenical Development Corp.; Baltimore Development Corp.; Govanstowne Business Association and the York Road Partnership, wants to first market the York Road corridor.

The corridor, which runs through the heart of Henry's district, was the subject of a report the Urban Land Institute Baltimore released last April. It described the perception of that portion of the city as "aged, unmarketable, partially un-walkable, and often times unsafe — especially from 39th Street to Northern Parkway."

But Henry said he's excited about the prospects for OppSite to draw development and businesses, such as a grocery store, that residents want to see open along York Road.

"It looks like a perfect fit for the York Road redevelopment plan," Henry said.