



## C. Fraser Smith

Ongoing State Center saga makes you wonder if government itself is functioning. 14A

## Zoning dispute

It's environmentalists vs. builders and Realtors as Charles Co. weighs changes around creek. 7A

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## Where's the Plan B for State Center?

Hard to know what's happening with the \$1.5 billion State Center project. Or maybe not. Nothing's happening.

Gov. Larry Hogan and the Board of Public Works have tried to kill the project that began at the dawn of recorded time. (Actually, it was just seven years ago.)

The board has driven a stake into its heart, voiding leases that would have allowed construction of a new office complex and various attendant uses, including shops, offices and retail.

Hogan said he was authorizing a fast-track study of what do now.

Laughable. The project has been in suspended animation for three state government administrations. And we have no plan B?

Comptroller Peter Franchot, rushing to Governor No Plan's aid, says, Why not a sports stadium? Why not a duckpin venue or a wave park or name something.

The current state office building apparently has some real issues. That's why a new building was proposed to begin with.

We are moving into a zone that makes you wonder if government itself is functioning. Presumably these offices exist pursuant to some dictate of the General Assembly. If you can't provide for the offices and the workers, aren't you guilty of some dereliction?

If you actually started forward with a sports stadium and took seven years to get started, you'd be a laughingstock – and, since it was sports, there'd be demands for heads.

How embarrassing to kill the deal and have nothing to propose in its place. When Hogan killed the Red Line, at least he bothered to propose better bus service.

To observe that the project was stalled by lawsuits lays out the his-

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Commentary



tory. But to have no plan for moving forward suggests a lack of basic governmental problem-solving and imagination.

If the building was needed almost a decade ago, how do we find ourselves with no plan in place and no idea where to go from here?

There have been so murmurings of problems with how much debt the state can afford. Does that mean we're dealing with a big picture budget question – a policy-driven one?

In other words, does the governor wish to illustrate his conservative bona fides here? Is he simply opposed to spending the money on a \$1.5 billion government project? Is no action good action here?

### First clash?

And will we have the first of clashes between the city's new Democratic mayor, Catherine Pugh, and the Republican governor? Seems inevitable, doesn't it?

Pugh wants to get along. She will now troop to Annapolis to make a case for getting the project back on some track – if the current project operators don't go to court, stalling the project yet again. In fact, they are promising to do just that.

What to do then? They probably can't clear the decks for a new developer, and who would want to get involved now? Asked and answered, as the lawyers say.

All of this goes on in the usual at-

mosphere: construction costs rise. What would a \$1.5 billion project really cost today? How much money has delay cost Maryland?

Landowner and principal Orioles owner Peter Angelos challenged the project from the beginning, arguing the state was competing with landowners leasing space to the state closer to downtown.

Franchot took shots at previous administrations that approved rents he described as "insane." Developer David Cordish agreed, but said Franchot's arena idea would be a "disaster." Neighbors would almost surely agree with that.

The current developer's attorney, Michael Edney, said the lease holder will go to court. That action, he suggested, would mean another five years before anyone could lift "a shovel full of dirt." (Edney said Thursday his client plans to fight a lawsuit over the development filed Wednesday by the state.)

Edney called the debt issue "a total red herring." He said he hopes the governor will have a change of heart.

If not, Edney, "we'll see his representatives in court."

And state employees will find themselves still working in overcrowded, unhealthy conditions. Who knows, maybe there will be more lawsuits from employees.

Supportive neighboring groups, eager for some positive development in their communities, will have to live with their disappointment.

The rest of us will be asking, yet again, who's in charge?

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