

Takoma Junction Task Force

Minutes – August 18, 2011

A quorum being present, the meeting convened at 7:40 pm.

Present: Dan Seligman, Kay Daniels Cohen, Seth Grimes, Howard Grimes, Katrina Oprisko, Lorig Charkoudian, Susan Robb, Billy Coulter, Hailu Aichehi, Steve Dubb, Roger Schlegel.

Visiting: J.J. Smith

1. Agenda review. The meeting agenda was accepted as proposed.
2. Seth Grimes updated the group on the status of signal timing problems at Sycamore/Ethan Allan/Carroll. A police department bulletin had incorrectly stated that vehicle detectors underground were disabled so that these could be repaired, and so that countdown timers and crosswalk signals (also audible signals) could be installed. This bulletin ignored interactions that the Task Force had had with the State Highway Administration. Lorraine Pearsall has sent Cedric Ward of the SHA a request for a status update.

It was noted that it would be helpful for city staff to coordinate the Task Force's work with that of city departments to avoid problems. For example, the new "Public Parking" signs at the City Lot were not placed before Façade Advisory Board for review. Also, the city seems to have had ongoing difficulties in communicating with SHA.

Lorig Charkoudian recalled a previous meeting at which it was suggested that a Task Force recommendation be to improve the City relationship with SHA or other state/county agencies with a stake in the Junction. There was general agreement that the relationship is dysfunctional and should be addressed.

Follow-up suggestions included (1) that Seth Grimes communicate with the Chief of Police on behalf of the TF; (2) that Sara Daines or other city staff be brought in to TF meetings; (3) that the state delegation remain apprised of, and involve in, issues surrounding Rt. 410 and the Junction; (4) that the City budget include a Junction "program" which would receive funding over several years. It was agreed that Sara Daines would be invited to a next meeting of the TF.

One final comment: "The New U" program could be a model for the Junction.

3. Summary of meeting with developers on August 17th, and further discussion: Two developers met at the City Lot with members of the Task Force: (1) John Urciolo, owner of the Laurel Avenue strip and the building where Shampoo is located (both in Old Takoma). He grew up near here and knows Takoma Park well. (2) Jeff Topchik, who lives in Takoma Park and works for JGR in Rockville, on commercial development projects, usually larger scale. About 10 TF members were present.

The essence of John Urciolo's message: The rear one-third or one-quarter of the City Lot site's macadam portion is underlain by fill material which was dumped in the era before such dumping was regulated.

Given that dumping occurred in the 1950-60s period, prior to any environmental regulation, there could be a great deal of hazardous material there. An environmental purist might be worried about the site right now, but on the other hand the site has remained in the same state for a number of years. No developer would be interested in the site unless the City were willing to take responsibility for testing and remediation. Testing alone would cost up to \$100,000, including first audit, second audit, borings, etc. Remediation could cost a million dollars or more. Some ideas discussed included Co-op expansion to the east, creation of a covered area in the current City lot, possible use of front (streetside) portion of the lot if the soil there proves to have been unaffected by fill/dumping activity. Even a park would have to be built up above the asphalt because “finding out” what’s underneath the lot could be financially disastrous. Seth Grimes suggested that a starting point might be to test an area on the upper part of the wooded hillside to get a clue as to what might lie under the City Lot. Discussion ensued as to whether positive findings of hazardous materials in the wooded lot would require the City to proceed into cleanup of the entire lot. In the meeting with Urciolo and Topchik, they were of the opinion that if there were an environmental problem found on the wooded lot, the City would be required to clean up only the wooded lot. A deciding factor might be where the boundaries between the various parcels lie.

Urciolo’s opinion was that the size of the developable area is not sufficiently large to justify the building of a very high retaining wall, which would be needed because of the slope. The largest structure that could be built would be three stories high. Something built on slab could be two stories high; however, even a slab would require breaking ground for footings. A developer would insist upon the City indemnifying it, and might request an opt-out clause if significant remediation turned out to be required. Salt Lake City has a number of such plots in the central city that cannot be developed.

Kay Daniels Cohen suggested the building of a park, something more beautiful, to attract people to go to the Junction, in combination with a walking path up from Columbia and Poplar. Susan Robb asked how much soil would be needed (over the top of the macadam) to create any kind of parklike setting; another TF member suggested that 18 inches would be the minimum (without tree planting). Katrina Oprisko noted that Subcommittee A’s proposal included doing a park or a tented kiosk. Seth Grimes noted that Urciolo was enthusiastic about food trucks, crafts fair events, and perhaps a pavilion structure so that vendors would not have to cart tents/awnings in and out. Dan Seligman emphasized that Urciolo was responding as a developer but was also enthusiastic about a potential Co-op expansion along the front portion of the property or on the current lot along Sycamore (with a guarantee of the continued use of parking on the City Lot), with perhaps a piece of the front portion of the City Lot being used to round out the Co-op’s need for square footage.

Howard Kohn noted that both Jeff Topchik and John Urciolo said pretty clearly that if the Co-op wanted to be the lead developer for the property, that would be workable, as opposed to an outside developer coming in. Roger Schlegel suggested that a dance hall might attract patrons during off hours when there would be reduced demand for Co-op parking. Billy Coulter suggested that the Co-op expansion might try to work with the space available in the Turner property, as a certain amount of parking must be maintained to support the other businesses in the area. Roger Schlegel reported a potential of 7 more spaces behind Carroll Row and perhaps 15 to 18 “employee” spots which could be made available in the Grant Ave. side of the Carroll Gardens apartments lot, via a use agreement (based on Schlegel’s observations and calculations). Seth Grimes and others commented that encouragement of public transportation, shuttles, and bikeshares could help in the Junction.

In the meeting with developers, Jeff Topchik essentially agreed with John Urciolo's comments. The idea of engaging with potential retail tenants was discussed but not viewed as highly promising. Also, the outright sale of the lot was deemed a poor idea, as it would not fetch a good price. Urciolo suggested that if the lot were sold, the likely "best use" would be a fast-food restaurant.

Dan Seligman suggested that, given the number of moving pieces in the question of what to do with the City Lot, an organizing principle could be trying to brand and re-design the area as Eco-Junction, in line with the national trend toward brownfield development. A program would be put in place by the city to develop "Eco-Junction" over a two-year period. Seligman noted that, since the Co-op faces a very difficult business decision -- whether to become the primary developer of the Junction -- perhaps the City should be footing the cost for a consultant to help the Co-op explore what to do, and whether to do anything, on the City Lot. If the Co-op can't work with the site, then the fallback development option would be a public park.

Kay Daniels Cohen also suggested a basketball court as a possible part of a multi-purpose redesign of the lot.

Summarizing comments, Seth Grimes suggested the TF seems to be leaning toward the following recommendations: (1) the exploration of mixed-use by the community, to include sports, vendor events, and dance events; (2) City support for Co-op exploration of expansion; (3) testing of the wooded portion of the City lot; and (4) given that these initiatives would take time, a program approach to the dedication of resources by staff. Dan Seligman restated the value of placing time-boundaries around the process.

Regarding item (2) Steve Dubb noted that the Co-op's expansion window for this site is already three years or less. Howard Kohn reemphasized that the existing Co-op interest in expansion onto the City Lot is an obvious plus, even from the standpoint of the developers without an "insider" interest in the site. The general group consensus is that, while sensitivity about conflicts of interest is worth considering with respect to the Co-op's expansion interests and the membership of Co-op members on the Task Force, the Co-op expansion remains a strong viable possibility for the City Lot at this point. Lorig Charkoudian suggested that the TF report overtly mention the conversations we have had about the potential for bias toward the Co-op.

4. Presentation and Report to Council: September 19th was suggested by Seth Grimes as the date for the report presentation. Billy Coulter has agreed to work on the visual presentation. September 26th would be also a potential followup date for handing in the report.

Howard Kohn suggested that all try to attend on the 19th.

Seth Grimes cited Roger Schlegel's suggestion that we write as much as possible of the report, then meet in September to decide upon the recommendations.

It was agreed not to meet again until August 30th; then to hold a final community outreach forum during the week of September 6; then to meet on Monday, September 12 for the final votes that might need to be taken.

The group briefly discussed how much debate and discussion is still needed prior to finalizing the report. Lorig Charkoudian suggested that, given the emerging traffic report and the options that it offers, we

seem to have consensus about fixing the lights, about getting a better relationship with the State Highway Administration, and perhaps “chopping the chunk” of B.Y. Morrison Park in combination with other adjustments. All other options seem to be up for further consideration but require more traffic flow studies. In the report, “beliefs” as well as “facts” can be presented without decisions or votes.

Seth Grimes noted that the TF can recommend a multi-stage process that includes a sequence of immediate, near-term, long-term actions; Roger Schlegel suggested performance targets for the intersection and recommendations to achieve those performance targets. Summarizing, Lorig Charkoudian stated that the TF’s goal would be to achieve optimal performance for the existing intersection, and then measure that performance and establish it as the baseline for doing simulations to determine potential performance improvements. Kay Daniels Cohen suggested that a deadline be set for each stage of this process. Howard Kohn noted that the key to any forward progress is getting enough information from the State to determine how to proceed.

5. Report gaps and writing responsibilities. Billy Coulter will manage production of a PowerPoint presentation to the Council. He specified format requirements for photographs. Dan Seligman will work on a write-up of City Lot issues and options, to be shared with other A members. Andy Kelemen is working on a description of the TF mandate from the Council. Roger Schlegel and Kay Daniels Cohen are working on the Subcommittee B material. Katrina Oprisko, Susan Robb, and other C members are working on Subcommittee C material, with Roger Schlegel providing a write-up of the T-intersection concepts.

Seth Grimes noted that the City Lot discussion of options (in the report) should include all options that have been put forward in the recent past (such as the roundabout options in the Kittelson report and residential development of the wooded lot), with explanations as to why the TF is not recommending these options. Seth Grimes also reiterated that the length of the core report should be brief, with other material contained in appendices (within the report) and annexes (separate documents).

6. Additional item: Katrina Oprisko brought out the detailed Junction map, and those present looked at the map to determine how far rights-of-way extend, as well as how property ownership might allow for widening sidewalks, creating verges between street and sidewalk, or narrowing the street, to improve the pedestrian experience and perhaps calm traffic. As right-of-way trumps private ownership, the idea of narrowing the street unilaterally (as a City action) was seen as impossible. It was observed, however, that moving the sidewalks back from the street (in stretches where this is feasible) would be a small but highly significant action.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 9:10 pm.