

Takoma Junction Task Force

Minutes – June 22, 2011

Present: Seth Grimes, Howard Kohn, Kay Daniels Cohen, Lorraine Pearsall, Roger Schlegel, Andy Kelemen, Ellen Zavian, Steve Dubb, Linette Lander, Katrina Oprisko, Susan Robb

Visitors: John Hume, Dan Seligman

1. Agenda Review: The agenda was accepted as proposed. John Hume, a Carroll Avenue resident, was introduced as a visitor.
2. Review of May 26 draft minutes: The May 26 minutes were approved unanimously, with one absence, after a brief discussion in which minor amendments to one item were agreed upon. Dan Seligman, a Carroll Avenue resident who has an interest in the Task Force, was introduced as a visitor.
3. Discussion of Task Force and Subcommittee processes: Seth Grimes introduced this agenda item, noting that some concerns about process had been expressed in recent TF email exchanges. These concerns included glitches in notification of the change of the meeting time with Cedric Ward of the State Highway Administration; concerns that the TF might be biased or overly favorable in its consideration of a possible Co-op expansion; and concerns that some TF members might be misrepresenting community opinion regarding the idea of a roundabout at the Junction.

Seth Grimes acknowledged that the final scheduled time of the Cedric Ward meeting, which had been rescheduled several times already, was not shared with all TF members, but that this had been an unintentional oversight and that there had been no intention of excluding anyone from the discussion.

Andy Kelemen made the distinction that, while the TF may be discussing potential Co-op expansion a great deal, this will not necessarily translate into great emphasis upon, or support of, Co-op expansion in the final report to the Council. He noted that the Co-op is, so far, the only business that has agreed to come and talk to the TF about the City lot; and that many of the issues involved with a potential Co-op expansion would apply to any potential City lot development. It was noted as well that the Co-op is not the only Junction stakeholder with representation on the TF, since Historic Takoma also has members serving on the TF.

Seth Grimes asked Lorraine Pearsall to confirm whether Historic Takoma (HTI) has official standing with respect to historic preservation issues in Takoma Park. Lorraine Pearsall characterized HTI as one of several entities that might be consulted, but she clarified that there is no requirement that HTI be consulted in connection with development proposals.

Andy Kelemen observed that, since the TF seeks to determine the boundaries (i.e. what can and can't be done) surrounding any work that gets done at the Junction, an organization like Historic Takoma plays an important role in the TF deliberations, as an expert on historic preservation issues. Similarly, the Co-op provides a useful perspective on what businesses are likely to object

to vis-à-vis the Junction. He would like to have seen continued Old Takoma Business Association (OTBA) representation on the TF as well. To take a hypothetical case, the business perspective would likely provide a useful counterpoint to any development proposal for the City lot that eliminated all parking in that area. Katrina Oprisko, while agreeing that the Co-op is an anchor business for the Junction, asked whether the TF is “presenting” the Co-op expansion concept to the Council; Seth Grimes clarified that the Co-op Expansion Task Force made its own presentation to the Council, and that the Mayor and Council are free to invite any organization to present to the Council.

Roger Schlegel shared his concern that, if the eventual TF report lacks completeness, its findings would be called into question. Citing the Council mandate for the TF, he expressed the view that the TF still has much research, consultation, and deliberation to do in the area of “evaluating opportunities.” The TF has thus far expended much effort in exploring the Co-op expansion opportunity and in investigating possibilities for traffic improvement. He made a distinction between “ideas” and “opportunities,” and said that an idea should be characterized as an opportunity only when (1) it has passed muster via a thorough TF discussion, in which most TF members view the idea as reasonable; and (2) the costs and benefits of the idea have been evaluated with an eye toward the needs of the Junction as a whole. He also expressed the view that, with only a few months left, the TF should set aside efforts toward interim improvements – which might have served useful purposes in helping to evaluate possible options – and should focus on gathering facts and making contact with experts. He also more briefly expressed concern that two other aspects of the TF’s Council mandate – developing an outreach plan and creating both short-term and long-term work plans – have not been addressed yet by the TF. He stated a desire for the TF to engage in hard discussions and then to create a set of integrated concepts for the Junction as a whole, which the Council could then evaluate.

Responding, Andy Kelemen pointed out that the TF lacks a financial expert. Roger Schlegel then suggested that, in lieu of detailed financial analysis, the TF could still make a general determination that Co-op expansion is a reasonably good “opportunity” for the Junction and then move on to look for other such “opportunities.” Seth Grimes added that in some cases it is necessary to create opportunities when opportunities cannot be identified.

Kay Daniels Cohen noted that there has been some business input obtained by Subcommittee B, and that it is likely that general business views of the Junction have not changed much in the past several years. Andy Kelemen said that he would like to hear an outside developer’s view of the feasibility of developing the City lot site. Seth Grimes cited the conversation that some TF members had with local developer Bruce Levin, and mentioned how that conversation led to the question among some TF members whether reaching out to potential developers constituted favoritism or an attempt to give them an “inside track.” He asked whether “reaching out to potential developers” might in itself be considered an “opportunity” to recommend to the Council. The TF recognized that Subcommittee B has obtained some prospectus material from potential consultants but not from potential developers. Roger Schlegel shared the opinion of one of his neighbors, Mark Burlinson, who works as a development consultant. Burlinson said that a potential developer would want the TF to produce a development concept that the community

could support; the developer would then crunch numbers to see how that concept might be implemented. Andy Kelemen agreed that he would like to see the TF moving toward development concepts. Kay Daniel Cohen said that a number of the potential consultants had also asked to see the TF's "body of work" before moving forward.

Returning to the question of possible TF bias toward Co-op expansion, Steve Dubb noted that outreach survey findings indicate that residents patronize the Co-op far more than they do any other business; he pointed out that the Co-op is willing to put a large chunk of its own money into an expansion project, and that the Co-op would not attempt to expand without community support. Also, the Co-op sees City lot development not simply as an opportunity, but also as a potential threat, since the loss of parking space in the City lot would make the Co-op non-viable. He said that as a community institution that has made a substantial investment in the area, the Co-op needs to know (1) whether expansion is something that the Takoma Park community wants; and (2) whether the community prefers a partnership redevelopment that includes multiple uses, such as a new structure with multiple tenants. He said that it makes sense for the Co-op, as the only existing business to have expressed interest in the City lot, to weigh in on the development question. During these comments, Seth Grimes emphasized that Steve Dubb, as a Co-op member, does not have any financial conflict of interest that would preclude his involvement in the TF, so long as his involvement with the Co-op is acknowledged.

Susan Robb acknowledged that the Co-op appears to have strong community support and that no other potential developer for the City lot has come forward; at the same time she recognized that the TF has focused significant time on Co-op expansion. She said that she would like to see a summary of Subcommittee B's business surveys, and that she would like to hear businesses come in to speak to the TF directly about the state of their businesses and their future plans.

Lorraine Pearsall observed that there is a big difference between consultants and developers, and she recommended that the TF to have Bruce Levin, a local developer, come and speak to the full group. While Levin did attend a Subcommittee A meeting, that meeting was not well-attended. As a developer he was able to offer a number of practical insights: for example, he noted that the City lot is a small site; he said that the cost of underground parking would be prohibitive because the cost would be \$40,000 per space; and he described the constraints of the site. Levin's recommendation was that the Co-op take ownership of the Turner property and expand via an addition on that property. She emphasized the value of a developer's practical perspective, awareness of financial realities, and experience in taking risks as a builder.

Summarizing the outcomes of the entire item 3 discussion, Seth Grimes said that future consultation meetings will be publicized to the entire group; that the TF feels the need to have further consultations with other business owners in the Junction, with developers, and with property owners. Steve Dubb suggested that it would be important to have City staff in regular attendance at the last few months of regular meetings, as possible work plans are developed. Andy Kelemen suggested that, prior to engaging more closely with City staff, the TF should seek to hear from other potential developers. Seth Grimes agreed, and said that the general sense going forward is that parties other than the Co-op should be sought out and given the level of

scrutiny they deserve. Lorraine Pearsall clarified that Bruce Levin's conversation with Subcommittee A did not exclusively concern the Co-op or the City lot but also touched upon the Junction as a whole.

Roger Schlegel offered a clarification that the graph of residential outreach survey responses indicated respondents' mentions of the Co-op, not their support for Co-op expansion, and that it remains unknown whether respondents would favor Co-op expansion over some other potential redevelopment of the City lot. Seth Grimes observed that a formal outreach plan, such as that which the TF has been asked to develop, would explore the question of what type of businesses residents would favor the most.

Linette Lander said that it would be advantageous for the TF to invite multiple developers to consider the City lot. The TF reached a consensus opinion that it should reach out to additional developers. The discussion mentioned Sasson Garree, an architect who is the Eco Park developer; Paul Millstein, who is in charge of construction for Jemal Development; Bruce Levin; John Urciolo; and the Turner family. This matter was turned over to Subcommittee A for action.

Katrina Oprisko and Kay Daniels Cohen reiterated Steve Dubb's request that City staff be involved in later TF meetings. Sara Daines, or some other City staff member with expertise germane to a specific discussion, might be invited. It was agreed that Sara Daines would be invited to participate in subsequent TF meetings, so that she and other staff could be aware of TF goings-on, including any TF meetings with outsiders.

The discussion turned to traffic options. Barbara Muhlbacher asked that outsiders be brought in as well to help Subcommittee C evaluate various traffic options, especially since SHA has stated that, while they do carry out evaluations of traffic signal options, they do not carry out simulations of other options. Seth Grimes confirmed that any changes to roadways other than traffic signal changes would involve planners who are outside Cedric Ward's office (per Cedric Ward). He added that Ward said that SHA does not share its simulation results. He also noted that Toole Design Group has recently added a staff member who specializes in traffic design; and he asked whether there was general TF interest in seeking to gain the services of such a traffic design consultant. Barbara Muhlbacher commented that the TF cannot ask City staff to engage with a specific traffic design consultant without such work being put out for general bid, and without knowing the cost of simulations desired.

Visitor Dan Seligman asked what sort of guidance might be given to developers who were invited to meet with the TF. He suggested that the conversation be structured somewhat so that invited developers would be considering broad options for the City lot, such as Co-op-only development, mixed use, etc..

Susan Robb observed that any company asked to do traffic simulations would need traffic data. Howard Kohn observed that SHA is in the best position to do traffic simulations, as it has a history of working with the area and has already collected some data. As a side note, Seth Grimes interjected that, according to Cedric Ward, the vehicle detectors that actuate the signals

have been broken for some time and will be replaced with cameras (by SHA), and that some of the light timings will be changed as well. These activities will create a new baseline for any simulation; so these facts should be factored into the timing for any simulation.

Ellen Zavian commented that TF members' time is constrained; therefore, the goals of any meeting with developers should be very clear, and any parameters or constraints should be made clear to the developers in advance, i.e. things we can live with, and things we can't live with as a group. Arriving at these parameters and constraints, e.g. what changes to B.Y, Morrison Park, if any, is the TF willing to accept, may require some hard discussions. She concurred with Kay Daniels Cohen that the Junction businesses are somewhat disengaged; they care, but don't want to put in the time. She has asked the businesses multiple times to come to TF meetings. In Ellen Zavian's view, as long as those invitations have been made and recorded, a reasonable effort has been made.

Barbara Muhlbacher asked for clarification of the extent to which SHA conducts traffic simulations. Seth Grimes said that the impression he had received from Cedric Ward was that a different SHA office, i.e. highway and roadway designers, would be involved in doing simulations related to a roadway change, such as a roundabout. Lorraine Pearsall recalled Cedric Ward saying that his office can do traffic simulations related to traffic signal changes and changes in lane restrictions. When she asked Cedric Ward why the SHA does not share its simulation results, he said that no one had asked him that question before; thus it may be possible to receive the results of SHA simulations. Katrina Oprisko proposed continuing to work with SHA to obtain simulations. It was agreed that if SHA simulation data is deemed to be public information, there are mechanisms for obtaining that information, via City staff or via the Public Information Act.

Seth Grimes again summarized the action items emerging from the discussion so far:

- Outreach to developers (Subcommittee A)
- Invitation for Sara Daines to attend meetings (Howard Kohn)
- Pursuit of traffic simulations via SHA, with help of City staff
- Better communications of subsequent TF and subcommittee meetings
- Determining which potential consultants can do simulations (Kay Daniels Cohen)

Dan Seligman offered that the TF's job is to define the traffic problems and offer some simple and more complex options for resolving those problems; then the City staff's job is to engage with traffic engineers or other consultants. Roger Schlegel suggested that TF might agree on what constitutes a minimal acceptable level of performance for the intersections at the Junction and then recommend that the City seek to achieve and/or maintain that level of performance as any development goes forward. Seth Grimes noted the additional layer of complexity involved in the TF seeking to communicate with SHA via City staff; and he re-emphasized the idea that the TF should be making recommendations for Council consideration and potential action, rather than taking action itself.

Linette Lander, who had interviewed Ben Myrick of SHA, offered to follow up with any questions that TF members might have, including a question about whether pedestrian movement

is considered in traffic signal evaluations. It was agreed that Cedric Ward, as the SHA point person for the Junction, would be kept informed of any communication with Ben Myrick.

Andy Kelemen asked that subcommittees share their communication with the whole TF from this point forward. Seth Grimes commented that as subcommittees complete their reports, or agree on who will be responsible for completing their reports, they might phase out their work. Roger Schlegel suggested that each subcommittee might conduct a “gap analysis” of any incomplete work in its purview prior to disbanding. For example, details on the environmental remediation in the 7300 block of Carroll Avenue still need to be gathered.

4. Meetings with Cedric Ward and Ben Myrick of SHA: Seth Grimes referenced notes that he and Linette Lander have shared with the TF about the recent meeting with Cedric Ward and Linette Lander’s conversation with Ben Myrick. These notes were included in this TF meeting’s packet of materials. Seth Grimes asked for any comments or questions from the TF. Barbara Muhlbacher commented on the third point in Seth Grimes’ notes (about the meeting with Cedric Ward); she said that it remained unclear whether, in Ward’s view, a “smart-light” system (one in which all signals work together consistently) can be implemented at the Junction. Such a smart-light system would go beyond simply creating two or three distinct signal or phasing arrangements for different times of the day. Rather, it would respond in real time to current traffic conditions. Seth Grimes elaborated by saying that Cedric Ward had said SHA wants to have a consistent pedestrian crossing signal present throughout the day, rather than switching to a pedestrian-actuated signal at some times of the day; SHA prefers this approach because in practice, many pedestrians won’t bother to push a button and wait for a pedestrian-actuated signal. This falls in line with SHA’s emphasis on pedestrian safety. Kay Daniels Cohen added that, in the meeting with Cedric Ward, several present had pointed out that a pedestrian-actuated signal is in place at the corner of Fenton and Ellsworth in Silver Spring. Seth Grimes also pointed out that by 2016, SHA intends to put visual and audible countdowns on all pedestrian signals; some have expressed concern about the noise generated by “audibles;” per the notes of the meeting with Cedric Ward, the audible signal adjusts its volume based on the level of ambient noise. Susan Robb, Lorraine Pearsall and others expressed concern about the impact of audibles, especially during the night hours, on nearby residents. Seth Grimes related that, according to Cedric Ward, many of SHA’s adjustments are in response to individual residents’ complaints.

It was generally agreed that Seth Grimes should continue to take the lead in maintaining the line of contact established with Cedric Ward, as the connections built with Cedric Ward seemed to be leading to renewed efforts on the part of SHA to address problems at the Junction. Roger Schlegel suggested that the TF try to involve City staff in any future meetings with SHA staff so as to encourage the establishment of a closer working relationship between the City and SHA. Andy Kelemen suggested that the TF share its eventual draft report with Cedric Ward. Katrina Oprisko asked that follow up with Cedric Ward include a request for an SHA evaluation of the current level of service at all of the intersections, and others seemed to agree with this idea. In conclusion, the TF agreed on the action step of continuing to pursue existing requests for information that have been made to Cedric Ward.

5. Subcommittee B update: Kay Daniels Cohen reported on her informal meeting this past Monday with residents of the Franklin Apartments on Maple Avenue at Ritchie Avenue. About 24 adults were present; most of those who spoke were women. Findings included the general lack of awareness of the term “Junction” among those interviewed, as well as the general desire expressed for affordable services at the Junction, such as a dollar store; an affordable, simple dining option; a place to buy basics such as soda, chips, bread, and milk; and a more affordable laundromat and dry cleaners. Another desired service is a place to pay bills and buy lottery tickets. A shuttle bus service exists which periodically takes Franklin residents to a nearby full-service grocery store. Kay Daniels Cohen would support the suggestion of Lorig Charkoudian and others that the City-owned shuttle might be used to transport residents around the City to the Junction, perhaps in combination with or as a supplement to trips to nearby farmers markets. Kay Daniels Cohen noted that no TF contact has been made as yet with residents of high-rise apartments on Maple Avenue or with others living in apartments on Lee Avenue; however, the comments about affordability made by Franklin residents were very similar to those made by residents of Victory Tower.

Summarizing, Kay Daniels Cohen stressed the importance of transportation and marketing, noting that Maple Avenue residents may find it difficult to walk up the hill to the Junction and also may be generally unaware of the services available at the Junction. Commenting further on the need for coordinated marketing of the Junction, she mentioned the owner of the Green Commuter as someone who is interested in such an effort but also pointed out that the Animal Clinic does not need coordinated marketing of the Junction. She agreed that she would type up the notes of the Franklin Avenue meeting and share them with the TF. Seth Grimes pointed out that OTBA (Old Takoma Business Association) is the natural entity to take the lead in matters of branding and marketing. He also suggested that the idea of transporting residents to the Junction with City-owned shuttle buses should be considered for inclusion in the TF report as an option, with suggestions on how the Council might evaluate and potentially pursue this option. Kay Daniels Cohen observed that the City-owned bus is rarely used. Barbara Muhlbacher pointed out that the Ride On #18 bus has been rerouted to connect Maple Avenue with the Junction; others added that the Ride On service is free for seniors; Kay Daniels Cohen indicated that there may be a lack of awareness about this on the part of residents. The subject of Co-op senior discounts was also introduced.

Seth Grimes suggested that the TF ought to encourage other entities to take the lead on various ideas that had been raised. TF members who sit on the Recreation Committee can explore the question of transportation for seniors; TF members involved with OTBA can explore marketing-related questions; and TF members involved with the Co-op can explore the question of senior discounts. Meanwhile, the TF report can mention these ideas as well. The group generally seemed to agree with the approach suggested by Seth Grimes.

Lorraine Pearsall observed that the input shared by Kay Daniels Cohen points toward the Junction’s valuable function as a neighborhood center for good basic services (without some of the “fancy” businesses found in Old Town). This function could be built upon and strengthened by adding additional services desired by local residents. Andy Kelemen urged that findings such

as those shared by Kay Daniels Cohen be shared with Sara Daines. Seth Grimes reminded the group that OTBA already receives City funding to help with economic development at the Junction. Katrina Oprisko expressed support for the idea of a circulator bus in Takoma Park, and Roger Schlegel and Kay Daniels Cohen commented that such a bus would encourage more Takoma Park residents to spend their dollars in Takoma Park, which in turn might encourage developers to take a look at the Junction. In response to a question from Barbara Muhlbacher, Kay Daniels Cohen said that she had not asked Franklin residents whether they had used the convenience store (TJ's) formerly located at the Junction; however, several Victory Tower residents said that they had frequented TJ's and now missed it.

Lorraine Pearsall shared that she and other residents are forming a "Friends of B.Y. Morrison Park" organization. This group's goals include beautifying the park with new landscaping, and giving the historic structure – with its "Takoma Junction" sign -- better visibility from the street.

Roger Schlegel said that Subcommittee B still seeks to conduct some pedestrian intercepts and complete more business surveys. He said that September seemed like a late juncture at which to hold a final community forum (at which emerging TF recommendations would be shared and community feedback sought), if the TF seeks to incorporate input received into its final report. However, as the group generally seemed to agree that August would be a bad time to hold a community forum, the plan to hold a community forum just after Labor Day was retained.

Items 6-7: Subcommittee A and C reports. In the interests of time, and since many issues germane to these items had already been covered in earlier discussion, the TF agreed to table further discussion of these items and move on to item 9 on the agenda.

9. Presentation to Council: Seth Grimes shared that City Clerk Jessie Carpenter had proposed July 25 as the date for a TF presentation to the Council. This presentation will be an update on the status of the TF's work in progress. Howard Kohn and Seth Grimes, as co-chairs, will lead the presentation, but any other interested TF members will be welcome to participate. The TF will be informed of any handouts that the Co-chairs propose to include in the presentation.

8. Draft report outline: Seth Grimes invited the group to examine a draft TF report outline he has prepared. This outline was included in the meeting packet. In particular, he asked the group to consider a proposed section entitled "Junction Improvement Scenarios and Options." This section would focus on various areas and include options for each of those areas, along with interdependencies among the areas as well as pros and cons for each option. For each option presented, the TF can present either a consensus position or, in lieu of consensus, majority and minority positions. Alternatively, two positions could be presented without further characterization. The TF could choose whether to make a specific recommendation in regard to any set of options, other than the general recommendation that the Council should investigate the options further. Four possible recommendations would include: take no action; conduct further investigation, including hiring a consultant if necessary; take a specific action; or do something else. Seth Grimes asked that the TF consider this outline and take up further discussion of it at the next TF meeting.

Steve Dubb stated the view that the TF report could be a useful working document if it contains perhaps some specific recommendations as well as a clearly stated set of questions requiring further investigation and/or community input. Andy Kelemen expressed concern that the TF report could end up being an interim report which would then require the TF to continue its work indefinitely. Dan Seligman then said that it would be energizing to the community to separate low-cost, short-time-frame improvements from long-term possibilities requiring further investigation. Seth Grimes suggested that a long-term vision for, say, 25 years in the future could be included in the section entitled “A Tour of Takoma Junction.” Roger Schlegel suggested that the section of the report entitled “Issues and Concerns” might be reframed as “Strengths and Weaknesses,” concluding with a set of goals for improvement; then later in the report, each option could be evaluated as to how well it responded to the identified strengths and weaknesses, i.e. accomplished the goals for improvement. He also suggested that the report should contain a recommendation for funding a program for Junction improvement over time.

A brief discussion related to the big picture of what can or should be accomplished at the Junction. Andy Kelemen made the observation that, while a central goal of the City is to increase revenue, the Junction’s unusual configuration may make it hard or impossible to redevelop the area in such a way as to generate dramatically increased revenue. Lorraine Pearsall added that the Junction is also a very small area. Roger Schlegel indicated that the Junction’s value includes its location near the geographic center of the community and its potential as a flat space for hosting community activities. Dan Seligman said that the Junction at present is “a bit of a wasteland” and needs some sort of improvement, whether that be commercial development or greening of the area. Lorraine Pearsall noted that some of the key property owners in the Junction may not be in a position at the moment to focus attention on development possibilities; she added that the need for patience is normal in Main Street programs.

Returning to the draft report outline, Seth Grimes suggested the need for an “impact statement” in the report. He said he would make additions and minor edits, then re-send the draft to the full TF.

Barbara Muhlbacher asked that Subcommittee C reporting, which had been tabled earlier, be placed early on the agenda for the next meeting, which was scheduled for July 12; she also asked that 40 minutes, rather than 30, be allotted for that report, which will include parking as well as traffic options. Seth Grimes observed that the TF’s process problems arise from the fact that there are so many issues to discuss at any given meeting. It was proposed that the TF schedule an additional meeting just to discuss Subcommittee C issues. After brief discussion, the TF agreed to meet on Thursday, June 30 to discuss Subcommittee C and A reports in progress. This will be planned as a reporting meeting with no votes or decisions, so that the meeting can go forward without a quorum.

The meeting adjourned at 9:26 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Roger Schlegel Jeff Trunzo

Co- Secretaries