

Takoma Junction Task Force

Minutes – June 30, 2011

The meeting convened at 7:42 pm without a quorum present. By 8:00 pm, a quorum was present.

Present: Andy Kelemen, Susan Robb, Lorraine Pearsall, Seth Grimes, Howard Kohn, Kay Daniels Cohen, Jim DiLuigi, Katrina Oprisko, Barbara Muhlbacher, Linette Lander, Steve Dubb.

Visiting: Roz Grigsby, John Hume, Paul Chrostowski, Dan Seligman.

1. Agenda review. The meeting agenda was accepted as proposed.
2. Announcements. July 25th has been scheduled for an interim report to the City Council. In other remarks, Seth Grimes suggested that a good product of the meeting could be a gap analysis – a listing of incomplete research or options yet to be considered. He also suggested that the final report should consider cross-impacts of various potential actions.
3. Discussion of Subcommittee A preliminary summary. As an attachment to the agenda, Subcommittee A provided a list of major options under consideration for the City-owned lot. The options are:
 - A. No changes.
 - B. Co-op expansion.
 - C. Multi-use development.
 - D. Public space, i.e. landscaped parking lot reconfigured to accommodate vendors, events, etc.

The preliminary summary includes pros and cons for each of the above options.

Discussion: TF members commented on Option A – “no changes.” It was noted that parking meters could add to revenue under Option A; that the existing space is already usable for community functions (i.e. it has sewer and electric connections remaining from the temporary Fire Station); that the wooded lot would also remain unchanged; and that the “no changes” option essentially keeps options open for the time being.

It was agreed that the delineation of “options” does not preclude “hybrid” options from being explored (e.g. a combination of Co-op expansion with public space development).

It was also agreed that an “Option E” ought to be included, which would be City lot development without the Co-op’s involvement. This scenario might occur, for example, if the Co-op decided to move or to expand to the east, onto the Turner-owned parking lot. Under the latter scenario, the City lot might still be used for Co-op loading access.

TF members discussed parking needs as related to the City lot and to the Junction as a whole. The expense of underground parking (Bruce Levin’s estimates were cited) was reiterated. Andy Kelemen

asked to what extent there is a need for additional parking capacity in the Junction – or whether there would be a need for additional parking if further development occurred. Susan Robb emphasized that residential streets are already absorbing some of the parking demand; she estimated that 5-7 Junction patrons or employees are generally parked on Manor Circle during the day. It was noted that Historic Takoma will generate some parking demand once it is operational.

The TF generally agreed that its research has not yet determined a “hard” parking demand for the Junction, i.e. how many visitors (parked vehicles) does the Junction need to be able to accommodate at peak times? This demand estimate would have to take into consideration the ability of alternative modes (pedestrian, bicycle, and public transit) to mitigate some of the parking demand; therefore, a related question is, “What is the availability and frequency of public transportation?”

The idea of an “Option F” was introduced. Option F would be a larger redevelopment of the south side of Carroll Avenue involving two or more properties. The City either would form a development partnership with other property owners or would acquire adjacent property or properties (via negotiation or eminent domain). There was disagreement among TF members as to whether development ideas for the Turner-held lot (leased by the Co-op) fall within the purview of the TF. Roger Schlegel asked whether the Fire Station’s side driveway and rear parking area could be used to access a new development from the rear (for deliveries or employee parking) via a negotiated easement. Jim DiLuigi suggested that the unused loading dock in the rear of the existing Co-op could be activated as a loading dock again for an expanded Co-op; he also suggested that the City might encourage the Co-op to buy the Turner property.

Responding to this “Option F” discussion, visitor Paul Chrostowski cautioned that there is likely environmental contamination beneath all lots on the south side of Carroll Avenue, including not only the auto service businesses but the Turner lot as well. The TF generally agreed that there is a gap in knowledge about the degree and extent of environmental problems on the south side of Carroll Avenue.

In discussion of Option D, the TF was generally favorable toward the idea of preserving the wooded lot but adding a walking path through it. The preservation of the wooded lot was seen as a “pro” for Options A, B, and D.

In response to the idea of a multi-tenant commercial development, discussion turned to the three currently vacant properties at the Junction (the former TJs, the former Glad Rags, and the former Letter Shop). All agreed that more information is needed about the environmental contamination situation at the properties in the 7300 block of Carroll, as this is a factor in the continuing vacancies there. Paul Chrostowski was able to provide information on the remediation activities underway, as follows: Activity is picking up; a plan will go forward which involves improved ventilation to mitigate risks from existing vapors in interior spaces. The EPA is investigating the extent of groundwater contamination. Two more years at least will be required for this process. During this time, the unresolved issues place a hold on financing for those properties or their potential tenants. In the worst case, groundwater and subsurface vapors would have to be pumped and treated. Lorraine Pearsall indicated that any plume of groundwater contamination would be tracked for a while, and that the same situation could apply to other properties if Phase One audits turned up positive. Eventually, the State will likely issue a “comfort letter” indicating that problems have been resolved or mitigated to the State’s satisfaction. . Andy Kelemen noted that the Junction has vacant properties at present, asking why there is not more demand for business at the Junction.

At the conclusion of this agenda item, it was noted that Option C had received little discussion; the question was raised whether Option C was “out of favor” with Subcommittee A for some reason.

It was moved that the Tuesday, August 2 TF meeting be moved to August 3 or 4 because August 2 is National Night Out. This motion was seconded and passed by a simple majority, with two abstentions.

4. Discussion of Subcommittee C progress: Katrina Oprisko began by summarizing the recent history of the roundabout concept for the Junction. Roundabout concepts received support in the Walkability Study, were recommended for further study in the Kittelson Report, were supported in the New Ave. Corridor Design, and were favored in the 2010 report of the Task Force on the Environment. However, in 2008, a Ward 3 meeting on the question of roundabouts indicated strong opposition to the idea of roundabout at the Junction.

Katrina Oprisko went on to outline the consultations held by Subcommittee C thus far. These have included the meeting with Scott Whipple, executive director of the Montgomery County Historic Preservation Commission; two meetings with Cedric Ward, a project manager for the State Highway Administration; and an interview with Ben Myrick, an engineer and traffic signal specialist with SHA.

Subcommittee C has been focusing on three options for improvement of the main intersection (Ethan Allen and Carroll) at the Junction. These options are:

- A three-way stop
- A mini-roundabout
- Re-timing of the signals.

The three-way stop would eliminate one of the two approach lanes in each direction on Carroll Avenue, so that the intersection involved three single lanes meeting at a three-way stop. The stop could be configured as a flashing-red signal, which would allow periodic or pedestrian-activated solid-red signals to allow time for pedestrian crossings. Howard Kohn noted that during a power outage this morning, the intersection had a de facto three-way-stop configuration, and that traffic was moving very smoothly.

The TF generally agreed that simulations (modeling) of the above options would be needed, and that the report ought to recommend that the City request simulations from SHA, and that the results of these simulations be placed into the public record. It was noted that the SHA sometimes says it cannot share simulation data; this raised the question of whether SHA findings are, or should be, public records.

Jim DiLuigi, another Subcommittee C member, interjected to note that the traffic light adjustments are the only options that have majority support on Subcommittee C at present. He went on to offer a number of critiques of the roundabout option, including: extremely negative impacts on pedestrian safety; potential encouragement of cut-through traffic on side streets; questionable benefits for emissions reduction; serious impacts on historic character; potentially life-threatening impedance of emergency vehicle movements; and site limitations including limited space available between historic structures, grade changes from the north to south sides of the intersection, and the close proximity to the signal-controlled intersection at Philadelphia Avenue.

Barbara Muhlbacher, also of Subcommittee C, responded that a mini-roundabout would in fact fit within the available space at the intersection, and that pedestrians would be safe with a roundabout.

The TF acknowledged that questions remain about how the aprons on a roundabout might be constructed to allow emergency vehicles or large trucks/buses to negotiate a tight turning radius; also, the TF should attempt to pursue the question of whether grade changes might prohibit the creation of a roundabout.

Barbara Muhlbacher offered to show the group a video about a successful roundabout installation project in Glens Falls, New York. The consideration of this proposal led to extended debate, with many members as well as visitors offering thoughts and comments. Jim DiLuigi emphasized that Subcommittee C is not resolved on its stance toward the three options presented so far. Dan Seligman, a visitor who has applied for membership on the TF, advised that consistent formatting of subcommittee reports would be helpful. A question was raised as to whether the fire department's input (with respect to a roundabout) had been sought – members disagreed about this. Kay Daniels Cohen questioned the need for a major traffic fix, noting that now that school is out of session, traffic is significantly eased. John Hume, a visitor, asked whether primary literature on roundabouts had been consulted. He advised the TF to examine Federal Highway Administration resources, as well as a 2009 University of Middlesex thesis; and he mentioned a court order which required signaled handicapped crossing signals at every inlet to roundabouts.

Seth Grimes asked that Subcommittee C work together to create a bibliography of roundabout studies and resources.

Continuing the roundabout debate, John Hume suggested that the TF should be clear about whether it is seeking faster traffic or slower traffic. Andy Kelemen asked what problem the TF hopes to solve with a roundabout, and offered that there are probably other ways to solve it, such as installing traffic signals that respond to real-time data about congestion at each approach to the intersection. The TF generally agreed that the possible impact of such an “adaptive timing” configuration for signals ought to be explored. Susan Robb recommended that the TF look at the interplay between the signals at the Co-op and the signals at the Fire Station, to see if they are well-coordinated. Seth Grimes asked those who opposed the roundabout option whether “geometry” is the major concern. Jim DiLuigi stated that a roundabout simply would not fit at the intersection. Paul Chrostowski stated that roundabouts can sometimes lead to increased, rather than reduced, emissions, as vehicles approaching from all directions may form queues that start-and-stop at congested times. Steve Dubb suggested that TF ask members of the Task Force on the Environment why a roundabout was recommended for the Junction. Dan Seligman offered that pollution is a big issue with roundabouts, as they may attract more traffic into the area if they succeed in improving traffic flow.

As the impromptu debate drew to a close, Roger Schlegel summarized the overlapping interests that any traffic solution seeks to address: cut-through traffic, emissions, safety, congestion, and historic preservation. Steve Dubb stated that it would not make sense for the TF to put the roundabout question to a vote, absent any simulation data, because the TF shouldn't pretend to be traffic engineers. Wrapping up the discussion, Seth Grimes reminded the group that the Subcommittee C report will be open to comment by any TF member.

5. Task Force planning: As the meeting had gone beyond its scheduled time, Seth Grimes offered to prepare and share a draft template for how to proceed with the report. Katrina Oprisko observed that the goal of the TF is still unclear at this point.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 9:20 pm.

Respectfully submitted.

Roger Schlegel Jeff Trunzo

Secretaries