

**Takoma Junction Task Force
Public Outreach Meeting
Thursday, September 8, 2011
Meeting Notes**

Task Force Members Present:

Lorig Charkoudian, Kay Daniels-Cohen, Billy Coulter, Steve Dubb, Jim DiLuigi, Megan Gallagher, Seth Grimes, Linette Lander, Roger Schlegel, Ellen Zavian

Guests:

Patty Barden, Frederic Baron, Hally Childs, Joan Clement, Sonya Cramer, Gary Geck, Diana Kohn, Tim Male, Dannie McName, Bodil Meleney, David Paris, Dan Robinson, Clifford Schwartz, JJ Smith, Sally Taber, Catherine Tunis, Roland Weiss

These notes record points brought out at this meeting. They are not formally minutes; as a subcommittee meeting, this public meeting was not subject to the Maryland open-meetings requirements. In some cases, points are presented grouped by topic rather than in the order they were discussed.

Opening

Kay Daniels-Cohen started the meeting at 7:34 pm and asked Subcommittee B and other task force members to introduce themselves.

Takoma Junctions Conditions

Kay stated that this is the final of close-to 10 meetings with the community. Roger reviewed past task force meetings and community-outreach sessions including the questions asked and discussed. He outlined basic Takoma Junction goals.

Kay talked a bit about junction history, how it used to be a varied shopping area, and now the TPSS Co-op is a magnet (as shown by TF investigations) with other thriving businesses serving local needs.

Megan discussed data collected from forms, attempts to quantify mentions of issues.

Roger discussed the “mentions” chart that shows the co-op as the by-far most mentioned business, and he cited possible co-op expansion plans.

Vacant Storefronts

Cliff reports that his wife feels that the businesses that are not open – the vacant storefronts – are not helping the community. One thought is that the City of Takoma Park should consider giving a time-period for opening or selling and then consider applying remedies that could include eminent domain.

Diana Kohn said that Historic Takoma building a bathroom and is waiting for an occupancy permit. The former TJ’s and Glad Rags sites are in the midst of environmental remediation because of dry-cleaning fluid.

Seth reported that the TF had brought the issue to the city council. The city manager stated that legally, clean-up progress has been satisfactory.

Cliff asked about the barber shop and Letter Shop properties.

Roger said that there are 3 vacancies out of 22 properties, so the situation isn’t so extreme.

Jim asked, Should decorative changes be made to the vacant store fronts, and Cliff agreed.

Catherine said that SOSCA discussed the possibility of artists working on the spaces, and Ellen mentioned the thought of temporary gallery use. Ellen said that eminent domain involves taking of property for public use and would not likely be justified here.

Frederic said he has heard of jurisdictions applying differential tax rates to create an economic incentive for landlords to rent out properties.

Roger talked about the desire that came out of meetings to have a second anchor business. The corner is the logical place. But if there's a second, successful destination business, where will people park, and how will they cross the intersection? The TF will likely recommend near-term remedies.

Traffic, Signals, Roadways

Bodil mentioned an on-going issue between Sycamore neighbors and the city regarding traffic-light timing. Seth noted that the SHA controls the light and both the TF and the TP Police Department have been in touch with them. Billy reported on city e-mail stating that the city had notified the SHA that the lights are out of sync and that supposedly it would receive attention directly.

Gary: "No one is talking about the long-term physical changes that might be necessary" to facilitate improved pedestrian use (and other goals).

Kay: The report will have near-term and long-term recommendations.

Roger: The signals need to be optimized, and after that, Does the junction work?

Frederic observed that buses do not pull into the bus bay. Roger acknowledged this.

Jim: The police chief indicated that he could have some influence on bus stops. Another option is to create a second through lane: "Chop the chunk," according to Roger. Seth noted that adding a lane would make the pedestrian crossing wider and would create perceptions that the junction is for driving through.

Roland asked about the traffic-circle idea and brought up a year-ago community meeting with significant opposition. Roger said that the TF acknowledges a round-about would be a contentious issue. Jim said that there are a number of round-about designs and concerns, for instance, about the impact on the firehouse and on nearby intersections.

Roger asked whether attendees are familiar with mini-roundabouts, which would include a drive-over portion. Four or five attendees did. Jim mentioned Chief Ricucci's observations about the Ward 6 roundabouts, and Sally noted that there's one at Elm and Lincoln without a drive-over.

Roger cited road-width as a concern and mentioned the Kittleson report at Seth's suggestion. Seth mentioned historic-district concerns if any roadway changes cross the current curb line.

Frederic asked, Did the TF look at traffic issues in light of area-wide traffic flow and handling? "We seem to be funneling all the traffic into a few choke points, and then we're shocked that we have choke points." Roger said that a number of people have noted cut-through traffic, on Boyd, Jackson, Columbia, and wrong-way traffic on Manor Circle. Someone mentioned Elm-Sycamore-to the junction.

Joan said that several years ago, she asked the SHA to place a no-right-turn light on Carroll approaching the intersection because cars would almost hit her heading toward Grant. Jim said the problem could be the flow of traffic coming from Ethan Allen, moving to the right.

Comment on the Meeting

Seth interrupted the flow to mention that this is a public meeting, on the record, with JJ Smith of Patch.com in attendance. If anyone would prefer points not be included in these notes, he or she should just say so.

Businesses

Catherine commented that the junction businesses and the junction as a whole need to be promoted more in the community, that OTBA's efforts seem to be a patch-work. Fifteen years ago, we talked about a drawing at Christmas that would be at the Metro, or e-mail could be used, as the co-op does, also Old Takoma Ace Hardware. "So many residents are not aware of the businesses and services that are there... It should be a business association that does [promotions]."

Kay talked about marketing efforts.

(JJ Smith left at 8:27 pm, and David Paris, Dan Robinson, and Steve Dubb arrived.)

Roger said there are a number of "one-stop businesses," for instance the yoga place, Johnny's. Same goes for Melvin at the barber shop. There are perceptions that the parking is tricky, unclear for people. It isn't necessarily so, but the perception is there. Kay said she has yet to see the city lot filled with cars.

Lorig discussed business development: the co-op's interest in expansion, bringing in developers to look at lot potential. The developers were more responsive to the idea of co-op expansion given the co-op's current presence. Other possibilities, short or long term, include putting high-end food trucks on the lot, perhaps with a mini-park with seating, as a community amenity. One of the challenges with the lot is the uncertainty what's underneath the lot, the environmental conditions. Food truck, "the park-on-top model," wouldn't require excavating. Lorig also mentioned the across-the-street storefronts and Blessed Coffee's interest in the junction.

Billy mentioned that we had looked at placing a crafts market on the site, but there were issues: The need to utilize the full lot, which removes any parking potential. Lorig noted that if there's some sort of covering, there could be a dance floor put down for events.

Bodil: It sounds really lovely. But what about the space needed for food deliveries to the co-op, which doesn't work on the Sycamore side. Lorig responded that the co-op has had various drawing and recognizes that deliveries would be from the lot.

Roger: The city also owns the woods behind the parking lot. There has been no advocacy of development. Roland said that commercial zoning extends down the wooded slope, that the residentially zoned area is restricted to triangle bordering Columbia. A group that involved the TPSS Co-op, with Marc Elrich acting as a liaison, looked at boundaries, zoning, and soil quality back in 1987 or so. They determined that the soil quality (looseness) posed difficulties for anyone wishing to build.

TF Timeline

Sally asked us to talk about the timeline for the TF, also about other teams [subcommittees] working on issues.

Roger said that we're supposed to present a report by the end of the month.

Traffic proposals

Linette has the report and read headings, noting that the traffic issues were intractable, so we have various means of reconfiguring the intersection to get traffic flowing, with competing objectives: Getting traffic flowing, but getting people to stop and shop. Headings are –

1. Alter the bus bay to a through-lane.
2. Permit only right turns into Sycamore and right turns out.
3. Convert the left lane of south bound Carroll Avenue to allow right turns onto Carroll Avenue.
4. Make a second lane on Carroll by the fire station to create a lane for left turns onto Philadelphia.

5. Create a T intersection for Carroll and Ethan Allen Avenues.

Roger talked about, and showed on the map, the T intersection ideas.

Sonya: That would make the intersection more pedestrian friendly. You'd want to take away the sense of East-West Highway zipping through the junction, reinforcing the sense that Carroll is the main street through the junction.

Linette continued,

6. Creation of a mini-round-about near BY Morrison park, single-lane with at least 90' diameter
7. 3-way stop with Ethan Allen near the co-op building.

Diana asked how different the T is from just extending the bus bay?

Gary asked, what about the more logical approach of alighting Carroll with Sycamore, moving the park? A 4-way intersection is 10 times easier for a pedestrian to cross than any other configuration we've discussed.

Diana asked, what effect would that have on the streetscape and store fronts.

Roger: The relocation of the historic structure would make the change very difficult. Jim: "The topography would be detrimental to the storefronts... You would have a significant difference in elevation." Sally: "The parking area there is incredibly steep."

Catherine: You'd need to think about sending traffic down Sycamore.

Joan said that you used to be able to take a right turn on red at Carroll facing the Co-op. Because people taking that right turn were almost hitting her when she was turning on Grant, she successfully lobbied the SHA to make it a No Turn on Red. So she's thinking if you make Grant one way the other way, then you could go back to allowing right turns on red at Carroll. And this might move traffic along.

Kay, at 9 pm: Is there anything else you haven't raised or want to ask about?

Attendee: Do you have a traffic expert? Roger: We didn't have consensus on a consultant, and there wasn't much time.

Kay: We talked about traffic simulations, to see how changes will affect walkability, livability, etc.

Sonya: In short-term recommendations, "the pedestrian safety for children is really critical." It seems simple to send a cross-guard there, to put up more signs, to urge traffic to slow down, just at a couple of times a day.

Bodil: "A long term solution needs to be bold, and it needs to be created. I live two houses up from the junction, and I see this mess every day."

Adjournment