

Takoma Junction discussion group

Meeting 5 – April 20, 2010 – Meeting summary

Location: Takoma Park Community Center

Attending: Billy Coulter, Lorig Charkoudian, Kay Daniels-Cohen, Steve Dubb, Roz Grigsby, Seth Grimes, Andy Kelemen, Diana Kohn, Howard Kohn, Lorraine Pearsall, Susan Raab, Dan Robinson, Jeff Trunzo, Bruce Williams

1. Attendees introduced themselves.
2. Bruce Williams: On Monday May 10, the city council will have a worksession discussion of the Takoma Junction Task Force. A vote on the task force is scheduled for May 17. The council will name people to the task force, post newsletter advertisement, probably not before the first of June.

3. Agenda discussion.

Howard Kohn: Our mandate for tonight is to create unofficial recommendations for the work plan of the task force.

Bruce: Recommendations will be part of the council packet at the worksession.

Howard: Certain points have been discussed and generally agreed to, including empowering the task force to reach out to state agencies.

Going around the room...

Lorig Charkoudian: Open forums have been discussed. This group, in the short or medium term, could create a packet for use at forums, including for instance, various potential directions about which community input would be invited, on which further information about designs, costs, etc. would be gathered. For the 3-4 months after [the forums], information gathered could direct the work of the task force.

One interest is investigation of the possibilities for underground parking (or even, perhaps not realistically, putting the street underground): feasibility, cost, environmental impact.

Billy Coulter: What's the low-hanging fruit, what are the things that could be done right away, especially with the city lot?

Also, what is not on the table? What would never, ever be considered? For instance, might it be possible to take down the Takoma Junction [gazebo] structure.

Roz Grigsby: We've talked about doing a parking survey, going to commercial-property owners. Longer-term, the big two are the lot and pedestrian and traffic safety.

Steve Dubb: The businesses in the junction exist because of the traffic bottleneck.

Seth Grimes: We could study the key elements for junction business viability.

Steve: We could look at the city lot in isolation, or we could look at the Takoma Junction district as a whole. The latter would be better.

Bruce: Reiterate 3 points: Traffic issues, pedestrian safety issues, and particularly inability to get strollers and wheelchairs down sidewalks. On Steve's point, the whole thing has to work from the movement, economic, and neighborhood senses. We need to prioritize and focus given fiscal reality. Next year's government financial picture will be worse so think about short, medium, and long term goals in light of the greater possibility of funding further out.

Dan Robinson: Old Town is not the junction; it is and deserves to be considered a different place. We need to find ways to bring money into the junction and keep it there. And we should not be afraid of creative ideas, even if they don't cost a lot of money.

Jeff Trunzo: Agree it's important to identify one or more consensus issues. Agree with Roz that a look at parking, and perhaps creation of a parking-management plan, is key to getting support.

Kay Daniels-Cohen: The sign at the city lot is important so people know they can park there. The State Highway Administration needs to be brought in to look at the traffic flow. It may be a simple thing to improve it, for instance with the light timing. Also leaving the crosswalks to the island but put another in straight across from TJs to by the co-op. The parking survey is a given. Developing foot traffic for the businesses is important. So is outreach to the property owners. Carl Kessler says he is willing to work with us. Events at the city lot, maybe working with the co-op, are a quick, easy thing.

Lorraine Pearsall: Agree. I like the short, medium, and long, although we're far away from having a major neighborhood charrette, although we can have forums.

Some things do need to come off the table. We need to be sure we do no harm. For instance, taking out the park would harm the people who live near it. We should also respect the historic fabric and the genuine quality of the junction as we move forward. The other concern is conservation, in particular of the treed lot behind the city lot.

Susan Raab: When I moved in, in 1986, there was a promise of junction revitalization. (The B.Y. Morrison park was a former gas station thrift shop.) I like the idea of low-hanging fruit. The critical issues are traffic flow, parking, getting across the street, and commercial property owners. I don't want to stifle creative, off-the-wall ideas, but we need to be mindful of a certain amount of reality. Even council members talk about more lanes through the junction; there'd still be a back-up. Also, this is a neighborhood with residential homes that should be respected in the course of commercial development. One thing we miss in the neighborhood is a viable convenience store; the gasoline serves this purpose, not well.

Diana Kohn: My focus at the junction is trying to walk. No one has brought up the buses; there should be attention to the location of the bus stops. Also no one knows that you can cross the whole of the junction because there's no signing. (Roz: because it's nerve-racking.)

Bruce: Ownership of the road is not clear. It's coming up this Thursday night at the council worksession.

Andy Kelemen: One of the Takoma 2010 ideas was to engage the Univ. of Maryland graduate planning department, which wanted to do it so long as the city kicked in some funds. And is there any interest for people to look into what's been done in the past.

Bruce: Sara has historical documents that I gave her to copy.

Andy: How do we engage Montgomery County Fire and Rescue?

Dan: Students need to be well directed. This process is exciting and broad, and they may want to be involved to observe without taking a lead role.

Howard: Is there consensus, general agreement on a few things:

The task force should target reporting quarterly.

For reporting around October 1, reports would include recommendations regarding short-term goals, covering pedestrian and vehicular traffic flow; we'd need to meet with professional engineers to move forward. There'd be a parking survey and third, meeting with property owners.

Seth: The task force should create an organizational framework -- a workplan and schedule -- based on this group's recommendations and the council's mandate.

Jeff: There could be rationales why investments would be justified and would pay off.

Bruce: Don't assume no money, but any money is going to be in the out-years.

Lorraine: Look at how we can use tax credits, because we're in a historic district.

Roz: We've spent all our façade-improvement grant money and there's no indication from the state that there'd be more funding.

Seth: OTBA does administer some funds through the revolving loan fund that can be used for capital improvements.

Howard: Backing up; the first report should include community-outreach planning.

Kay-Howard-Roz: There's agreement that the city lot and/or B.Y. Morrison should be used for community events.

Lorraine: and there's the sign at the city lot.

Lorig: The short-term stuff would fall into study and action categories.

Study items include: the parking study, including underground parking; traffic flow + pedestrian safety including buses.

Near-term action items include: Posting of the city lot for parking, buckets of flags, education about loans, putting in another cross-walk.

Long term goals: Find way to build businesses (Seth: and community amenities) and address parking management.

Values include no harm, historic preservation, respect for neighborhoods.

Susan: Items like painting road markings could be addressed immediately.

Bruce: That's State Highway -> WSSC -> contractor.

Authorities are becoming convinced that the city owns and has always owned Ethan Allen from Elm to the junction, and other parts of Philadelphia, possibly from the junction down to Maple. The state also owns Flower. They want to swap Flower for the city's portion of Ethan Allen and Philadelphia. Their understanding is that sidewalks along a state highway may have been put in by SHA, but once they're in, the local jurisdiction must maintain them. (There were other issues, for instance, with New Hampshire Avenue, and there is on-going discussion.)

Andy: What is the Fire & Rescue service supposed to be doing to finish their project? Is there any sidewalk work planned? There should be a horizontal surface as part of the sidewalk.

Bruce: Everything in front of their building is supposed to be fixed and done. They're supposed to be working according to plan. The county is overseeing the work. I can find out the details.

Roz: Is there a short-term fix regarding light synchronization? There are avenues that don't cost money that can get something better right away.

Billy: There's no point in doing a study until the fire station is done. Right now there's a fence in the road!

Seth: Can we not ask the council to discuss on May 10, for potential vote on May 17: parking-lot signage, examination of traffic-light synchronization.

Kay: Adding a cross-walk is third.

Susan: Task staff to ensure that pedestrian and traffic signals are working correctly. Fifth: Look at the lanes on Carroll Avenue coming into the junction: are they properly drawn and signaled?

Dan: Be aware that the Sycamore light is differential: It stays on longer if there are a lot of cars.

Andy: And the rush-hour cycles are each different from each other and the regular cycles.

Bruce: There could be an information request to the SHA regarding the cycle specifications.

Billy will send the committee application form to the list.

Kay: Is the group going to meet regarding organizing events? The co-op's and OTBA's involvement is essential.