

August 15th, Wednesday Evening Pin-up Session

Comments overheard prior to opening regarding initial design concepts

- Where is the parking on the Takoma Park side of New Hampshire (for a proposed development)? If you don't have parking, no one will come.
- We've got to get away from this dependency on cars.
- In Bethesda, people walk, and they have parking.
- If you build big parking lots or garages, what you get is a disneyland effect--people drive there and walk around. We need development that will serve the people who live in the neighborhoods.
- You could build parking garages underground and preserve the above-ground areas for park space.
- Why a park? You could put buildings above them.
- It might be expensive.
- I think the idea is to have a lot of on-street parking.
- I don't know if people in Takoma Park can visualize it: people (here) are used to being car dependent.
- I'm worried about how I am going to cross New Hampshire Ave. safely if I have to park on the other side. Maybe we could build a pedestrian bridge?
- The pedestrian bridge at Rockville Metro is unpleasant and little used.
- Yeah, maybe we could build a bridge like the one over the river in Florence!
(laughter)

Opening of Pin-up Session

Charrette team leader Stuart Sirota opened the session by pointing out that the purpose of a pin up session is to present to the public some initial rough concept sketches, get feedback, and take that feedback back into the studio for re-working and re-presentation.

While coming up with the sketches, the team, noted Sirota, took into consideration the many excellent ideas that came out of the first day's 'table top' session. Out of the many individual suggestions made, the team looked for the major themes.

Some of these big themes from the table top session include: re-developed mixed-use buildings with street-level retail; the retention (wherever possible) of existing businesses; improved lighting and other anti-crime measures. For New Hampshire Ave., suggestions included: fewer lanes; use of roundabouts; on-street parking; sidewalks; improved crossings. People also expressed concern about trash and odors. Another suggestion concerned use of the existing highvoltage electric power line corridor as a transport corridor. The individual comments that were made during that first session have been captured and are available.

The broad-brush conceptual drawings being presented here, Stuart added, should be thought of as something like crash-test dummies--his team "fully expects" that not all of them will survive or be kept after tonight's session. The team wants to hear what are perceived as pluses and minuses, and which pieces should be carried forward.

Before getting down to their sketches, the team, said Sirota, had taken a look at what constitute the existing natural 'centers' of focus in Takoma Park, and drew the 5-minute (one fourth mile) walking sheds around each of them (see **Fig. T**). This produced a map yielding three over-lapping walking-shed circles centered, respectively, at Takoma Metro, Takoma Junction, and 'Old Town.' To these existing centers, the team then added two additional circles centered on the junction of New Hampshire and Ethan Allen Avenue/Route 410 (Ethan Allen Gateway), and New Hampshire and Eastern Avenue (Maryland Gateway).

These two new gateway areas do not overlap with the three existing centers, noted Sirota, nor do they overlap between themselves. It does not seem either feasible or desirable, including from a place making or a walkability perspective, to attempt to string out new development in a thin smear along the whole length of the corridor section under discussion, which is about one and a half miles long. There will need to be some more concentrated nodes of development within the two gateway areas (it was noted that these centers are not absolutely fixed: they can shift a bit north or south along New Hampshire). Charrette team member Dan Jarrell mapped some of the existing development in the gateways and indicated in red both existing and proposed areas of more intense use. He also proposed some safety measures that could be applied at the Elm Ave. and Ethan Allen intersection, including, for example, the addition of a median strip on 410 at Elm Ave. to slow traffic.

Barry Mahaffey showed exploratory drawings of potential redevelopments of the property that includes the existing Shoppers Food Warehouse [**Fig. H**]. He would create an additional pedestrian crossing across New Hampshire, and would break up blocks within the property so as to create a shopping street with three- to four-story buildings and parking behind the buildings. An alternate version of the plan (**Fig. I**), which presumes the absence of the Shoppers, would create a square, and connect streets with

existing multi-family dwellings. This would also improve the situation of those dwellings that currently face dumpsters and the rear of the Shoppers building. A variety of versions of a New Hampshire transformed into a multi-way boulevard were examined, including with and without medians, and with parallel or diagonal parking on the street.

Shaun Barattia, in the hopes of shortening the perceived distance between the New Hampshire gateways, looked at the idea of creating green features in the non-developed spaces that separate them (**Fig. F**). He suggested that the existing green area to the north of the Ethan Allen (Route 410) intersection of New Hampshire could be enhanced with a statue that would help communicate a sense of ‘arrival.’ Sirota explained that the goal of making a gateway, after all, is to create just this sense of arrival. The current landscape is such that one can drive right past Takoma Park and have no sense that there is an interesting city right here. Shaun’s statue, or the use of built structures facing the road, can help create this sense of identity, said Sirota.

Brian Hendrickson did some conceptual sketches of the Washington-McLaughlin property off of New Hampshire on Poplar Avenue, with all versions (See **Figure O**, **Figure P**, and **Figure Q**) focusing on the creation of additional housing density. One version would preserve the architecturally interesting part of the building but not preserve the most recent additions to it. The remainder of the site would have small cottages with green space. Alternatively, the existing structure could be removed and replaced with a mixture of single family residences and also some larger houses.

Kathy Poole, the urban ecologist of the group, looked at the big-picture environmental features of the corridor. She noted that Takoma Park is much more intertwined with natural systems than many other areas. What is more, she said, eco-systems truly do matter and it is necessary to take a balanced approach toward them within the whole plan.

Which environmental features matter most? Tree cover, for one, said Poole—and also such larger features as creeks and big stretches of woods. What matters are not jurisdictional labels, such as ‘public parks’ (since such labels are meaningless to wildlife); what matters are eco-systems. Some eco-system protections are already in place—for example, existing one hundred-foot buffers along creeks. There is also the existing powerline corridor—a place with potential that could be further developed.

Our goal, continued Poole, should be to focus most on those areas that are most important from an ecological point of view. This means the Sligo Creek system and areas that are important for animal movement between contiguous zones of habitat—which means, in turn, adding connectivity where those habitats are broken. Her map (**Figure B**) illustrated in red and orange where new connectivity is needed. The larger patches of woods that are close to water are also the areas that matter most, and they are colored green on the map.

Now what the resulting map (**Fig. C**) of natural structures suggests, continued Poole, is that there are alternating nodes of commercial build-up zones and green gateways. There is a green gateway that could connect to and directly complement the existing Recreation Center.

If the City wishes to realize this goal, it needs to do several things. It needs to work on the restoration of its creeks. It can take better advantage of and help restore the ecosystem in the powerline corridor. It needs to take advantage of the topography, the existing plants and drainage to give a combined recreational and ecological focus to the community. It then becomes possible, and highly desirable, to have buildings that front onto such restored ecological structures; dwellings that have a view of the woods (and not, Poole pointedly added, a view of a dumpster). Restored woodlands could feature appropriate roads and paths for bikes, thereby giving the woodlands greater prominence. By the addition of these green gateways, and by adding new roads that, being strategically located alongside them, provide a view of these gateways (See **Fig. D**), the City could best leverage what it already has.

Turning to New Hampshire Avenue itself, Poole said that here too there was an opportunity to improve the environment. If, for example, the City decides to consider a multi-way boulevard (**Fig. E**), which means, among other things, both increased tree cover and improved drainage, this will add habitat for birds, insects—even butterflies—on New Hampshire Avenue. And if it is built correctly, these goals can even be achieved at lower cost than existing systems.

Kevin Klinkenberg looked closely at alternative uses of the existing shopping center property at the south-west corner of Route 410 and New Hampshire, focusing on mixed-use buildings on the road and parking in rear, with new housing added behind the Shopping Center and connecting to the existing neighborhood (**Fig. W**). Looking at the area to the south along Sheridan Avenue, he noted that there is an existing small park that appears to go unused, and which might serve the community better if the park were moved to a near-by more felicitous location so that the parcel could be used for increased housing. Across New Hampshire there is a strip mall with excess parking that he proposes to change in part to a green space with a central square and some public art or monument at its center in order to form a focal point. It would have a loop drive in front of the building with angled parking for customers (**Fig. X**).

Stuart repeated that everyone recognizes that not all these ideas will, or need to, survive, and he then opened the floor to comments

Public comments

An initial theme of public questioning centered on the property rights of owners. For example, as one questioner noted, the team had presented one set of drawings for big changes on the McLaughlin School Property. What if the owner has no interest in selling?

Takoma Park senior planner Iona Blanchard stressed that the properties on the corridor fell into a number of different categories. Some were known to be presently on the market. Others are not, and yet past experience tells us that the status of properties are

subject to change. What is more, in the final analysis, it is the local community that tells us what they want to redevelop over the long run—a fact that is already expressed in the general plan. It is important to have in place an overall vision of what the community in principle wants at various sites. Otherwise, one puts potential developers in the position of sinking (as has happened in the past) tens of thousands of dollars into a plan that the planning board ends up rejecting out of hand. The bottom line: the concepts that are being discussed here are meant to provide guidance to a process that will evolve and only gradually be realized over ten to even twenty years. To be sure, a given property may not be available now, but we (the City) want to be in a position to provide timely and specific direction to future developers at whatever point in the future a given property does become available.

Another audience member asked about how they expected the SHA to react to such suggestions as traffic roundabouts. Wasn't it likely that their interest in moving cars on this major highway would preclude such a solution? It was acknowledged that approval of traffic roundabouts was by no means guaranteed, but they have been approved by the SHA in the past. Furthermore, the SHA does represent, in the final analysis, the public, and does respond to its desires.

A local resident who is himself a planner expressed skepticism about the feasibility of several of the proposals, and suggested that the planning process could be streamlined and made more effective if it made better use of locals who know the situation on the ground. He added that the Washington McLaughlin property, for example, appears to be expanding and therefore seems unlikely to be in play any time soon. Is it relevant, then, to this discussion? What is more, the small park mentioned by Mr. Klinkenberg has already been rejected for development, and other properties in that area have run into opposition when attempts were made at their redevelopment.

Another note of caution was struck by a local business owner who noted that, in one of the drawings for redevelopment, the building in which his own shop is located was missing. "I know," said the local small business owner, "that the idea here is to improve businesses—but my building is not here." He worried that his building was slated for demolition, and if so, he asked why he should continue investing in his building and his business at this site.

"I'm putting my life into this specific spot," he said. "Let's let them put a roadway through someone else's half million dollar house," he said, suggesting that this would help others gain greater understanding of how he felt.

As a partial response to this concern, Sirota said that the plan "is not about shutting your business." The salient point is that the charrette was looking at the long term, and "we don't know what will happen ten years from now."

The business owner replied that, as a property owner, he felt concerned that, whatever plan is developed, it should serve the good both of the community as a whole and also of each person individually.

[A fuller answer to the business owners question was delayed until after the end of the Q & A session, at which point Stuart Sirota and others added details which appear to have largely assuaged, if not eliminated, the business owner's concerns. Among the points made: no one would, or in fact even could compel him to sell his property. Second, surrounding re-development could well significantly increase his business prospects. Third, at some point in the future, he may himself choose to relocate if it means that in doing so he can sell his own property at a considerable profit, as would seem at least very likely if extensive improvements are made to the area.]

Another resident said he felt the remarks were too negative: he felt very encouraged by the direction the charrette team was pointing, and encouraged the audience to be more willing to expand their imaginative horizon regarding what this area can become. He particularly liked Kathy Poole's idea of connected greenways, and noted that he bought his "half million" house precisely because it was near connected habitat. He asked Ms. Poole to define what she meant by 'balanced solutions.'

Poole replied that she meant that it was necessary to weigh the relative benefits, in every given context, of protecting forests or creating businesses. "Some people want to save every tree," she said. Balance, here, meant looking at what would provide the greatest benefits, she said.

Takoma Mayor **Kathy Porter**, while noting that "not all this will be built," said she appreciated the charrette team's work and its help in getting people to stretch their thinking. "I love the idea of green corridors," she said, and added that, since such areas needed to be preserved in any case, it made great sense to do something of the sort Ms. Poole had proposed with them.

The resident who had earlier expressed concern with property rights said he was also unconvinced by the idea of roundabouts, and in any case was opposed to the idea of slowing down commuter traffic on New Hampshire. He acknowledged being unprepared for the scale of changes being considered at the meeting, and said that his own hopes for this meeting had been restricted to asking that the grass medians on New Hampshire Avenue be cut and edged. To this latter comment Stuart replied that his team was, indeed, thinking on a grander scale. Traffic engineer Richard Hall then spoke up and said that, depending on traffic volumes, it can be possible to move the same volume of cars in a safer manner through the use of roundabouts (which should not be confused with the larger, and hence faster-moving and less safe traffic circles).

A question was raised concerning redevelopment plans for the area just south of Sligo Creek. According to one drawing, a neighborhood residential street would be integrated into a finer street grid pattern, but in such a way that it would no longer be isolated from New Hampshire Ave. "I suspect," said the questioner, "that the people on the dead-end street like being closed [to traffic from New Hampshire]."

It is true, acknowledged Sirota, that one is often faced with a certain conflict of interests here: on the one hand, it usually serves the good of the community to increase connectivity; on the other hand, it can attract the ire of those residents who do not want it.

An audience member said that the goal of reducing the number of lanes on New Hampshire from six to four lanes (or of otherwise changing New Hampshire to reduce its adverse impact on walkability) would be made easier if some of the volume on that road could be diverted. Toward this end, the questioner noted, he had already lobbied Pepco to provide light rail along its electric power corridor, thereby providing an additional transportation alternative extending from Ray Road to the Beltway.

Sirota replied that his team was looking at an option that does precisely that.

Another comment was made suggesting that, while it may not be desirable to include the idea of connecting Belford with New Hampshire, the addition of two new streets running parallel to New Hampshire, as suggested in the conceptual sketch, would be good.

After another discussion of the pedestrian-friendly aspect of traffic roundabouts (vs. traffic circles), an audience member pointed out that, if there was concern about safety on New Hampshire, then something had to be done about high-accident locations, such as at the bottom of Ray and New Hampshire. That might well be a good location for a roundabout, the local resident noted.

Mr. Hall then provided an overview of traffic flow concepts in order to explain how an improved (or 'finer') street grid pattern improves the livability of streets from both the pedestrian and the driver point of view. Traffic, he said, has two key characteristics: the number of lanes, and the amount of 'green time'—which means the ratio of green light time to red light time at an intersection. Where traffic on cross streets is light, the green time ratio is very favorable to drivers. But at major intersections, such as at Ethan Allen or University Avenue, wait times becomes much longer. That is why it is so particularly useful to extend the street grid at that sort of intersection—to provide drivers (who always learn fast about such things) with many alternative ways to make a turn. Kathy Poole pointed out that the point is to add such additional streets not to residential areas, but to commercial ones—and added that this increased opportunity for more complex and networked traffic patterns is all to the benefit of the commercial businesses themselves.

Thurs. August 16, 2007, 9:13 p.m. PRG