



Historic Takoma, Inc.

"Preserving the Heritage of Takoma Park-MD and Takoma-DC"

THE HISTORY OF THE PARK AT THE TAKOMA METRORAIL STATION

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I. WMATA'S INTENTION TO ACCOMMODATE THE TAKOMA COMMUNITY

Between 1971 and 1974, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) dramatically reversed its land use plans for the Takoma Metrorail Station. In direct response to strong concerns voiced by community members and elected officials, the transit agency down-sized the parking area from 450 to 100 spaces and provided a park on the site.¹ The final site plan, adopted in June 1974, reflected long and deliberate consideration by WMATA's board. Citizens who would be affected by the Metro constituted a driving force behind the final plan. It is clear that the creation of a park at the Takoma Metrorail Station resulted from WMATA's intentional response to community members. On December 20, 1973, when the WMATA board directed its staff to down-size the parking area, it urged regional planning agencies to "address the station parking issue in the context of joint land use planning for the Takoma area in consultation with affected citizens."² Consultation with citizens was not an empty gesture by WMATA; the outcome of that consultation was taken to heart by WMATA planners, as WMATA documents show. The final site plan including the park—the layout that remains today—was designed to "accommodate" residents in Takoma, D.C. and Takoma Park, MD, in the words of one WMATA board member.³ Further, a WMATA funding authorization, necessary to pay the contractor to provide the newly authorized park, stated directly that the changes came as "a result of citizen objections to the original site plan."⁴ For their part, city planners in the District of Columbia noted in 1975 that the final site plan for the Takoma Metrorail Station "provides the community with the open space it requested."⁵

II. WMATA'S INTENTION TO PROVIDE A PARK AT THE METRO SITE

Just as there is no question that the site design of Takoma Metrorail Station was intended to respond to the interests of citizens, it is equally clear that WMATA and planning agencies in the District of Columbia and Maryland intended the landscaped area at the station to be a park. During the months that followed the December 20, 1973, WMATA board directive to its staff to come up with a new site plan for the Takoma Metrorail Station, two substantially similar plans were developed, one by WMATA and one by a group of citizens in Takoma, D.C. and Takoma Park, MD. [[WAS THE LATTER PLAN BY VERNON DUCKETT??]

Both plans under consideration called for the inclusion of a park on the site; the difference between them related to the layout of the parking area and the location of the park. An internal WMATA memo noted in analyzing discrepancies in the two plans, "The

¹ On September 16, 1971, the WMATA board approved the creation of 350 parking spaces, and an optional 100 more, at the Takoma Metrorail Station. Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, minutes from board meeting, September 16, 1971.

² Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, minutes of board meeting, December 20, 1973.

³ Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, minutes of board meeting, June 27, 1974.

⁴ Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, Action No. 2: Request for Approval of Award, Contract Number 1B0065-557, June 10, 1975. This document, authorizing a payment to the contractor for work pursuant to changes in the site plan, states: "As a result of citizen objections to the original site plans for the Takoma Station, the Board authorized the restudy of the proposed plans and subsequently authorized revisions to those plans. This action provides for the incorporation of these revisions."

⁵ Municipal Planning Office, "A Draft Report of the Municipal Planning Office: Service Area No. 1, Upper Northwest," 1975, p. 3.

issue seemed to boil down to the amount of vehicular traffic on Eastern Avenue between Piney Branch Road and Cedar Street.”⁶ Speaking before the WMATA board in June 1974, a WMATA staff member made it clear that deciding between the two plans was a matter of where the park would be, not whether there would be a park. The staff member recommended placing the kiss & ride facility at the northern portion of the site, with access to Eastern Avenue, which, he said, would place “the major portion of the park buffer on Cedar Street.”⁷ District of Columbia planners also noted the similarities between the two plans, particularly with respect to the provision of park space. In a 1975 draft report, the D.C. Office of Planning and Management wrote, “The WMATA plan is very similar to the community’s in that it also combines the off-peak hour parking and kiss-n-ride facilities into 100 spaces and provides the community with the open space it requested. The major differences of the two plans revolve around the location of these elements: parking and a public park.”⁸ Ultimately, on June 20, 1974, WMATA’s board adopted the WMATA staff plan, locating the park where it is today.⁹ The goal of providing a park—shared by WMATA and the community—was explained in an April 1974 memo by the organizations Plan Takoma and Save Takoma Park:

- a) The use of excess land on the WMATA site as a park land is consistent with the public use type of acquisition which WMATA employed.
- b) Metro construction has removed a significant amount of park land that was shared by the two communities along their border at Jessup Blair Park. It is reasonable and fitting that the agency which removed this valuable park land replace it for the mutual benefit of District and Maryland residents.
- c) The open space would act as an oasis in what will become a heavily traveled area. The park plantings will act as a visual screen and sound absorption unit and will help to rectify the imbalance in air quality created by traffic to the site.¹⁰

II. THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL’S DRAMATIC SHIFT TO SUPPORTING THE PARK

Although the Montgomery County Council initially supported large-scale development around the Takoma Metrorail Station, it reversed itself and lent whole-hearted support to down-sizing the parking area and providing a park on the site. In early 1971, in the face of plans in the District of Columbia to eliminate parking at the Takoma Station altogether, the Montgomery County Executive urged WMATA to provide at least 450 spaces at the station, and requested that the County Council do the same.¹¹ The Council adopted the County

⁶ Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, memo from Albert J. Roohr to William I. Herman, re: The Restudy of Takoma Station Parking as Directed by the Board December 20, 1973, May 24, 1974.

⁷ Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, minutes of board meeting, June 20, 1974.

⁸ Municipal Planning Office, “A Draft Report of the Municipal Planning Office: Service Area No. 1, Upper Northwest,” 1975, p. 3. The report continued, “The WMATA plan places the open space along Cedar Street, and the parking near the apartment buildings (buffered by another open space) with the drive-in entrance on Eastern Avenue.”

⁹ Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, minutes of board meeting, June 20, 1974.

¹⁰ Plan Takoma and Save Takoma Park, memo to members of the WMATA board of directors, District of Columbia City Council and Montgomery County Council, April 28, 1974, p. 3.

¹¹ Memorandum from James Gleason, County Executive, to Montgomery County Council, March 12, 1971.

Executive's view.¹² For its part, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission concurred, even arguing that allowance should be made for a multi-level parking garage in the future.¹³ The Commission, suspecting a deficit of 400 spaces at Takoma, went so far as to request an increase in the number of parking spaces.¹⁴

In June 1971, the Montgomery County Planning Board presented the first draft of its plan related to development in the context of the coming Takoma Metro Station. Reflecting the views expressed in prior months, the draft plan called for almost 450 parking spaces.¹⁵ It also opened the door to large apartment buildings—1,500 units at 65 units per acre around the Metro station.¹⁶ However, in September of 1971, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission began a series of meetings with community members to “seek answers to a number of questions as guidance in planning for the future of Takoma Park, and particularly that portion of Takoma Park most directly affected by the forthcoming Metro rapid transit station.”¹⁷ The feedback radically changed Montgomery County's approach to land use at the Metro. According to the Park and Planning Commission, “The series of public forums which followed revealed that the proposals contained in the draft were not acceptable to many of the residents, property owners, and business interests in the Takoma Park area.”¹⁸ In response, Montgomery County dramatically shifted its position on land use at the Metro station, supporting limited parking and a park at the station.

III. THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL'S STRONG INPUT INTO THE WMATA PROCESS

The Montgomery County Council had supported the citizens' plan, not the WMATA staff plan that was finally adopted.¹⁹ Although both plans provided for a park, the Montgomery County Council believed that the parking lot layout in the WMATA staff plan was less favorable to Montgomery County residents than the alternative.²⁰ In fact, the Council weighed in so heavily in the WMATA process that when the Montgomery County representative on the WMATA board, Cleatus Barnett, voted in favor of the WMATA staff site plan, rather than the citizens' plan favored by the Council, the Council successfully sought to have the WMATA board reopen the process and Mr. Barnett change his vote.²¹ In

¹² Letter from Idamae Garrott, President, Montgomery County Council, to Delmer Ison, Secretary-Treasurer, WMATA, April 6, 1971.

¹³ Memorandum from staff, Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, to Montgomery County Planning Board, March 1, 1971.

¹⁴ Letter from Caroline Freeland, Chairman, Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, to Carleton Sickles, Chairman, WMATA, May 3, 1971.

¹⁵ The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, Takoma Park Transit Impact Area Plan, June 1971.

¹⁶ Jack Eisen, “Suburban High-Rise Opposed,” *Washington Post*, August 19, 1971, and Fred Barnes, “Metro Fears Voiced in Takoma Park,” *The Star*, August 19, 1971.

¹⁷ The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, memorandum to the citizens of Takoma Park, September 13, 1971.

¹⁸ The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission and Montgomery County Planning Board, “Sector Plan for the Transit Impact Area in Takoma Park,” October 1974, p. 12.

¹⁹ Montgomery County Council, minutes of Council meeting, June 18, 1974.

²⁰ Montgomery County Council, minutes of Council meeting, June 18, 1974.

²¹ The Montgomery County Council vote to request that WMATA reconsider the citizens' plan took place on June 25, 1974. Montgomery County Council, minutes of meeting, June 25, 1974. According to the WMATA record, one week after the WMATA staff site plan had been adopted, “Mr. Barnett

the end, the WMATA staff plan again prevailed, preserving a park for the citizens but locating the entrance to the parking lot on Eastern Ave. instead of Cedar St.

IV. MONTGOMERY COUNTY AREA PLANS ANTICIPATED NO DEVELOPMENT ON METRO SITE

Montgomery County's involvement with the Takoma station did not end with the adoption of the site plan in June 1974. Since 1969, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission and Montgomery County Planning Board had actively worked to plan for the arrival of the Metro in Takoma. Their final report, released in October 1974, makes it clear that they did not expect the park or parking area at the station to be developed. [CITE] Indeed, in a parcel-by-parcel analysis of the probable timing of development around the Takoma Metro—on both sides of the D.C.-Maryland border—the planning groups did not include the Metro property in any phase of probable development.²²

VI. D.C. AREA PLANS ANTICIPATED NO DEVELOPMENT ON THE METRO SITE

Washington, D.C. was no mere passive player in this process. The Office of Planning and Management (OPM), which later became the Municipal Planning Office, actively worked with WMATA on site development. Indeed, OPM helped to select the final site plan approved by WMATA's board in June 1974.²³

In an effort to understand and direct potential development in the wake of the soon-to-open Metro, the Municipal Planning Office developed seven potential schemes for rezoning parcels near the Metro, each laying out different assumptions about the type of development that might occur. It is clear from these drawings that the Municipal Planning Office did not expect the Metro site to be developed. A parcel-by-parcel analysis of the properties around the Metro, discussing the pros and cons of changing the zoning of each, does not include mention of the Metro property. The same office that helped to choose the WMATA site plan in 1974 developed a document the following year called "Metro Places: Prospectus and Idea Paper." The suggestions contained in the draft report followed a longer planning process: "For several years the D.C. Municipal Planning Office (formerly the Office of Planning and Management) has been preparing plans for the development of the 40 Metro station areas in the District. This has been a long process, involving close cooperation with other agencies, citizens, and business."²⁴ "Metro Places" suggested that the area become a "small arboretum."²⁵ The shared assumption that the park would not be developed was further demonstrated in 1977, when the Municipal Planning Office

stated that while he had voted in favor of the staff recommendation on June 20, he had received a letter from County Council Chairman Potter calling to his attention the fact that the Montgomery County Charter grants to the County Council exclusive jurisdiction over planning matters and that he was in agreement that this was a planning matter and that the Council's views should prevail. Mr. Barnett then moved that the Board action of June 20 approving the staff recommendation for the Takoma Station site plan be reconsidered." Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, minutes of board meeting, June 27, 1974.

²² The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission and Montgomery County Planning Board, "Sector Plan for the Transit Impact Area in Takoma Park," October 1974, p. 40.

²³ Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, memo from Albert J. Roohr to William I. Herman, re: The Restudy of Takoma Station Parking as Directed by the Board December 20, 1973, May 24, 1974.

²⁴ Municipal Planning Office, "Metro Places," 1975, p. 8.

²⁵ Municipal Planning Office, "Metro Places," 1975, p. 50.

developed maps for a study called “A Plan for Takoma, D.C.” The maps clearly labeled the park “open space.”²⁶

VII. CONCLUSION

It is clear that the creation and location of the park at the Takoma Metrorail site reflect a carefully debated and clearly resolved policy decision taken by WMATA, based on input from affected citizens, planning agencies in the surrounding jurisdictions and the governments of the District of Columbia, Takoma Park, and Montgomery County. Moreover, it is evident that neither District of Columbia nor Montgomery County planners expected at the time that the Metro property would be developed. After working long hours to develop and choose the site plan for the Takoma Metrorail Station, the planners understood that WMATA had entered into a compact with all of the parties to provide a park for the community at the site.

Historic Takoma, Inc. is a nonprofit organization incorporated in Maryland and Washington, D.C. The organization is grateful to the many volunteers who donated their time and energy to the search for the documents cited here, including, in alphabetical order, Sabrina Baron, Paul Long, David Minton, Pete Munger, Chris Simpson and Joel Solomon.

²⁶ Historic Takoma is in possession of the maps, and is working to obtain the original document from which they came. The original document is cited in another document produced by the Office of Municipal Planning, called “Transit Access Study, Volume III.”