

The City of Takoma Park

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Seth Grimes, Councilmember, Ward 1

Tom Downs
Chairman of the Board
Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority
600 Fifth Street NW
Washington, DC 20001

Testimony

Docket R14-01: Proposed Changes to WMATA Facilities at Takoma Metro Station

June 18, 2014

Dear Mr. Downs,

I am Seth Grimes, a City of Takoma Park councilmember and the city's representative on the Transportation Planning Board of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments. The Takoma Park ward I represent is directly adjacent to the Takoma Metro station. My constituents walk and bicycle to the station and occasionally drive there, using the station's transit-user parking spaces. They are heavy users of Metrorail and the station's Metro and Ride On buses.

The City of Takoma Park and the Takoma Metro community will gladly welcome true transit-oriented development at the Takoma Metro site. The proposed EYA building does not qualify. I urge WMATA to reject the building and to compel the developer to create a building that instead favors transit users, integrated with, rather than in defiance of, the surrounding neighborhoods, working in true cooperation with stakeholders, rather than in opposition.

Site Conditions

Takoma Park was founded in 1883 by Benjamin Franklin Gilbert. Gilbert bought land, and sold lots, in a Washington D.C. and Maryland area surrounding a station on the Metropolitan Branch of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Takoma Park was the region's first railroad suburb. B.F. Gilbert, and Takoma Park, pioneered transit-oriented development in the Washington DC region. We remain dedicated to transit-oriented development, 130 years later.

The Maryland residential neighborhoods closest to the Takoma transit facility consist almost exclusively of single-family homes, including directly across Eastern Avenue NW from the planned development. The nearby Washington DC residences are single-family homes and small-scale apartments. Ours historic designation is official. The Washington DC and Maryland residential neighborhoods and the Old Takoma commercial corridor – and the Takoma Metro station – are within United States National Register Historic Districts.

Zoning and Neighborhood Compatibility

The Takoma Metro parcel that would be developed is split between two zoning designations, R-5-A residential fronting on Eastern Ave NW and C-2-A commercial, backing on the railroad tracks. The residential zone has a 40-foot height limit and the commercial zone has a 50-foot limit. A nearby TK/C-2-A Takoma Neighborhood Commercial Overlay District was created in 2005 with a 55-foot

height limit. It does not extend to the development location. Yet the proposed building rises to 72 feet in height.

Scale matters. Neighborhood compatibility and impact matter. Transitions matter. They matter to residents, and as embodied in the site's zoning, in historic-district regulations, and the Takoma Central District Plan, they regulate factors that include height, setbacks, and compatibility. They govern development at the site, therefore they must be considered by WMATA. Height 80% in excess of zoning limits, with massing of five stories just 23 feet from Eastern Avenue, even with the two upper stories set back an additional eight to ten feet, all within a residential zone, fails compatibility. The design does away with much needed buffers, and places a loading dock driveway in such a way that trucks will back across a sidewalk that is heavily used by pedestrians including transit users.

Transit and Traffic Impacts

The current building design includes a multi-level parking deck in the rear of the building, with far too many residential parking spaces, a ratio of 4 spaces for each 6 units, given the location. A Washington DC zoning rewrite currently underway would reduce the required parking ratio, for a site in close proximity to a transit station, to 1-to-6, one quarter the 4-to-6 ratio EYA proposes.

The excess of residential parking will cost WMATA transit-user revenue (relative to revenue if fewer units had car parking spaces). It is a direct contributor to the excessive size of the building and to traffic and transit-user parking impact. If the developer reduced the number of residential parking spaces – or located them under the building, like every other recently constructed apartment building in the Takoma Metro area – the building size could be reduced. Further, there would be fewer new cars on the surrounding residential streets, answering community concerns about the traffic impact that will hamper Metro and Ride On buses that use those same streets.

But further, the excessive residential parking, and its positioning in the development, create the need for three lanes of surface driveways to the rear of the building. Space for these driveways comes at the expense of transit-user parking and buffers to the neighboring apartment building.

The proposal reduces the number of metered parking spaces for transit users from 141 to 85, with additional spaces for handicapped drivers and Kiss and Ride use. Fewer transit-user parking spaces will mean reduced use of the Takoma transit facilities and, again, lower transit revenue.

Remediation

The issues with the proposed building can be fixed. I ask that WMATA create a new Neighborhood Design Working Group and mandate that the developer work with the City of Takoma Park and the working group and other concerned parties, to revise the design to the satisfaction of those stakeholders – to reduce the building size and create proper setbacks and preserve transit-user parking – as a condition of approval of the compact-hearing report.

Thank you for your consideration of my testimony.

Sincerely,



Councilmember, City of Takoma Park