



City of Takoma Park

## **City Manager Comments**

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### **Report of September 16, 2020**

#### **Election Information**

It is definitely election season! Please make sure to be prepared to vote. This year things are a bit confusing, so make a plan and don't wait until the last minute. First, make sure you are registered at your current address! Even if you are not legally able to vote in the Presidential elections, you may be legally able to vote in the City of Takoma Park election. Information is in the *City Guide* that came in your Takoma Park Newsletter this month and is online here:

[Election Information](#)

#### **COVID-19 Related Information**

##### **City Facilities Remain Mostly Closed to the Public**

Given that the COVID-19 case numbers remain higher than we are comfortable with and Montgomery County remains largely in Phase 2 reopening with restrictions remaining on a number of activities, most of the City of Takoma Park government buildings remain closed to the public. I have let City staff know that this may continue until the summer of 2021. City staff that are working remotely have been provided equipment to work from home, we have limited the number of temporary and part time staff on site, and we are limiting public access to the lower level Maple Avenue entrance to the Community Center. Some services, such as Books to Go and some election-related services, are outside of the building, either in the Community Center back parking lot or at the lower level Maple Avenue entrance. Police emergency and limited administrative services are available from the lower level Maple Avenue lobby. Some drop off services (mail, deliveries, mask and food donations, prescription drug drop offs) occur in the lower level Maple Avenue lobby.

City parks and playgrounds are available for public use, but basketball courts remain closed. Contact sports are strongly discouraged at this time. Some outdoor recreation and skills-building programs are being offered by the City Recreation Department and certain other organizations, when they can be done safely.

Masks must be worn in public facilities and when near others. Although advice has been to stay six feet away from others for safety, coughing, sneezing, shouting, singing or exercising can expel the virus more than six feet. For this reason, please wear masks unless you really are at a safe distance from others for the activity that is occurring.

City Council, City committee, and other public meetings will be held virtually for the foreseeable future. Committees that may hold quasi-judicial hearings are receiving training so that they can be handled appropriately. We have been working to include ASL interpretation for certain meetings

and events. We are also trying to update our website and online services to make getting services as easy as possible while working to keep people safe.

The City of Takoma Park has always had a small staff for the level of services we provide. Working remotely adds to the amount of time and coordination required to get work done. Add to this regular illness and quarantining for COVID-19, and our staffing levels are reduced even more. During the pandemic, I ask the community's patience and flexibility on work requests. We are working hard to serve you promptly, but delays are occurring at times.

### **Halloween**

City staff are working with others to come up with a safe, city-wide approach to celebrating Halloween this year. I hope to be able to announce the plan within a week or so. This is not the year to go door-to-door, but we are looking at fun options for celebrating. Fortunately, Halloween is on Saturday so activities can occur during the daylight over a number of hours. We've had enough "tricks" this year, so looking forward to safe "treats!"

### **Takoma Park COVID-19 Dashboard**

Deputy City Manager Jessica Clarke updates the City's COVID-19 [Dashboard](#) each week, usually on Friday. A lot of the data detail we would love to have is not available, but we post the information we are able to obtain, including race, ethnicity and age. Some information is only available by zip code. The data that is posted is largely after-the-fact information. People are often infectious two days before any symptoms appear and many people remain asymptomatic. Positive case statistics therefore lag dates of infection and testing; and then deaths lag behind cases by several weeks. Thanks to Jessica for keeping up with this Takoma Park-specific information.

### **Allowing Alcohol in Takoma Urban Park**

Related to the Maryland-National Capital Picnic in the Park program, the County Director of Parks, Mike Riley, has issued a directive allowing consumption of alcohol in nine parks, one of which is Takoma Urban Park (Gazebo Park at Carroll and Westmoreland). The City was not consulted about including this park in the list of those in which alcohol may be consumed. Problems should be reported to the Park Police at 301-949-8010 or, if an emergency, call 911.

### **Other Information**

#### **City Is Awarded \$475,000 Bikeways Grant**

We are very happy to announce that the City received a grant of \$475,000 from the Maryland Bikeways program to continue work on the New Ave Bikeway. This grant will fund final design documents for the conversion of the southbound service lane on New Hampshire Avenue into a two-way separated bike lane. The City has previously received funding from both Maryland Bikeways as well as the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments for preliminary and semi-final designs for portions of the bikeway. The realization of the bikeway will help to support multi-modal transportation on New Hampshire Avenue and will connect to the future Purple Line station. More information on the project can be found [here](#).

## **Police Chief Participation in Key Committees**

In addition to the regional and State organizations that Chief Antonio DeVaul participates in, he has been asked to be part of two new committees looking at public safety and policing issues:

- Maryland Police Body Worn Camera Task force - serves as a member representing the Maryland Chiefs of Police Association (MCPA). The task force was formed as a result of SB492 (2015). The task force is composed of elected officials including D20 Del. Moon as well as law enforcement representatives from the MCPA, the MD Sheriffs Association, Maryland Municipal League, and other stakeholders. The task force was designed to review Maryland law enforcement agencies' body work camera programs and look at a possible statewide program.
- Montgomery County Reimagining Public Safety Taskforce – serves as a member of this task force put together by County Executive Marc Elrich. The Task Force is a workgroup of community representatives, organization representatives and others who will work with County staff with an aim to address institutional racism and work toward creating a safer community and one that is better for all County residents.

## **Status of Takoma Junction Redevelopment Project**

It is expected that the City's development partner, Neighborhood Development Company (NDC) will submit revised plans for the Takoma Junction development in the next several weeks. It is probable that after that submission, City of Takoma Park staff will begin their detailed review of all of the plan information. A major focus of the review will be the assessment of how the plans address the provisions and requirements of City Council Resolution [2018-41](#). When City staff have completed their review, the staff report will be shared publicly to allow the public to consider the staff findings as they prepare testimony for City Council consideration. The plans are not likely to come before the City Council within the next three months. Thanks to resident Bill Kules, who worked with City staff to develop a nice graphic of the process, public input points and timeline. That graphic is posted here: <https://takomaparkmd.gov/initiatives/takoma-junction-redevelopment/>

## **Purple Line Project**

The entity ("concessionaire") that has been under contract with the State of Maryland to construct and then operate the Purple Line light rail line has been disputing payment terms with the State for some time. The concessionaire now has the right to stop their work on the project. Officials from the State of Maryland have stated that they want the project to continue and may mobilize to construct it themselves. Yesterday, statements were made that this transition time may take six months. The City Council will be sending a letter to State and County officials identifying the critical need to continue the project and to protect our businesses and residents from problems during any delay. In addition, we want to see improvements made regarding pedestrian and bicycle safety, traffic diversion into neighborhoods, and replanting of trees along the route.

## **Retirement of Library Director, Ellen Arnold Robbins**

Ellen Arnold Robbins has announced that she will be retiring this winter; actual date as yet to be determined. Ellen has been with the City Library since 1973, serving as Library Director since

1982. The photos below, from Takoma Park Newsletters, show her in 1975 and 1982. For most of us, she is the only Takoma Park Maryland Library Director we've ever known. We will give her a terrific send off when we are closer to her retirement date. In the meantime, I am pleased that she will advise us as we recruit for a new Library Director. The new Director will be able to structure the operations of the new library and its programs into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century library vision particularly suited for Takoma Park. We are so happy that Ellen has charted the course for this through 47 years with the City of Takoma Park!



*Ellen Arnold Robbins in 1975 and 1982.*

### **Other Personnel News**

Our holistic approach to managing personnel costs and providing services during the pandemic has included working to reduce long-term costs, acknowledging the service of our staff under difficult conditions, and employing or reassigning staff in order to focus on critically-needed services. We have been working on filling key vacant positions, such as Urban Forest Manager, IT Specialist, Elections Intern, Communications Intern, Deputy Public Works Director, Assistant to the Manager, and Budget and Accounting Specialist. We have developed a retirement incentive program that will result in short term and long term personnel savings. And, we have been in negotiations with the City's two unions. We have not employed non-permanent staff or temporary employees since the fiscal year started on July 1. A number of vacant positions are on a hold list, which will be reviewed by Council as more revenue and expenditure information becomes available during the course of the fiscal year.

### **Adopted FY21 City of Takoma Park Budget Document Now Available**

Thanks to an enormous amount of hard work, City staff have now finalized the adopted FY21 [Budget](#) document. This was a very difficult year in which to prepare a proposed budget as well as to consider and adopt a final budget. The City Manager's proposed budget document was prepared just as staff went into remote work mode. Many financial adjustments were required during the Council's budget consideration process as we estimated the potential impacts of the pandemic during the early months of the shut down. During the budget consideration process, there were many comments made about how the budget document should more clearly

communicate the information. City staff, particularly Deputy City Manager Jessica Clarke, Finance Director Susan Cheung, Budget and Accounting Manager Ron Kawaley, and Human Resources Director Tracy Smith, have put in a great deal of time and thought in order to accommodate the requests that residents and Councilmembers made for the presentation of the financial information.

The result of their work is a greatly expanded budget document that provides much more detail on personnel costs, budget cost change information by account line, organizational charts, staff diversity information, ten-year tracking information for many categories, and other explanatory information that often is only found in the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR). Because the pandemic caused many changes from a normal year, special blue boxes identify major COVID-19 related impacts on departments or services. Vacant positions on hold are identified with a special symbol in the reconciliation table.

When looking at the new budget document, Councilmembers, interested residents and all budget geeks should turn first to a new special section of the budget document, "Reader's Guide to the Budget Book," that begins on page 30. It explains what the various sections of the budget document include, defines the column headings, provides detailed personnel information, and describes changes to the budget book from previous years. It also has explanations of the COVID-19 related actions that are included in the budget.

On most budget charts, we have added a column showing the numerical difference between the Adjusted FY20 amount and the adopted FY21 budget amount. It should be noted that in most years there is a current year budget amendment that is adopted between the adoption of the next year's budget but before the new fiscal year begins. The "Adjusted FY20" column that has been added to this budget document is the adjusted current year budget figure before the new fiscal year's budget is adopted, so a later budget amendment could affect a particular line.

Budgets are planning documents and almost all figures in a budget document are estimates. Estimated figures are often conservative estimates to limit risk to the jurisdiction. For this reason, real year-to-year comparisons need to be based on audited figures after the year ends. Audited financials for the FY20 Fiscal Year will be included in the CAFR for the year ended June 30, 2020 which will be posted on the City's website in November when the City's annual audit has concluded.

I think you will find that the FY21 Budget document is a great source of information and much improved over past years' budget documents. Comments on what works well and any additional improvements that may be considered for future budget documents are welcome. Please submit your comments to Deputy City Manager Jessica Clarke at [JessicaC@takomaparkmd.gov](mailto:JessicaC@takomaparkmd.gov).

### **Laurel Avenue Streeterly**

As part of the closing of one side of Laurel Avenue to create the Laurel Avenue Streeterly in June, residents have been encouraged to leave messages regarding pedestrian, vehicular and health safety. Staff is to report to the Council about comments received. There have been a total

of 69 comments, with 11 coming after the last report to the Council in July. Of the 11, one was negative on every aspect. The others were positive about the Streetery in general and specifically in the areas of social distancing and feeling safe. Suggestions for improvements included trimming overgrowth for clear sight lines for drivers; more signage for social distancing; and more handicap parking. Suggestions were also made to extend the area for outside dining to the other side of Laurel and to other locations on Carroll Avenue. I have also heard of recommendations to expand bicycle parking in the area.

### **Recreation Center Kick-off**

This Saturday, there will be a kick-off event for residents who live near the Takoma Park Recreation Center to learn about the planned redevelopment process for the facility. Given the health constraints, we are focusing on the residents in the immediate vicinity and we will have a fairly quick walk-through system through several stations to introduce the project and the process ahead. After the activity this Saturday, there will be virtual events the following week that we will advertise to the rest of the City. Kudos to Economic Development Manager Samira Cook Gaines and consultant firm Brick and Story for working creatively to involve residents safely during this pandemic.

### **Kudos**

Over the summer, City staff have been working extremely hard on providing services to residents and businesses. There have been extra challenges due to the pandemic, issues of mental health crises and homelessness, an increased level of violent crime, and the heavy rain storm and flooding of last Thursday. Just as it is a stressful time for our residents and business owners, it is a stressful time for City staff. If you have a chance and are so inclined, please let them know you appreciate them. I know I do – I am so fortunate to work with so many wonderful and dedicated people!

### **My Schedule Next Week**

Next week, the annual convention of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) will be held. The convention will be held virtually and both Jessica Clarke and I are signed up to attend. We will be able to attend some sessions in real time, and other workshops may need to be viewed as recorded sessions later. We may not be as available to immediately respond to issues next week, but will be checking regularly. The sessions look particularly good and it looks like some of the information to be shared may be immediately applicable to the issues we are facing.