

FEBRUARY 1, 2016

STATEMENT OF PETER KOVAR

TAKOMA PARK CITY COUNCILMEMBER

MONTGOMERY COLLEGE FACILITIES MASTER PLAN

Thank you. My name is Peter Kovar. I'm a member of the Takoma Park City Council, representing North Takoma, where much of Montgomery College's Takoma campus is located.

North Takoma residents have concerns about both the substance and the process of the Master Plan. I share those concerns, and I ask the Board to delay voting on the Plan until there is genuine consultation with the community, as required under the 2002 legal Agreement between the College and the City of Takoma Park.

Before detailing our concerns, I do want to note that I'm a strong supporter of the College. MC is an important community resource that provides valuable educational opportunities to area students, especially those from lower income families.

Indeed, I have important personal connections to the College. First, my daughter was a student at MC. In addition, my wife and I recently endowed a scholarship to help low income MC students afford tuition. I have also testified before the County Council in support of increased funding for the ACES program.

Provost Stewart recently gave me a tour of the Takoma campus, including the science buildings. It's clear the labs need to be updated. Takoma campus students deserve access to state of the art scientific equipment and facilities.

However, many aspects of the Master Plan appear to be inappropriate for a campus in a residential area, and incompatible with the neighborhood's historic district designation. The Takoma Campus is the only MC campus literally mixed into a residential neighborhood, which means more focused consultation with the community is vital.

The Plan calls for replacing most major MC buildings in North Takoma, meaning residents could face ongoing construction work for much of the 10-year period. The new buildings would likely tower over or intrude inappropriately on single family homes in the area.

That's not necessary, because the College owns space on Georgia Avenue, where construction could occur, in line with previous MC plans to expand the campus toward Silver Spring. And, there are properties on Fenton Street -- better suited for College buildings -- that could be purchased.

Perhaps a replacement science facility could be made compatible by building below ground or moving closer to Fenton Street. But, expanding to the West is preferable, especially since the Plan also calls for replacing key buildings on New York Avenue, which will cause further neighborhood disruption.

Unfortunately, there has been no meaningful chance to explore these alternatives because of the inadequate consultation with residents and the City, due to the compressed Master Plan review schedule. This gets to the process problems.

Under the 2002 Agreement, attached to this statement, MC agreed to consult with the City and community as early as possible during planning for major changes to existing buildings. But in this case, the only consultation was two poorly publicized events where few details were provided.

When the schedule was announced late last summer, the insufficient time for consultation was clear. The final public meeting was set for mid-December, followed by an almost immediate referral to the Board, which would vote on January 25, delayed until today because of the snowstorm. Only after the Board vote, would details become public, and the Plan would be referred within a week to the State.

That meant we couldn't comment knowledgeably on the Plan until after most details were announced. So, in October the City Council adopted a resolution protesting the College's "non-accommodation of adequate public comment" and urging "modification of the schedule and process to allow for timely, informed community input once the College has a draft proposal for discussion." A copy of that document is also attached.

When few details were released even in December, our Mayor asked Mr. Stewart to make a presentation to the City Council on the Plan. She renewed that request in January and he appeared before the Council on January 20, again with no written material provided in advance and few details revealed in the presentation.

None of that sounds like the behavior of an institution with a legally binding commitment to consult with the community.

Now, I've heard the argument that a Master Plan doesn't require everything it contains to actually be done. That depends on factors like funding availability. But things not in the Plan will almost certainly not be done. And those of us who live in the area are distressed to see that this Plan doesn't include any alternatives to simply rebuilding existing structures.

So, speaking as a strong supporter of MC's mission, I again urge the Board to postpone today's Master Plan vote so we have time to explore alternative approaches that protect the historic North Takoma neighborhood.

The neighborhood and the college are part of the same community. We need to work together to create a stronger, more collaborative relationship. As a new member of the Takoma Park City Council, I look forward to helping foster a better working relationship, and I am convinced that postponing the Master Plan vote to ensure greater local input would be a crucial step toward that goal.

Thank you. I would be glad to answer any questions.