

City of Takoma Park

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Kate Stewart, Mayor

August 26, 2019

Ms. Sandra Heiler
Chair, Historic Preservation Commission
Historic Preservation Office
Montgomery County Planning Department
8787 Georgia Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Dear Chair Heiler,

I would like to thank you for serving as the Chair of the Historic Preservation Commission. As the Mayor of Takoma Park, I know first-hand the many hours public service requires, and at times, the difficult decisions that need to be made.

I am writing to you today with regards to the development project in Takoma Junction. I was unable to attend the last Historic Preservation Commission meeting but listened to the audio afterwards.

In your remarks, you urged "a look at the whole process" and noted the people who were in attendance at the HPC meeting have "not been heard" by myself nor our City Council. We have heard these residents and many others who hold differing views on this project. As you know, like many redevelopment projects, there is not consensus from the community on all the facets of this project, and it is why over the last five years we have striven to have an open, transparent process in which residents have been heard and adjustments made based on their feedback.

The Council has had long deliberations, engaged experts, and listened to the public including our own resident committees on this project.

Our City Manager sent you a letter on August 1st with information regarding our process over the last five years. I want to reiterate a number of points made in her letter:

First, I ask that you look at [Resolution 2018-41](#), which authorized the project to begin its review through the Montgomery County Planning Department, including the review of the Historic Preservation Commission. As you will see by the 12-page length and great detail of the

Resolution, much consideration has gone into the City Council's review of the project. This is only the last of many resolutions we have passed regarding this project.

Second, over the past five years, regarding this project, the City Council has held:

- 32 Work Sessions with public comments
- Three Listening Sessions
- Three Open Houses, including an on-site Pop-Up Open House
- The above only includes city-wide sponsored events. Each member of the Council held additional meetings in their wards. In particular, over the years, I have opened my own house on Saturday afternoons to have people come and discuss this project.

Third, the City held design meetings on form and character, and access and mobility, with over 200 attendees. Online surveys on these topics garnered 630 respondents. The number of written public comments in 2018 alone, leading up to Council's Resolution 2018-41, was over 600.

Fourth, the City has maintained a detailed website that contains up-to-date information and numerous Q&A documents to address questions that have come up during our five-year process, including a number of those raised by the HPC (such as truck circulation options). Do look at our [website](#) on this issue.

Specifically, during the HPC meeting you raised concerns about the Urban Forest and stormwater and questioned whether we have spent enough time considering the impacts of the development on both. The answer is yes we have spent a great deal of time on both and you can read here regarding [stormwater](#). Regarding the Urban Forest, it is being placed under a Forest Conservation Easement for the improvement and long-term preservation of the area.

One example of the changes we made after listening to residents was very early on in this process. We heard clearly from residents, especially those who live on or near Columbia Ave, that they did not want any access to the property off of Columbia Ave nor did they want the forested R-60 lot developed. Working with Neighborhood Development Company, changes were made to their concepts for the project and since that time we have worked to find the best ways to preserve, protect, and improve the forested area.

Finally, I would like to address the issue of public space and our deliberations on this point. Because there is no objective standard or precedent to point to when it comes to how much public space there should be, we held many discussions on the topic. We held an on-site open house where we chalked the space currently proposed so people could see it, and we engaged David Cronrath, an Associate Provost and former Dean of the School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at the University of Maryland as an independent, third-party advisor to the City Council as we considered the site plan design. Besides providing advice on the design of the building (including improving the Columbia Avenue facade for attractiveness and to minimize light and noise pollution), Professor Cronrath shared his expertise with the Council regarding

the appropriate dimensions and configuration of the public space so that it would be more likely to be comfortable and well-used.

I very much agree that public space is very important to a community, and I am proud to be the Mayor of a City that has and creates places for people to gather both formally and informally. As the Mayor, I believe it is one of my responsibilities, working with my colleagues on the Council and City staff, to ensure our community has places to celebrate and gather.

When the Council looked at Takoma Junction and discussed the public space at the location, it was noted that within a few blocks of the parking lot we have many public gathering spaces. The parking lot we are looking to redevelopment is an asphalt parking lot with no stormwater remediation. Yes, events have been held on the lot, but it is by no means the only and is certainly not the main, gathering place in our City.

To give you a sense of the places where people gather in our City, we have:

- The Gazebo area near Old Town (in Takoma Park Urban Park) where we have held a number of Community vigils, demonstrations, PlayDays, public art displays, music, drum circles, fire shows, and other events;
- The underused BY Morrison Park, across the street from the Takoma Junction project, which we hope with the project will actually be altered to become much more usable public space;
- The MCPS fields that we are able to use for our fireworks display on the 4th of July, the Folk Festival, soccer tournaments and other events;
- Two Farmers Markets: on Wednesday afternoons we have our Crossroads Farmers Market on Anne Street that provides a great place for the community to gather and has now hosted a number of night markets with music and entertainment, as well as our Sunday Farmers Market in Old Town on Laurel Ave;
- We also have our Recreation Center on New Hampshire Ave; our Community Center with auditorium on Maple Avenue; and often we find closing Maple Avenue in front of our Community Center beneficial for events, such as National Night Out; and
- We have a number of neighborhood parks within a five block walk of Takoma Junction that serve as great places for those both young and old to enjoy; these include Opal Daniels Park, Spring Park, Forest Park, Takoma Park Urban Park, Takoma-Piney Branch Park/Ed Wilhelm Field and Sligo Creek Stream Valley Park.

As we look at our City as a whole, there are places that are in greater need of public space and parks than Takoma Junction, such as in Ward 6 near New Hampshire Ave and University Boulevard and in Ward 5 along Flower Avenue. The Council has been having conversations on how to create spaces for residents who live in these parts of the City.

I very much appreciate your time and would be happy to meet with you and the other Commissioners if you have questions regarding our process. I have not reached out before because I wanted to see the project move forward through the HPC review and did not think our process would be called into question.

However, I will be honest that I was very concerned to hear that the Chair of the Montgomery County Historic Preservation Commission does not feel we had an appropriate process in our Community and that as Chair you stated that people in our City were not heard. I understand that not everyone agrees with the direction of this project. Nevertheless, the Mayor and the Council are elected by the voters of our City and it is the voters of the City who get to decide if we are listening or not and hold us accountable for our processes.

I hope we can have the opportunity to talk in more detail about the work that has taken place in the City with regards to this project and I thank you for your time and look forward to the HPC providing feedback on the specifics of this project as they relate to historic preservation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Kate Stewart".

Kate Stewart
Mayor

CC: Historic Preservation Commission
Gwen Wright, Montgomery County Planning Director
Takoma Park City Council