



Takoma Junction: the dilemma of revitalization

Part three of a series

For more than 25 years Takoma Junction has eluded all efforts at revitalization. Despite a never-ending round of committees who enthusiastically gather to tackle the problem, little has changed.

Much of the challenge is location. Originally part of General Samuel Sprigg Carroll's family estate, the intersection of Carroll and Ethan Allen only slowly developed commerce in the 1930s.

The small storefronts that appeared in conjunction with the trolley line passing through on its way to Sligo Creek, remain the primary economic activity. But several blocks of residential houses separate them from the Takoma Old Town commercial center at Carroll and Laurel.

Although city debate over development was sparked by the freeway fight of late 1960s, little thought was given to this intersection until 1981. Then the city decided to take advantage of newly-available federal block grant money to improve its commercial districts.

Takoma Old Town was the first recipient. Finally in March 1983, the city convened a Takoma Junction Revitalization Committee to figure out the best model for the newly-named area along Carroll Avenue between Sherman and Philadelphia.

Eight contractors made proposals, which ended up filed in city hall and the library, but brought only some minimal streetscape improvements. The most tangible result was the Victorian mural on the corner wall of High's Market (now TJs). This was the brainchild of Ed McMahon, who promoted public art as a key to revitalization.

A new go-around in 1995 resulted in the creation of B.Y. Morrison Park with Jim Colwell's "Guardians of the Neighborhood" mural adorning the abandoned gas station (once Sister City Thrift Shop) on the corner. Trees and shrubs were planted,



PHOTO COURTESY OF HISTORIC TAKOMA

The fire station as seen in 1929. The construction of a new fire station on site, just getting underway, will prompt renewed discussion of revitalization at the Junction.

turning the corner into a gorgeous, glorified bus stop.

Then developer Mike Zarpas began entertaining offers from People's Drug and later Rite Aid to build on the open lot at 7100 Carroll Avenue. This 67,000 square foot vacant lot had been identified from the beginning as the spot that "would define the identity of the Junction" in the words of one of the committee reports. (See account on next page of a similar fight over 8 Grant Ave.)

Zarkas' action galvanized neighborhood opposition and the Last Takoma Junction Committee was born. A coalition of neighbors, city officials and businessmen, the committee conducted a public charette and floated the concept of a "village center," with a pedestrian-friendly plaza..

They also envisioned a Community Development Corporation, as a non-profit entity that would support the financial development. The effort faded away, although the committee did help push the city into purchasing the property from

Zarpas.

Dan Robinson, the Councilmember currently representing the Junction, still echoes the idea of a non-profit mechanism as the best hope for revitalizing the area. "It is not necessary for economic development to knock down and rebuild bigger - which of course, forces out the current small businesses."

Instead he calls for a commercial land trust. "As a non-profit, they don't have to gather the high rents required by developers to turn a profit. They could encourage a smaller-scale of development. Say, expansion of the Co-op."

Ten years ago Takoma-Silver Spring Co-op moved into the red brick storefront on Ethan Allen that once housed a Safeway store. They have shown interest in expanding, but would face tough financial hurdles.

Meanwhile, the neighbors have once again taken up the standard. Under the dynamic leadership of Ellen Zavian, they are trying to define how to make the junction function - that's her committee's name - Make the Junction Function.

"I have been talking with the store owners, encouraging them to clean up their front windows and to improve the streetscape. But we need to do more. The concerts this summer in the Co-op parking lot are just one example of what could be done."

Ironically, the best catalyst for change in years may actually be the long-delayed construction of the new fire station.

The original fire station was built on Carroll at Philadelphia Ave in 1927 to proclaim the elevated status of the city's Volunteer Fire Department. Built entirely by volunteers at a cost of \$45,000, the two-story brownstone was home not only to the firefighters, but a public space for the entire community.

Decades worth of banquets, civic meetings, teen dances, even council meetings were held in its large community room. The gym downstairs offered roller skating as well as basketball. Subsequent alterations eliminated this community space and altered the charming facade in order to accommodate larger fire trucks.

Now truck size is again pushing the county to replace the existing building. After 10 years of debate on design, complicated by efforts to save a nearby house from demolition, the first signs of construction appeared this spring.

For the next two years, the City Lot that has been the focus for revitalization schemes, will be occupied by firefighters in trailers and fire trucks in a tent. Given what the traffic is like now, things will be worse before they get better.

But many residents, like Robinson and Zavian, feel this is the best opportunity to hash out once and for all what the future of the Junction should be once the new fire station reopens.

Diana Kohn is Education Chair of Historic Takoma. Parts 1 and 2 of this Takoma Junction series are available online at takoma.com along with her previous columns.

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