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Takoma Park: Nuclear Free and proud of it



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SAM ABBOTT COLLECTION

Takoma Park's Nuclear Free Zone Ordinance reflected decades of activism including marches like the one pictured above. The public is invited to celebrate the ordinance's 25th anniversary on Wednesday, December 10 at 7:30 p.m. in the Community Center.

Twenty five years ago, the Takoma Park city council voted to declare our fair city a Nuclear Free Zone.

These days talk of global warming and pending recession dominate the news. But in 1983, the great fear was the arms race, fueled by the cold war between the Soviet Union and the United States. Massive stockpiles of nuclear weapons were accumulating at alarming rates.

Accepted national policy was something called "Mutually Assured Destruction" (MAD for short), which meant you needed enough bombs that the other side wouldn't dare attack you because they knew you'd have enough weapons to annihilate them too.

It provoked a national movement to freeze weapons production, sparked by celebrities the likes of Benjamin Spock and Harry Belafonte. Petition drives and marches filled the streets across America.

Jay Levy was part of the Nuclear Freeze movement, but as one of Takoma Park's many citizen activists, he decided to focus on the local level. His idea was to draft a city ordinance declaring Takoma Park a nuclear free zone.

"There were 28 or 29 other jurisdictions that had already done so," he recalls. "So I gathered all the ordinances I could find and put the strongest parts together into one. I wanted it to have some teeth, the force of law."

"It was scheduled for action on Monday, December 12, 1983" Jay continues.

"Ironically, the night before, ABC ran a grim faux-documentary called 'The Day

After,' dramatizing the harrowing aftermath of a nuclear attack. On Monday night the room was packed and the resolution passed easily. Sam Abbott was mayor and I don't know for sure, but he might have planned it that way."

The ordinance:

- (1) prohibited the production of nuclear weapons in the City.
 - (2) required publication of a list of nuclear weapons producers.
 - (3) prohibited the city from purchasing or leasing products made by a weapons producer or investing in such companies.
 - (4) provided for a waiver under certain conditions.
 - (5) established an oversight committee.
- After 25 years the ordinance is still going strong and the city wears the title of Nuclear Free with a sense of pride.

One of the reasons, according to Reuben Snipper, councilman for Ward 5, is the work that went into creating a process for enforcing the ordinance. He remembers that when he joined the committee in 1985, the first concern was to assemble a list of the banned companies. It was a difficult task in the days before the internet, but eventually they found a ready-made list, which they update to this day.

Next, the committee had to confront an budget and procurement system that did not allow for the advance notice necessary to locate alternate sources. "By the time we knew about a request, it was too late to find an alternative," Snipper explained.

"The departments knew early in the budget process what kind of cars or

gadgets they wanted to purchase. But we didn't find out until just before the budget was up for approval," Snipper continued, "So we changed the process to include the committee early on. Not only did it help smooth things out, but it often saved money, because a wider search often turned up a cheaper alternative."

Despite fears that the first waiver would lead to a wave that would sink the ordinance, Levy recalls that there have been only three waivers in 25 years.

One was for police radios. "It was the County that insisted every jurisdiction had to have the same Motorola system," he explained. "So we agreed."

Then there were the police cars from Ford. "As it turned out, Ford was on the banned list when we cut the check, but by the time the cars arrived," he went on, "they were no longer on the list as having a nuclear involvement."

"Finally," Levy recounted, "we wanted to use energy-efficient light bulbs that required special ballasts, and all the manufacturers were on the list."

Any contract or bid is subject to the same requirements, but over the years contractors have adapted to the city's rules.

Although nuclear war is no longer the first thing on people's minds, the committee would argue that the danger has not really diminished

Granted, much has changed since 1983. The Berlin Wall is gone. The Soviet Union has dissolved and the "cold war" is rarely invoked. But several nations have joined the nuclear club - Israel, South Africa, India and Pakistan, and just last year, North Korea.

An alphabet-soup string of treaties have tried to force a reduction in the number of

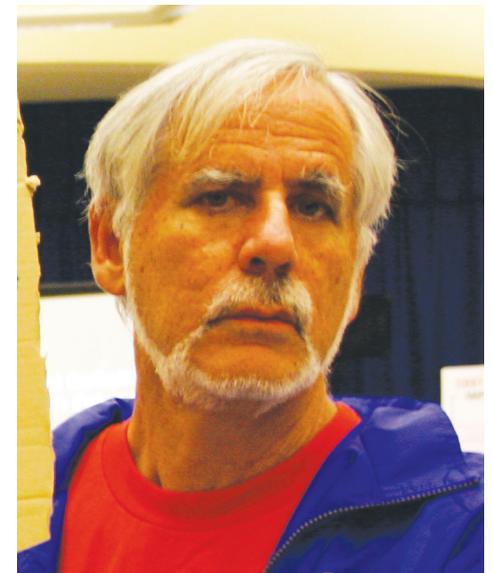


PHOTO BY ERIC BOND

Jay Levy, who wrote the original Nuclear Free Zone ordinance in 1983, currently serves as committee chair.



PHOTO BY DIANA KOHN

This sign at Piney Branch and Eastern Avenue is one of two remaining markers. The council has promised to replace the others at the city borders.

weapons, with little success.

The ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missile) Treaty promised to curb defensive missiles but the U.S. withdrew from it in 2000.

The NPT (Nuclear Proliferation Treaty) has 183 signers, but divides the world into those with bombs (five) and the rest without. South Korea has already figured out how to use it as a path to acquire bomb materials.

The CTBT (Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty) limited testing but the U.S. Senate refused to ratify it.

Meanwhile the Soviet Union has given way to a motley collection of nation-states and unleashed a rash of "loose nukes." Both the U.S. and Russia still hold 5000 missiles on hair-trigger alert.

The ominous threat of global warming has given new birth to nuclear power, and the risk that reactor fuel will end up in bombs.

Levy and Snipper, like many other citizen activists, see this as the continuation of the old anti-nuclear battles that prompted the original ordinance.

For example, the only amendment to the ordinance came in 2005, in the wake of outrage over rail shipments of nuclear waste through the city. The Council asked the committee to expand its mission to advise it on waste transport issues.

Last but not least, the ordinance has carried Takoma Park's fame around the

world. Scores of jurisdictions have used our ordinance as a model for their own.

Levy remembers a World Nuclear meeting in Vancouver, where the mayor of Olympia in Washington State took exception to Levy's claim that Takoma Park has the strictest ordinance. "No, you don't," the mayor insisted, "we have the same law you do, because you gave it to us."

"I have given a Nuclear-Free Takoma T-shirt to the Mayor of Hiroshima," Levy explains, "and I've been to the Mayors for Peace Conference in New York where many applauded us for taking a principled stand and making it work."

For all its success and the positive image Takoma Park has outside of Fox News, it's still hard to fill the committee seats. Levy has served as committee chair for the last 12 years but laments that they are operating with five members rather than the full complement of seven.

With this in mind, and with their mandate to inform the citizens, the committee is throwing a 25th anniversary party to elaborate on their accomplishments and the dangers ahead. Join the celebration on Wednesday December 10 at 7:30 p.m. in the Community Center council chambers.

The committee has also launched a weblog. Jim Kuhn, a long-time committee member, has taken on the task in conjunction with Linda Gunter of Beyond Nuclear, one of several activist organizations that call Takoma Park home.

Kuhn sees the pending inaugural of Barack Obama as "a remarkable opportunity for a municipality with a conscience to influence federal policies that impact local neighborhoods. Activism in Takoma Park is a living tradition."

Learn more by visiting the Takoma Park Nuclear Free Weblog at nftpc.blogspot.com and Beyond Nuclear at www.beyondnuclear.org for more on the twin dangers of nuclear power and nuclear weapons.



In August 2008 Jay Levy presented Hiroshima survivors with a Nuclear Free Takoma shirt. PHOTO COURTESY OF JAY LEVY

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