

WASHINGTON REGIONAL NETWORK FOR LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

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Ms. Debra Johnson, Secretary,
Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA)
600 Fifth Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001

RE: In support of the proposed action for Takoma Metro Station redevelopment, Hearing No. 175, Docket R06-5.

Dear Secretary Johnson:

Since 2000, WRN has been involved with the question of what kind of redevelopment at the Takoma Metro station would do the most to enhance transit access, improve the station area and larger community, help meet the need for more housing near transit. Appropriate development at the Takoma Metro station helps accommodate our region's growth in a way that enhances the Takoma neighborhood while contributing to the solution for our region's transportation, air and water pollution problems.

The Washington Regional Network for Livable Communities (WRN) is a non-profit organization that advocates transportation investments, land use policies, and neighborhood designs that enhance existing communities and the environment of the Washington, D.C. region. WRN's goal is to create and sustain a network of walkable communities linked by quality transit and surrounded by farms and forests, with the District of Columbia as the hub of the region.

We would like to express our support for the proposed actions to add bus bays, reconfigure Metro parking and move forward with the proposed redevelopment plan that includes a community park and 85-95 townhouses. We urge WMATA to move forward with this proposal.

We would like to reiterate our support for the 2002 Takoma Central District Plan and the redevelopment of the Metro station site into housing, shops and a village green. It is important to provide more housing opportunities at the Metro station while strengthening the pedestrian connections to the surrounding neighborhood. Better management of bus and parking facilities can also provide choices for Metro rider access while not detracting from an improved pedestrian and bicycle environment. While we believe that more housing would have been appropriate for this site, the proposed plans do advance the overall goal of providing more housing opportunities close to Metro in a pedestrian-oriented environment. This means more people in our growing region can choose to drive less, and walk, bicycle or rider transit more.

Overall layout: We appreciate the overall layout and design of the redevelopment project which creates a street grid, and provides an appropriate configuration for the bus facilities. The proposal will be an improvement to the pedestrian environment – improving access and safety for transit riders. The street grid and configuration of the townhouses provides more “eyes on the street” to enhance safety. The future retail facing the park also helps animate this space as a truly usable community gathering place.

We appreciate the attention to the pedestrian environment and ask that WMATA ensure that high quality materials are used for streetscape improvements and benches and other features for the park. WMATA should also secure improvements to make the underpass by the main entrance a more pleasant walking environment.

Bus Bays: We appreciate that this proposal will add bus bays to meet the future needs for Ride On service. We understand that Metrobus has more than enough room for existing and any expansion of service. The median in the bus bay area may not only better address current and future layover needs, it will also improve pedestrian safety and comfort by breaking up the driveway area and offer a refuge to pedestrians crossing along the segment. WMATA often overdesigns bus bays appearing to give little consideration to how an altered design could meet the needs for bus operations in a more pedestrian-friendly environment. Along with these improvements, we ask that real time information displays be installed in each of the bus shelters and possibly a display at the Metrorail station exit showing real time departure information for all bus routes.

We investigated the concerns raised by the City of Takoma Park and spoke to all local bus providers regarding the adequacy of the proposed additional bus bays and layover spaces for future bus service needs. According to Metrobus, Ride On and The Bus service planners, the proposed bus facilities will adequately meet anticipated future needs. It appears that Metrobus has a substantial amount of space. I would suggest that a bay could even be potentially shared or reallocated to Ride On if an unforeseen need arises sometime in the future. Metrobus at the Takoma station serves significantly fewer riders and peak hour departures per bay than at higher ridership stations. While Takoma serves 425 weekday boardings per bay, Minnesota Avenue Metro station serves 640 weekday boardings per bay, and Anacostia 1000/bay.

Metro Parking: WRN has consistently advocated that WMATA’s investments to provide access for transit riders be cost-effective. Metro’s own analysis shows that building a parking structure for Metro riders is not the most cost-effective approach to providing rider access and transit services. However, if a parking garage is built for transit riders, we ask that users of the parking pay the full cost or a substantial share of it. If parking is desired for non-transit riders, the users of this parking should pay a fair share of the cost to build and operate the parking. Pricing for parking should be used to ensure that parking will be available at all times with a 10-15 percent vacancy rate. We recommend the use of multi-space meters to allow for greater flexibility in pricing and convenience for users, as they accept payment in the form of credit cards, debit cards, bills and possibly SmarTrip cards. We urge WMATA to use this approach rather than the current inefficient area-specific regulations and time limits. Carsharing spaces should be replaced and expanded space at the station.

We also ask that WMATA work with D.C. and the City of Takoma Park to manage on-street parking that can be used for mid- and long-term commuter parking (parking that is not needed for businesses). We recommend the use of multi-space meters to provide for mid- and long-term parking on street segments like Piney Branch, or to enforce time limits for Residential Parking Permit (RPP) zones. This technology greatly simplifies enforcement, enhances customer convenience and generates more revenue. More effective on-street parking management makes available this resource at a lower cost than structured parking, and reduces the “hide and ride” problem of weak enforcement of RPP. In addition, new revenues can be dedicated to streetscape improvements to enhance the walk to Metro.

Residential Parking: In general, WMATA should not accept residential parking ratios of two spaces per unit for its joint development projects. High car ownership rates undermine the purpose of transit-oriented development – to reduce vehicle trips and increase the use of alternative modes. We ask that the parking ratio be reduced to 1.5 or less. We request that the cost of parking be separated from the cost of housing, given that many prospective residents seek to live in this location so that they can walk and ride transit more, and rely on driving and car ownership less. We strongly support building out one-car garages and an additional study or storage room in lieu of a two-car garage.

Affordable Housing: The parameters for redevelopment of this site were established in the Takoma Central District Plan adopted in 2002. We ask that WMATA be true to the D.C. Council resolution which requires that 20 percent of the new housing be set aside as affordable. At the very least, affordable housing set asides should conform to the D.C. Zoning Commission’s new Inclusionary Zoning rule which requires 10 percent of these housing units should be set aside for moderate and low income levels. This rule specifies half of the 10 percent will be affordable to households earning 50 percent of the area median income, and half at 80 percent of area median income.

Bicycle Facilities: Currently, the Takoma station has 60 bicycle lockers and 38 bicycle racks. The proposed plans show 40 bicycle lockers. We ask that at least 60 lockers be replaced, and that they be replaced with newer daily/hourly rental lockers. While these lockers are more costly, they have much higher utilization rates. Indeed daily/hourly rental lockers may offer a functionally higher capacity than the annual rental lockers. It may be possible that some reduction in the overall number of replacement lockers might be acceptable if the overall comparative capacity meets current and projected future demand. New racks should also be installed and placed in areas that have natural surveillance.

Transportation Demand Management: As a transit agency, WMATA should require all joint development projects provide strong transportation demand management (TDM) measures to maximize transit and walk/bicycle trips. In addition to reducing parking and separating the cost of parking from housing or commercial space, other measures can reduce vehicle trips and increase transit ridership. TDM measures that should be implemented for new residents and business owners include: distribution of SmarTrip cards with \$100 of fare; complimentary Zipcar and Flexcar memberships; promotion of transit such as the provision of bus maps, instructions on how to plan trips on the ride guide, etc.; and secure and convenient bicycle parking.

Conclusion

Overall, we believe the proposed actions are appropriate and part of a long overdue redevelopment plan. While improving access to transit, the redevelopment of the station area will create a lively, safe environment and new housing opportunities. The redevelopment will be an important component to a revitalized business district with a signature public park.

Transit-oriented development has a critical role to play in accommodating regional growth. It can help preserve rural resource lands, build on the asset of our high quality transit system, reduce pollution, and enhance neighborhoods. Focusing more activity around Metrorail stations is an important solution to the region's demand for new housing and access to jobs and services.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

Cheryl Cort
Executive Director