

# Quiet, Quirky Takoma Shaken by a Looming Boom

By Phuong Ly  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Thursday, October 13, 2005; DZ03

Local myth has it that opening a chain store is against the law in Takoma Park. Development skipped over the downtown of this quirky enclave for so long that many residents had accepted the myth as fact.

Now, more restaurants and shops are planned not only for the downtown but also for the adjoining commercial area of the Takoma neighborhood in the District. The construction boom in the historically connected communities is sparking a debate over growth and its impact on the area's character.

Nearly 540 condo units and townhouses and thousands of square feet of retail space -- including a chain grocery store -- are on the drawing board within a two-mile radius of the Takoma Metro station. In the past year, two retail and residential developments with a total of 100 apartments and condos have opened.

Sabrina Baron, who lives in Takoma Park, said she fears intense development would turn the area into a Bethesda or Clarendon.

"I think we have to be very thoughtful as to what happens now to lay the foundation for what's going to happen to the character," said Baron, president of Historic Takoma, a nonprofit group. "People don't come to Takoma Park because they want high-end shopping and nightlife. A lot of people come to Takoma Park because of the way it is, that it's a small-town community."

Faith Wheeler, a resident of Takoma in the District, said the area's community spirit could be ruined. "We have a particular aura that people hold about Takoma," said Wheeler, who has lived in the area for 27 years and is a member of the board of the Old Takoma Business Association. "I think it'll take off in a boom, and since it'll be like the rest of the county, it won't be attractive after a while."

Others say the changes have long been needed.

Alice Giancola wants more places to shop and dine. She says the construction is replacing old parking lots and dilapidated buildings and could help reduce crime.

"We're no longer a small, Southern town," said Giancola, a resident of Takoma in the District since 1981. "We're an urban metropolitan area. . . . I've seen nothing but improvements with the new developments. They're nice to look at."

Although the Takoma Park and Takoma commercial districts surround a Metro station, developers have largely overlooked the area. Part of the reason lies in its peculiarities.

Its Victorian and bungalow homes rose around a former Baltimore & Ohio Railroad station, creating what in the 1800s was a commuter suburb known as the Village of Takoma Park. Now, part of the area is in the District and part in Montgomery County. (Some of it once was in Prince George's County but was incorporated into Montgomery in 1997.) The dividing line is often confusing to residents and nonresidents alike.

There are separate business districts: Takoma Park's is centered at Laurel Avenue and Carroll Street; the one in the District is at Cedar and Carroll streets. Both are designated historical districts, and planning offices in both jurisdictions have advocated a uniform vision for the area.

Business developers face regulations requiring preservation of historical buildings and the character of the area.

For developers, "you've got to expect a lot to put up with all that, or you've got to love the community and want to really come here," said Suzanne Ludlow, community and government liaison for Takoma Park.

With the Washington region in a real estate boom, developers are taking another look at close-in suburbs such as Takoma Park and areas of the District that haven't been developed. Nearby downtown Silver Spring has recently flourished, and Takoma Park is receiving spillover traffic and attention.

"There's so much of a demand for land and housing now that all of a sudden, the numbers make sense," said developer John R. Urciolo, who owns the shopping center on Laurel Avenue. "Everybody's grabbing land, trying to build residential and commercial."

Urciolo came to Takoma Park in 1984 and bought the strip at 6901-6939 Laurel Avenue, which then included wholesale stores and auto parts and typewriter repair shops. He remade it into a shopping area with an ice cream parlor, pizza parlor, post office and boutiques selling furniture and secondhand clothing.

The space between Pizza Movers and the post office has remained empty for several years because Urciolo didn't think there was enough shopping demand to bother developing it.

But that has changed: Plans for a restaurant, two stores and a parking garage have been approved by the Montgomery County Historic Preservation Commission, and construction might start in the spring.

Urciolo said that although he wants more people to patronize the historical district, he would not put in a chain store and would try to preserve the small-business atmosphere.

"We have to be different from Silver Spring or Bethesda or Rockville Pike," he said. "You can't compete with something like that."

## **Enter the CVS**

One of the properties that residents single out as being among the most "un-Takoma" is the CVS drugstore, which is in the District across from a more typical Takoma store, the Big Bad Woof, a boutique that sells organic dog food.

Despite vehement opposition from Maryland and District residents, the CVS opened in 2000 on Carroll Street, partly because it lies just outside the historical district's boundaries.

Last year, the Takoma Park City Council, under pressure from residents, passed a resolution asking the drugstore to shut off its electronic sign advertising sale prices. The store manager complied but wanted to make an exception for Mother's Day. He thought people would enjoy seeing the sign flash "Happy Mother's Day." He was wrong. Takoma Park officials were deluged with angry calls.

Douglas Development Corp. says that despite the public opposition, the store is busy and successful. With the CVS proving that the market is viable, the District-based developer is planning a 95,000-square-foot grocery store, possibly a Harris Teeter, and 135 apartments on the two acres behind the drugstore.

"It's a very well-supported store," Paul Millstein of Douglas Development said of the CVS. "Although it's a very contentious deal, somebody in that area is going there."

Millstein said company representatives were "booed and hissed" by residents over the CVS store and are trying to make concessions in the new project.

Three historical bungalows on the property would be moved a few blocks by the developer, Millstein said, and the design of the retail center would have historical touches. Douglas Development has started introducing the project at community meetings; designs are still in the conceptual stage. Unlike the CVS, the new project will face scrutiny by the D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board.

"We don't want to fight; we want to come up with something the majority of residents can live with," Millstein said.

One proposal that has stirred controversy is Metro's plan to sell part of the Takoma station's green space and parking lots to Arlington-based developer Eakin/Youngentob Associates, which has proposed to build as many as 95 townhouses, reduce the number of parking spaces and clear a sloping area lined with trees.

Many residents of Takoma in the District have opposed the plan, and Takoma Park residents enlisted the help of their congressman, Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D), to make sure they also have a voice.

Some changes have been welcomed. Laurel Avenue in Takoma Park recently received a \$275,000 facelift with landscaping, benches and improved sidewalks and median. Improvements are also planned for Carroll Avenue.

Ludlow said officials want the area to be more walkable and to encourage people to linger at the stores. "It's certainly not luxurious, but it's attractive and friendly," she said.

Meanwhile, many residents, in an area known for strong opinions and extremes, aren't sure whether to be for or against the more drastic changes.

Bruce Moyer, a lawyer who has been a resident since 1979, said some of the older properties are eyesores that can create problems. He said a previous landlord at 7001 Carroll Ave. in Takoma Park, which a developer is proposing to transform into condos and shops, had let the property deteriorate so much that rats flourished and storm water flooded adjacent homes.

Yet Moyer, president of the Westmoreland Area Community Organization, said he worries about the increased traffic. Already, he said, there are backups on residential streets during rush hours.

"Certainly one of its assets is the proximity to the commercial area," Moyer said. "At the same time, how do you preserve that quality of life and the relative serenity of the street?"

*Staff writer Yolanda Woodlee contributed to this report.*

## **Planned and Finished Development in Takoma in D.C. and Takoma Park**

*Nearly 540 apartments and townhouses and thousands of square feet of retail space are planned within a two-mile radius of the Takoma Metro station in coming years.*

### **Takoma in D.C.**

- Between Willow and Maple streets behind the CVS store: 135 apartments and 95,000 square feet of retail space that would include a grocery store
- Elevation 314, at 314 Cedar Street: 52 apartments and 2,900 square feet of retail space. Opened summer 2004.
- Cedar Crossing, at the intersection of Cedar Street NW and Blair Road: 49 condos and 1,500 square feet of retail space. Has opened.
- 235 Carroll St. NW: 85 condos and 7,500 square feet for retail space. The project has received approval from the D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board; construction might start by next spring.
- Corner of Cedar and Eastern avenues, next to Takoma Metro: 95 townhouses and one acre of parkland. In the design and planning phase.
- 7014 Blair Rd.: 150 or fewer condos and underground parking. In the design phase for the past year.

**Takoma Park**

- 6903 Laurel Ave.: Three commercial spaces, including one restaurant and a parking lot with about 70 spaces. Approved by the Montgomery County Historic Preservation Review Board. Construction might start in the spring.
- 7001 and 7003 Carroll Ave.: About 75 condos and 10,000 square feet of retail space. In the planning phase.

© 2005 The Washington Post Company