

TAKOMA PARK'S RESIDENTIAL STREETSCAPES: SAFEGUARDING OUR DISTINCTIVE VISUAL CHARACTER

A REPORT OF THE RESIDENTIAL STREETSCAPE TASK FORCE

March 2015

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KEY FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

Attractive streetscapes are among a city's most valuable assets. But they can all too easily be taken for granted and are at risk of being eroded. The City should not only maintain the functionality of its streets and sidewalks, but needs, at the same time, to safeguard its attractive streetscapes.

No one benefits from streetscapes becoming less attractive and no one seeks to lower streetscape quality standards. Yet it happens, a day at a time, as a result of small, seemingly unimportant decisions. Because our valuable streetscapes are at risk, the Task Force urges that the Council take action to halt the process of inadvertent degradation.

The Task Force believes that our community would benefit from a number of changes: a stated City policy on streetscapes; more comprehensive planning applied to streetscape maintenance and development; stricter oversight of utility work; and better coordination on streetscape issues among relevant City departments in order to draw on their respective strengths and resources.

Overall, by systematically taking into account the potential visual impact of its planning and implementation efforts, the City can help assure protection of the valued quality, character and heritage of Takoma Park's neighborhoods for generations to come.

MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

The Residential Streetscape Task Force (RSTF) makes four overarching recommendations.

- The Council should issue a policy statement regarding the value of protecting the character of the streetscape.
- The City should strengthen comprehensive planning and coordination among departments in all matters affecting streetscapes – especially between the departments of Housing and Community Development and of Public Works.
- The City should develop a Residential Streetscape Style Manual.
- More stringent streetscape considerations should apply to the Historic District.



PROPOSED POLICY STATEMENT

With respect to its first recommendation, the Task Force proposes that the Council adopt the following policy statement:

Takoma Park's streetscape is a vital and significant part of our city. Our streetscape reflects not only up-to-date amenities that guide our bicycles, pedestrians, and automobiles safely over our streets and walkways. It also reflects continuity with our history and with values that bind us together as a residential community. The streetscape is one element -- together with the character of our houses, gardens, trees, shops, parks, schools, and playgrounds -- that helps form our identity and signifies that we are Takoma Park.

Our streetscape, whether in commercial or residential neighborhoods, is part of the built environment and, as such, should be planned and designed with intention. Safety, technical innovation, and cost-efficiency should be thoughtfully melded with the City's heritage as a unique community in the Washington metropolitan area. This heritage prizes our historic resistance to the placement of a freeway in our midst and our continued resistance to unnecessary impacts caused by motor vehicles. It celebrates gardens and trees and the beauty of both the natural environment and the things we build in it. The City's residential neighborhoods hold the cluttered and frenetic pace of urban life at just enough distance to permit the safe and quiet enjoyment by families and all residents of the thing they value most: the community itself.

The built environment of Takoma Park should reflect and promote this heritage, even as we embrace the vibrant and diverse growth of the urban landscape around us.



RESIDENTIAL STREETScape STYLE MANUAL

With respect to the third recommendation, the development of a Residential Streetscape Style Manual, the Task Force proposes a detailed set of guidelines contained in Appendix A (Proposed Guidelines: Streetscape Elements).

The elements include:

- Sidewalk Materials
- Curb Ramps & Detectable Warning Surfaces
- Tree Root Protection in Walkways
- Yellow Curb Painting
- Street Name Signs
- Sign Proliferation & Maintenance
- Speed Hump & Crosswalk Marking
- Trees and Other Plantings in the Public Right-of-Way

PROCESS IMPROVEMENT GUIDELINES

A parallel set of process improvements pertaining to streetscape work is proposed in Appendix B (Guidelines for Process Improvements). Proposed improvements include: Timely Notification of Residents; Memoranda of Understanding with Utilities & State Agencies; and Remediation of Unsatisfactory Outcomes.

Finally, a brief outline of the work of the Task Force and of the volunteer residents committee that preceded it in 2012-2013 is contained in Appendix C and includes a link to the committee's initial (2013) report.



THE REPORT

KEY FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

STREETS, SIDEWALKS, AND STREETSCAPES

The primary and most evident function of **streets and sidewalks** is to enable the safe movement of pedestrians, bicycles, transit, cars, and other conveyances. But public space plays other vital roles. Streets and sidewalks provide informal social gathering places for residents, which create stronger and safer neighborhoods and enhance the quality of life. Trees and other plant life that line streets contribute to environmental quality.

Streetscapes are the “look” or visual aspect of a street. They encompass both public space (pavements, curbs, sidewalks and rights-of-way) and private space (houses and buildings, particularly their facades and front yards). Residential streetscapes are a visual continuum of property and public space maintained by homeowners and by local authorities.

The aesthetic value of streetscapes also contributes immensely to the well being of all those who use the streets and sidewalks. While aesthetic values may seem elusive and sometimes subjective, they readily translate into critical elements establishing the character of the neighborhood as well as into tangible property values, important to both residents and the City as a whole. Streetscapes can give a street, a neighborhood, or an entire city a unique and defining appearance, strengthening a sense of community.

Attractive streetscapes are, in fact, among a city’s most valuable assets. But they can all too easily be taken for granted, and are at risk of being eroded. The City should not only maintain the functionality of its streets and sidewalks but needs, at the same time, to safeguard its attractive streetscapes.

OUR STREETSCAPE HERITAGE AND STRENGTHS

Takoma Park had its beginnings in 1883 and was incorporated as a town in 1890. From its inception, attractive streetscapes have been one of Takoma Park’s central features. Indeed, the promotional brochures of developer and founder, Benjamin Franklin Gilbert, described “the Park,” as it was known at first, as a “sylvan suburb,” and his early plats included streets and parks named for the natural world, such as Spring Park on Elm Avenue. Countless historic photographs attest to the tree-lined character of Takoma Park’s first streets. In its early days, Takoma Park was home to many botanists, such as B.Y. Morrison, whose spectacular azaleas contributed to the city’s character and reputation and whose influence can still be seen today.

The City of Takoma Park and its residents continue today to appreciate the extensive tree canopy that covers much of the city as well as its parkland. The City can boast of having a tree policy and ordinance; a tree commission; a city arborist and a city gardener, who not only tend to public lands, including public rights-of-way, but work to ensure that residents manage their share of Takoma Park’s streetscape and urban forest. The City also has an aggressive program for building and maintaining parks that are attractive and enhance the quality of life of its residents. Those complement the streetscape.

The City is attentive to the visual aspects of houses and yards through its property maintenance code enforcement program, which ensures that minimum standards of home and yard maintenance are met, particularly facades and front yards visible from the street. While health and safety are the primary goals of code enforcement, it is evident that the City is committed to keeping the community an attractive place to live.

In addition, homeowners in the Historic District expend considerable resources to ensure the preservation of their houses in accordance with County historic preservation guidelines, which cover structures, hardscapes such as sidewalks, and trees. The attractiveness of the architectural elements of historic houses adds considerably to the quality of Takoma Park's streetscapes, as do attractive yards maintained by residents.

Finally, in its commercial districts, the City has undertaken vigorous efforts in recent years to maintain or raise aesthetic standards, through various streetscape projects and through its Facade Advisory Board.

OUR VULNERABILITY: EROSION OF VISUAL STANDARDS

While the City of Takoma Park and its residents can take considerable credit for maintaining and enhancing many of its streetscape elements, one aspect of our City's streetscape has fallen short of the visual standards we strive so hard to maintain: namely, the way our public rights-of-way are painted, paved, signed, and repaired, including the work performed by utilities.

For example, trees are all too often trimmed in an unattractive way; curbs are painted jarring colors; sections of sidewalk are replaced with less attractive substitutes; too many traffic signs are added ad hoc or not maintained; ADA-mandated improvements are chosen with little regard to design options; utility poles and wires, already a blight on the streetscape, are abandoned for too long when no longer in use.

No one benefits from streetscapes becoming less attractive and no one seeks to lower streetscape quality standards. Yet it happens, a day at a time, as a result of small, seemingly unimportant decisions. Because our valuable streetscapes are at risk, the Task Force urges that the Council take action to halt the process of inadvertent degradation.

IMPORTANCE OF COORDINATION AMONG CITY DEPARTMENTS

Streetscape concerns, not unlike issues of environmental or economic sustainability or livability, cut across the domain of several City departments. Because the City government has no single focal point for managing our streetscapes, it is necessary that City departments with overlapping responsibilities – especially Public Works and Housing and Community Development – coordinate well on all streetscape issues.

The focus of Public Works is the hardscape, the plant life, and the water and waste management of our neighborhoods. It ensures the functionality of our transportation infrastructure (for cars, bicycles and other vehicles, and pedestrians). Housing and Community Development, on the other hand, has responsibility for planning and development, housing, property maintenance, and historic preservation. Each has its own strengths, expertise and resources to bring to bear on streetscape issues. Together, they determine the current state and the future of our streetscapes.

In addition, the Task Force recognizes that many detailed policy decisions require balancing competing or conflicting demands: cost, safety needs, and demands from outside entities (county and state or even federal agencies, and utilities) or from residents (e.g., curb markings to restrict parking). These decisions are too important to be left to an ad hoc process.

The Task Force believes that a deliberate process that better coordinates the strengths of the City's departments and also takes into account the potential visual impact of City decisions can help assure protection of the quality, character and heritage of Takoma Park's neighborhoods for generations to come.

MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of its findings and deliberations, the Residential Streetscape Task Force makes four overarching recommendations.

1. THE COUNCIL SHOULD ISSUE A COMPREHENSIVE POLICY STATEMENT REGARDING STREETSCAPES.

The City lacks an explicit and comprehensive City policy regarding its residential streetscapes. The maintenance and development of streetscapes, with the exception of large projects (such as the “New Ave” project), tends to proceed in an *ad hoc* or piecemeal fashion, rather than being tied to a broad set of principles and goals. The Task Force specifically recommends the adoption of this policy statement:

Takoma Park’s streetscape is a vital and significant part of our city. Our streetscape reflects not only up-to-date amenities that guide our bicycles, pedestrians, and automobiles safely over our streets and walkways. It also reflects continuity with our history and with the values that bind us together as a residential community. The streetscape is one element -- together with the character of our houses, gardens, trees, shops, parks, schools, and playgrounds -- that helps form our identity and signifies that we are Takoma Park.

Our streetscape, whether in commercial or residential neighborhoods, is part of the built environment and, as such, should be planned and designed with intention. Safety, technical innovation, and cost-efficiency should be thoughtfully melded with the City’s heritage as a unique community in the Washington metropolitan area. This heritage prizes our historic resistance to the placement of a freeway in our midst and our continued resistance to unnecessary disruptions caused by motor vehicles. It celebrates gardens and trees and the beauty of both the natural environment and the things we build in it. Its

residential neighborhoods hold the cluttered and frenetic pace of urban life at just enough distance to permit the safe and quiet enjoyment by families and all residents of the thing they value most – the community itself.

The built environment of Takoma Park should reflect and promote this heritage, even as we embrace the vibrant and diverse growth of the urban landscape around us.

2. THE CITY SHOULD STRENGTHEN COORDINATION BETWEEN THE DEPARTMENTS OF HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND OF PUBLIC WORKS.

This recommendation is intended to ensure that the expertise embodied in the Departments of Public Works (DPW) and of Housing and Community Development (HCD) are coordinated and brought to bear on the City’s streetscape issues. In particular, the planning and design strengths of HCD, which are not currently applied to most of the City’s streetscapes, should be coupled with the engineering, construction, hydrological and botanical strengths of DPW.

In addition, DPW and HCD should meet on a monthly basis to review and discuss their respective streetscape-relevant projects and activities. The main purpose of such consultation is to identify ways in which, through expert collaboration and joint planning and management, the City can preserve and enhance the quality of the city’s streetscapes.

3. THE CITY SHOULD DEVELOP A RESIDENTIAL STREETScape STYLE MANUAL

Currently, design processes are unevenly applied to different city projects. The City has an excellent record of attractive commercial streetscape design, which needs to be extended to its residential streetscapes. Even small projects could benefit from being planned in the context of larger design considerations. This can best be achieved by developing a style manual that sets out, wherever possible, design templates for various streetscape elements.

Appendix A of this report discusses a number of streetscape elements. These elements can serve as a starting point in developing a Streetscape Style Manual that could be easily amended and augmented over time. HCD should be given the lead role in developing such a Manual, drawing in particular on its recent experience with the “New Avenue” concept plan.

4. MORE STRINGENT STREETScape CONSIDERATIONS SHOULD APPLY TO THE HISTORIC DISTRICT.

The County’s Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) imposes rigorous guidelines on property owners within the historic district. Replacement or modification of streetscape elements in the historic district are by code subject to HPC guidelines, which call for “replacement in kind.” In practice, however, the HPC does not offer specific guidance pertaining to streetscape work nor does it monitor it closely. Nonetheless, the City of Takoma Park should use its best efforts to incorporate historic preservation principles, as set forth by the Department of Interior, in its work in the historic district. For example, it should, in so far as is practicable, replicate original materials, patterns and colors in a harmonious and coordinated treatment of an entire block, as long as it does not impede the safety of pedestrians, bicycles, and transit. Historic Takoma Inc. would be a resource in this process.

IN CONCLUSION: MAINTAINING OUR CITY’S CHARACTER

Planning and design are at the core of this report.

As we present this report, the City of Takoma Park is beginning to reap the benefits of changes to its economy in both its residential and commercial areas. This presents us with great opportunities and challenges. One of the most significant challenges will be to maintain our City’s character, protect our neighborhoods and manage our evolution in a way that ensures a quality of life for all who live, work and play here.

This will require a more active and professional role for our City Administration in shaping our future. The changing nature of our residential and commercial development; the demands of multiple transportation alternatives including greater pedestrian amenities, biking and transit; the management and control of parking; and the ability to respond to opportunity -- all argue for enhanced capability and resources for more robust planning and design.

In the past several years, the City has taken a more active role in creating an environmentally sustainable community. This effort illustrates how effective a clear planning role can be.

There are no accidentally beautiful vibrant cities. They all reflect the vision and planning of their residents. Today, our City has an opportunity to translate our community’s desire to preserve its unique character into programs that carefully focus and control growth, engage the natural beauty of our environment, protect our historic settlement patterns, and encourage local serving retail.

The members of the Task Force strongly encourage the City to embrace this challenge and provide the direction and resources so critical to our future.

APPENDIX A

PROPOSED GUIDELINES FOR SPECIFIC RESIDENTIAL STREETScape ELEMENTS

The Task Force has identified eight specific streetscape elements that merit priority attention by the City at this time. These are:

- sidewalk materials;
- curb ramps and detectable warning surfaces;
- tree root protection in walkways;
- yellow curb painting;
- street name signs;
- sign proliferation and maintenance;
- speed humps and crosswalk style and markings;
- trees and other plantings in the public right-of-way

As the City develops Residential Streetscape Style Manual, as recommended, the Task Force proposes the following guidelines for each element. In each case, the Task Force's finding and desired goal are outlined.

1. SIDEWALK MATERIALS:

Finding:

Recent developments in the production of concrete have resulted in a product called MC3, which is widely specified and used by local jurisdictions because it is harder, dries more quickly, and is less expensive. However, an MC3 sidewalk has a far brighter, whiter and more brittle appearance than the earlier sidewalks the City has installed over time. The recent installation of MC3 in historic neighborhoods has resulted in the loss of the earlier warm, earth-tone colors of the historic sidewalks, and in many instances produced a discordant, uncoordinated and patchwork design of differing colors and textures.

Depending on the age of the sidewalks in the newer neighborhoods, the contrast between existing materials and MC3 may not be as stark, and the difference in tone only slight, so that the use of this material in those neighborhoods may be acceptable.

Goals:

The goals of this guideline are to enhance the natural and harmonious character of our sidewalks in residential neighborhoods throughout the City and to respect the historic nature of our designated neighborhoods.

Guidelines:

- The color and texture of replacement sidewalks should be consistent with the existing color and texture immediately adjacent to the repaired area.
- In the event that sidewalks in a given block exhibit more than one historic style, repaired or replaced sections should match the predominant style. If there is no single predominant style, then the closest adjacent and adjoining sidewalks should be surveyed until a predominant style is clear.

- Where a warmer color concrete is required, tinting or an alternative concrete formula, such as Portland cement, brown sand, and warm-toned aggregate should be employed to match.



2. CURB RAMPS AND DETECTABLE WARNING SURFACES

Finding:

The Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) imposes certain accessibility requirements on public accommodations. With respect to sidewalks, this has meant the installation of curb cuts to allow people who use wheelchairs (along with other rolling conveyances) to cross streets without difficulty. A second requirement calls for the placement of detectable warning pads at the end of sidewalks, so that visually impaired people can know when they are about to enter a street. These warning pads are meant to have a significant degree of color contrast measured against the adjoining sidewalk, but there is no specific color requirement. One can find many examples throughout the region and the country of various colors and materials, including cast metal, terra cotta tiles, troweled concrete, and embedded plastic sheets or pads.

In Takoma Park, the practice has been to install plastic truncated-dome pads, arguably the least attractive material, but the most cost-effective. The predominant color used is yellow, but also to be found are terra cotta red and dark grey. Sometimes these colors are used in apparently random fashion, where all three can be found at the same intersection. Of these colors, yellow is the least desirable because it has a jarring visual effect. In addition, plastic materials are discordant with road and sidewalk hardscapes.

There are also standards governing the placement of the warning pads, specifically about their proximity to the roadway and their use in corners (in order to signify the direction in which a pedestrian should proceed). The Task Force has found several instances where it believes the installation does not meet the applicable standards (e.g., at Tulip and Maple Avenues and at Tulip and Cedar Avenues).

Goals:

The goals of this guideline are to promote a material and color choice for the detectable warning pads that is consistent and harmonious with the character of the neighborhood, and to standardize the placement of these pads to comply fully with ADA requirements.

Guidelines:

- Detectable warning pads should be installed in one material type and one color throughout the city. The most durable and attractive pads are made of pre-cast materials (e.g., metal, tile, and concrete), and these would be the most appropriate for Takoma Park. If plastic warning pads must be used, they should be terra cotta red.
- Where warning pads have been incorrectly installed or are of differing colors, the City should arrange for these to be remediated.
- A program of remediation of yellow warning pads should be developed so that these can gradually be brought into color compliance throughout the City.



3. TREE ROOT PROTECTION IN WALKWAYS

Finding:

When tree roots are confined by hard structures, they do their best to break through to find air space and water. The roots may cause large sections of concrete sidewalk will break and heave, presenting serious tripping hazards. The City has experimented with different techniques to cope with this problem, including re-routing the sidewalk around a particularly majestic over-story tree.

In recent years, red bricks have been laid in tree root areas that are in or adjacent to walkways. These treatments may be beneficial for the trees and initially visually attractive, but have drawbacks for pedestrians, as the bricks heave and become misaligned, creating a potential tripping hazard.

Goal:

The goal is to find an unobtrusive walkway material that protects tree roots, is both flexible and pervious, and which minimizes tripping hazards.

Guidelines:

- Newly developed materials, such as Flexi-Pave, appear promising and can be visually unobtrusive if installed in a neutral color such as charcoal grey.
- The City should continue to assess developing technology in this area to assure the most effective and visually compatible material.
- Gradual replacement of the current brick installations should be carried out.



4. YELLOW CURB PAINTING

Finding:

Curb painting was instituted some years ago in response to residential concerns about illegal parking that blocked driveways and caused congestion at intersections. However, the painted curbs are extremely unsightly and may entail negative environmental impacts. Moreover, they create confusion as currently applied because many of them do not adhere to existing parking code in terms of distance from intersections, from fire hydrants and from driveways and entrances. They also have the unintended consequence of creating the appearance of legal parking zones wherever yellow paint is not visible.

Goal:

The goal is to simplify the look of our streets and restore them to a more “natural” state. The use of “hazard” colors in any form (signs or pavement markings) should be carefully restricted to situations that are truly hazardous and not proliferate as a passive parking enforcement measure.

Guidelines:

- Immediately discontinue the practice of curb painting and, instead, undertake a program of parking code awareness and more stringent enforcement.
- If there are critical safety zones, such as those requiring school bus or hospital emergency access, then these should be signed appropriately and enforced by towing.



5. STREET NAME SIGNS

Finding:

A new generation of street name signs is appearing throughout the city. Unlike the previous generation of signs, the new ones follow no consistent format in terms of font style, letter spacing, and spelling treatment of street type. Many of the new signs employ a font that is unnecessarily condensed (the letters appear thick and tightly grouped), making a quick read of the name of the street difficult.

Goal:

The goal is to return to the practice of having simple, easy-to-read street name signs that are consistent throughout the City and give the appearance of having been professionally designed and manufactured.

Guidelines:

- The Task Force recommends that the City enlist the assistance of a graphic design professional to develop an attractive and readable template for Takoma Park street name signs.
- Street name signs should have a uniform style, be durable, and appropriately sized for the application and location.
- The use of unit or block address designations and any other information (other than the street name) should only be used if there is a demonstrable safety benefit.



6. SIGN PROLIFERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Finding:

Street signs tend to increase in number and to degrade over time, creating unnecessary visual clutter and requiring added maintenance.

Goal:

The goal is to remove existing extraneous signs, reduce driver distractions, and focus on safety while promoting an uncluttered appearance.

Guidelines:

- The City should be very restrictive in permitting new signage to be erected and first assess if the proposed signage meets a critical need.
- The City should continue to periodically survey both residential and commercial streets to assess whether signage can be reduced and to identify signs that are in need of repair or replacement.
- Street name sign poles and other City-specific sign poles should be qualitatively differentiated from generic traffic safety signs. Street name signs should not be affixed to traffic safety signs to the extent practicable.

7. SPEED HUMPS AND CROSSWALK STYLE AND MARKINGS

Finding:

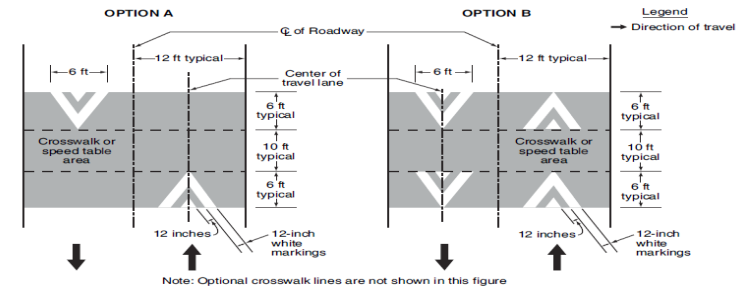
Speed humps and crosswalks throughout the City have striping and shapes of inconsistent widths, heights and line spacing. The variation in style and marking create unpredictability for drivers and cyclists, which can be especially problematic for safety vehicles and bicycles.

Goal:

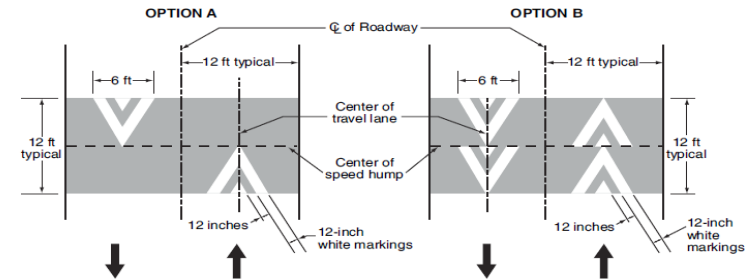
The goal is to achieve visual and physical regularity in the graphic style and marking of speed humps and crosswalks, ensuring driver predictability, and reducing visual clutter.

Guidelines:

- The shape and height of speed humps should be as uniform as possible, consistent with safety needs, so that drivers know what to expect (e.g., something comfortably drivable at 5 mph that doesn't create a jarring impact to the vehicle's load or suspension system) and to reduce visual clutter.
- A minimally acceptable number of evenly spaced white stripes of a certain width should be consistently painted and maintained on speed humps that are under the jurisdiction of the City.
- The raised crosswalk style of speed hump, typical of the those installed by MNCPPC on roads such as Sligo Creek Parkway, may require a different treatment, but these should use the minimally acceptable level of marking and be consistent with one another.
- Pedestrian crosswalks should be categorized by similar type and marked consistently throughout the city by type. Intersections or crossings in low-trafficked areas may not require marking.



20 MPH Speed Hump with crosswalk



20 MPH Speed Hump



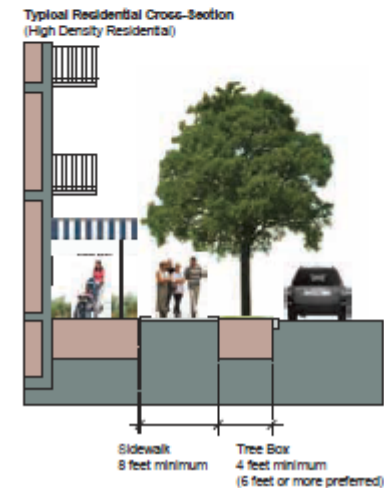
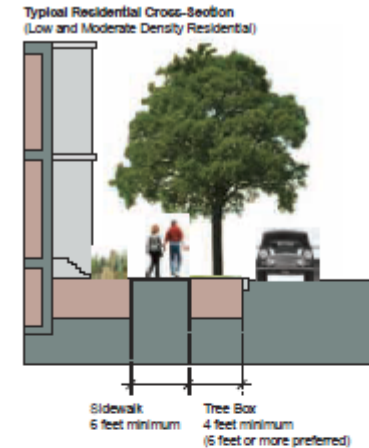
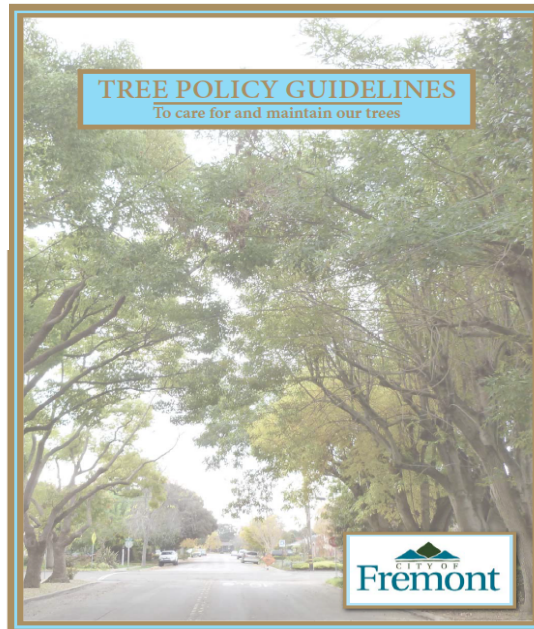
5 MPH Speed Bump

8. TREES AND OTHER PLANTINGS IN THE PUBLIC RIGHT OF WAY

The Task Force has not developed specific recommendations in this matter, but notes that trees and plantings in the public right-of-way constitute an important feature of the residential landscape. We suggest that the City include this topic in an eventual style manual, taking into consideration such matters as (a) the importance of tree specimen type with regard to interference with overhead utility lines, (b) who has responsibility for planting and maintenance (City vs. residents vs. utilities), (c) pedestrian safety vis-à-vis overhanging branches and other encroachments, (d) the undesirability of certain “nuisance” tree and plant specimens and (e) close proximity to hardscapes that are likely to cause eventual harm to the plantings or to the hardscapes. Examples are presented below.



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mission Statement Street Tree Policies Urban Forest Fact Sheet Managing the Urban Forest Sustaining the Urban Forest Recycling Green Waste Maintaining Sewer Lines Street Tree Trimming 		Street Tree Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Street Tree Selection Guide Inventory of Street Tree Terms Tree Selection Checklist Tree Trimming Fact Sheet Tree Spacing Guidelines Info Sheets <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For & Climbing Trees - Benches - Requesting a Removal Permit - Pest Control Spraying - Service Street to Private Tree - Pruning - Best Practices of Parkour Trees
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APPENDIX B

PROPOSED GUIDELINES FOR PROCESS IMPROVEMENTS IN STREETScape PROJECTS

In recent years, most neighborhoods of Takoma Park have benefitted from a large number of public work projects variously managed by the City, the State, and public utilities (PEPCO, Washington Gas, and WSSC). These projects have included new sidewalk installation; repair and replacement of sections of old sidewalk; street re-paving; curb rebuilding to achieve compliance with ADA guidelines; upgrading of power poles and lines; trimming of trees; installation of telecom cables; replacement of underground gas lines and water and sewer pipes; and snow removal.

Although these public works are desirable and beneficial, they can (and often do) generate unintended negative visual and other impacts. The Task Force believes that such problems can be avoided, mitigated or satisfactorily corrected if the City takes steps in three inter-related areas:

- Timely notification of residents;
- Concluding Memoranda of Understanding with utilities and state agencies and new ordinance requirements for utility patching that cover when patching must be done, what smoothness standards the patches should meet, that the materials should match, and that contracts issued by the City must contain these requirements; and
- Remediation of unsatisfactory project outcomes

For each of these five areas, the key issues and goals are outlined along with proposed guidelines for process improvement.

1. TIMELY NOTIFICATION OF RESIDENTS

Findings:

Public works projects by their nature frequently cause disruption and inconvenience to residents. Although not a visual issue, the Task Force found considerable concern among residents about shortcomings in notification about streetscape-related work. For example, because of unannounced/poorly announced work on streets and rights-of-way, or because of work crews either ignoring or unaware of city requirements, residents have found themselves prevented from exiting or entering their driveways or using sidewalks; suffering the unexpected trimming or destruction of trees; experiencing sudden interruption of gas, electricity, water or telecommunication services; and facing impassable sidewalks resulting from street-related snow plowing.

In this age of increasingly advanced communications technologies, there is little justification for not informing residents well in advance of the work and periodically updating them as a project progresses. The Task Force believes that the City should set high standards of neighborhood notification in the work that it performs. It should also insist that public work contractors meet the City's standards of notification.

Goal:

Residents should be able to reasonably plan their often complex daily lives – commuting to and from work, shuttling children to and from school and after-school activities, going to medical appointments, running daily errands, even on foot -- by receiving advanced, detailed, reliable and sustained notification of transportation disruptions (blocked driveways, closed or blocked streets, blocked sidewalks).

Guidelines:

- The City should consult with residents in neighborhoods potentially impacted by a public works project early enough in the planning stages to allow neighborhood input and concerns to be considered before final work plans are established. The Councilmember from the affected Ward should take the lead in carrying this out.
- Once the City and relevant contractors establish a work plan, they should notify affected residents of any expected disruptions, at least thirty days in advance and, again, seven days before the work begins.
- Once a project has started, any major departures from the work plan should be communicated via U.S. mail, electronic mail, or other appropriate means, to every impacted household at least 48 hours in advance. The further duration of the impact should be specified.
- Contractors should use advanced available technologies for notifying neighborhood residents.

2. MEMORANDA OF UNDERSTANDING: UTILITIES & STATE AGENCIES

Finding:

The public works projects that have created some of the most serious problems in Takoma Park appear to have been projects conducted by utility companies and state agencies such as the State Highway Administration. Projects managed by the City can, in principle, be resolved within the City, by its government and its management structure. But that is not the case when outside entities are involved.

The Task Force believes that such problems stem in large part from the fact that those entities have an inadequate awareness at the working level that they are operating not just within Montgomery County, but within Takoma Park, one of only three incorporated cities within Montgomery County. With that comes a lack of understanding or a disregard for what matters to the City and its residents: the visual attractiveness of its neighborhood and the character of its historic districts.

Goal:

The City should ensure that all external parties involved in the City's public works understand the City's standards and that these may be higher or, at least, different from the standards of other jurisdictions. While understanding the difficulty in dealing with such agencies, the City should review, and as necessary revise, the Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) that incorporate issues such as advanced notification, aggressive tree protection and timely completion. Consideration should be given to a new requirement that utilities or their designees post a completion bond with the City. Additionally, the standards should be built into any City contracts and enforced against City contractors should they fail to comply with the contracts.

While the Department of Public Works is responsible for ensuring that Takoma Park's standards are met by outside entities at the project level, this is fundamentally a political matter that will require the strong support and involvement of the City Manager and, as needed, of the City Council and the

Mayor. It may also be appropriate for the City's new Construction Manager to be involved.

Guidelines:

All public works involving external agencies, utilities, and contractors should be performed under the purview of an MOU, or some equivalent controlling document, that includes the requirements listed below. In addition, the City attorney should investigate ways in which it can enforce compliance with these requirements, such as requiring external agencies to post a bond with each work project and writing repair standards into City ordinances, with penalties for lack of compliance enforced against utility companies and their contractors.

- A consultation and notification plan, based on City requirements for consulting with neighborhoods prior to the planning of a project and for informing residents prior to and during a project.
- A vegetation plan based on City requirements for alteration, removal and remediation of trees and all other plant life and appropriate indemnification of property owners.
- A streetscape impact plan based on City requirements to respect the integrity of historic elements and minimize any impact on the visual aspect of the streetscape. The visual impact (and historic impact in historic neighborhoods) must be discussed and agreed in detail with the City before the work is planned. This includes the location of visible objects like switching boxes and gas meters, as well as the timely removal of old equipment such as utility poles.
- A damage remediation plan based on City requirements for comprehensive remediation of damaged pavement, curbs, sidewalks, signs, rights-of-way trees, or private property.

4. REMEDIATION OF UNSATISFACTORY OUTCOMES

Finding:

The guidelines apply to two types of remediation.

- One is remediation of damage caused by contracted public work projects: for example, mounds of dirt, holes in the ground, abandoned cables and wires, poles abandoned for excessive periods of time (years), unsightly coils of cable and switching boxes. Each incidence is small but the cumulative effect on neighborhoods can be substantial. Corner-cutting or incomplete projects are ultimately paid for by residents (through aesthetic and safety costs) and, ultimately, by the City itself. This type of remediation falls within MOUs described in the previous section.
- The second is with issues resulting from public works completed before the Task Force focused its attention on the streetscape issues of Takoma Park. These are cases where the work was completed and accepted by the City to be satisfactory at the time, but raised issues and concerns among residents leading to the proposed guidelines in this report.

The Task Force is aware that costs are involved in modifying the work of the past. Some items are relatively inexpensive, such as the removal of yellow paint, where costs can be offset by sparing the use of curb paint in the future.

Other items are more costly. While the Task Force recognizes this issue, it believes that this should be weighed against the recognition that cities fundamentally define themselves by the importance they assign to enhancing the character of their built environments and by respecting the heritage of beauty they have received from their forebears.

Goal:

The purpose of remediation is to remove the most glaring negative impact of past work on the visual quality of City streetscapes at a manageable cost to the City.

These guidelines propose a sensible compromise in which remediation is carried out incrementally over a period of five years. The cost of remediation can be worked into the annual budget as a small percentage of that budget, beginning with the remediation that will result in the highest aesthetic and safety payoff.

Guidelines:

Yellow Curb Painting

- Upon adoption of these Guidelines, notify residents and staff of Public Works that painting of curbs inconsistent with the standards listed in this report will cease.
- As time permits, begin a process of paint removal from curbs.
- Identify where signage is required.
- Investigate solutions that might leverage technology to provide appropriate notifications, thus avoiding the need for physical signage or paint.

Warning Pad Coordination

- Carry out independent review of placement of warning pads, particularly along heavily travelled pedestrian areas in the vicinity of the Metro and the Old Town area, and correct the placement as warranted.
- All new and all replacement pads should be of the same type and color (see earlier discussion of warning pads). Identify sidewalks where there are warning pads of more than one color, e.g., Philadelphia and Holly; Dogwood and Holly, and replace, as the budget allows.
- Institute a program of gradual replacement, as the budget allows, of yellow warning pads, especially in the most heavily-walked areas approaching the Metro.

Speed Hump and Crosswalk Painting

- Identify crosswalks and speed humps where paint has deteriorated and fully remediate according to new guidelines.

Sidewalk Repairs

- Develop with Montgomery County HPC more specific standards for the City's Historic District and identify those areas that are most non-compliant (e.g., those with three or more material types within the span of a single residence) for remediation.

Tree Root Protection

- Identify tree root protection installations that pose the greatest impediment to pedestrian safety (e.g., red bricks that are heaving and misaligned), and make these the highest priority for remediation.

APPENDIX C

TASK FORCE BACKGROUND AND PROCESS, 2012 – 2015

PHASE I: Ad hoc Resident's Committee, Spring 2012 – Spring 2013

In the spring of 2012, the City of Takoma Park began a large-scale process of repair and replacement of the City's sidewalks in the residential area of Ward 1 closest to the Metro and Old Town, which is also the core of the City's Historic District. While the sidewalk construction addressed issues of safety and ADA access, implementation resulted in an uncoordinated, patchwork quilt of mismatched materials, colors and design inconsistent with the history and character of our community.

In response to these and other related neighborhood concerns, a voluntary committee of ten citizens gathered to discuss the issues that this construction raised. Meeting over 12 months, they identified the primary issues as:

- The lack of clear City policy on repair, maintenance, and installation of infrastructure elements in the residential area, and
- The lack of a clear City process for balancing competing needs – such as tree protection, ADA requirements, pedestrian ease, and protecting and enhancing the character of the neighborhood.

The committee unanimously agreed that there should be an increased level of thought and care given and specific planning for the City's infrastructure – whether it is sidewalks, roads, curbs or signage. The City does this well in the commercial areas; the specific focus of the committee was the residential areas.

On June 3, 2013, the committee presented a report and power point presentation to the City Council. The goals of the presentation were the following:

- Understand the importance that our residential streets and sidewalks play in establishing the character of our community,
- Respect the character of all residential neighborhoods, new and historic,
- Establish an internal City staff process of collaboration among Housing and Community Development, Public Works and the community to ensure that maintenance and repair of public improvements respects our residential streets and sidewalks,
- Enhance the natural character of our streets and sidewalks and reduce the visual impact and importance of the automobile.

The three major recommendations of this presentation were that the City:

- Adopt a citywide streetscape policy,
- Develop design guidelines for the streetscape, and
- Appoint an Advisory Committee to assist in these efforts.

The June 2013 presentation to the Council is available on the City website at:

<http://citycouncil-takomapark.s3.amazonaws.com/agenda/items/2013/060313-1-improving-the-tp-streetscape.pdf>

Members of the voluntary committee: Caroline Alderson; Patty Baker; Mary Jane Breinholt; Laura di Curcio; John Lorenz; Thomas Luebke; Ann Miles; Lorraine Pearsall; Pierre Perrolle; Frances Phipps.

PHASE II: THE RESIDENTIAL STREETScape TASK FORCE,
NOVEMBER 2013 – MARCH 2015

On November 13, 2013 the Takoma Park City Council appointed five residents to a Residential Streetscape Task Force (Resolution 2013-75), four of whom had served on the earlier committee. Appointed were: David Cookson, John Lorenz, Thomas Luebke, Pierre Perrolle, and Frances Phipps. The Task Force was directed to develop the streetscape policy and design guidelines for review. John Lorenz was selected as chair.

The Task Force held six meetings throughout the period of May 14, 2014 to December 10, 2014 and prepared a Draft Report. During the course of these meetings, the Task Force met with the Director of Public Works and the Planner in Housing and Community Development. Elements of the draft report were discussed with the Planner and Director of HCD, and the full report was circulated for review and comment to the Departments of Public Works, the chair of the Safe Roadways Committee, and the vice president of Historic Takoma Inc. The Director of Public Works also participated in a committee review session, and Ward 1 Councilmember Grimes reviewed and commented on this report. The Task Force met several times in January February and March of 2015 to refine the report based on comments heard from the various reviewers.

The members of the Task Force thank Jessie Carpenter, City Clerk, for her unfailing support and assistance. They also wish to thank the following members of the City staff for being generous with their time in providing information and perspectives: Public Works Director, Daryl Braithwaite; Housing and Community Development Director Sara Daines; and Planner, Erkin Ozberk. Last but not least, the members of the Task Force greatly appreciate the invaluable procedural advice and feedback provided by Councilmember Seth Grimes. The Task Force is also grateful to all who commented on drafts of the report and provided important perspectives and suggestions.