



Candidate: AJ Campbell
Ward#: 5

Embracing Change,
Championing Inclusive Growth

www.takomaforall.org

Dear Candidates for Elected Office in the 2022 Takoma Park City Council Election,

Takoma for All (TFA) is a group of Maryland and Washington D.C. neighbors working to strengthen a vibrant, inclusive, prosperous, resilient, and transit-friendly community. We advocate the creation and preservation of affordable and market-rate housing, commercial spaces, and community amenities including schools, parks, recreation facilities and public spaces.

Thank you for standing for election to city office. To help us understand your position on topics of interest to our group and the Takoma Park public, would you please respond to the following questions?

1. Despite the recent failed Takoma Junction project, Takoma Park has several large tracts of land that are unused or underused. Please describe your vision for what you'd like to see Takoma Park officials do to promote these sites for revitalization?

A:

I disagree with the premise of the question. The Takoma Junction project is not over.

Takoma Park has a very poor record of promoting development. Our development department has had some vacancies recently. First, I would start by getting staff that can reach out and work proactively with developers, perhaps even former staffers.

Second, I would focus on the development that is likely to happen regardless of the City's effort to shape it. For example, development around the new Purple Line stations will happen no matter what we do. It is better to get in now and strike an advantage to Takoma Park and provide the housing we need for affordable rental units and starter "homes" for purchase.



I have been trying to get a project together at Piney Branch and Flower for almost two years. The city staff have ignored meeting requests and did not pursue the matter. I was told the project was DOA on Maple Ave. I even had an artist's rendering created.

It is called the Mariposa, a mixed-use development with medical and dental on the basement level, retail on the main level, a women and child homeless shelter, and two floors of affordable housing. All the existing shops can be relocated to the retail level.

0. Takoma Park hasn't added any apartment buildings ever since [it adopted rent control in 1981](#). If elected, would you support providing an incentive for builders to construct apartments by giving them an automatic exemption from rent control restrictions for a fixed period of time (e.g. 10-20 years)?

A: No, I would not.

0. Do you support Montgomery County's proposed general plan, known as "Thrive 2050"? If so, do you support Thrive's central tenet to revise land use designations for properties that are adjacent to

transit hubs like the Takoma Metro Station in DC and proposed Purple Line Stations in Takoma Park?

A: I support development at the Purple line station just blocks from Ward 5. The development will replace every corner of the Flower and Piney Branch station. It is our job as officials to help ease the transition, work with business owners to find a suitable transition plan, and provide relocation assistance if they can't stay in the current space.

0. Although Takoma Park kids can choose from several high schools, Montgomery Blair High School is the "home" school for most kids and it is overcapacity by more than 300 kids. Blair HS is projected to be more than 900 kids over capacity in [less than 10 years](#) (p.6). Do you support the building of a new high school located in Takoma Park or Silver Spring?

A: I don't think MCPS has any plans to build another high school. Montgomery Blair is one of the youngest high schools we have, and will likely be one of the last to be expanded or refurbished. Blair has the most square feet and the biggest acreage. It seems a likely target for a new tower vs a replacement.

The current MCPS CIP includes the expansion of other HS in the DCC. If density were to increase in Takoma Park, then it might be warranted. However, my understanding is cuts to the magnet program would happen before building a new facility.

0. The Montgomery County Public School system, has previously proposed expanding Piney Branch Elementary School in a way that would eliminate the indoor pool. Do you agree or disagree with this proposal?

A: Piney Branch does need an expansion. My kid had to put off foot surgery because the building was hostile to disabled students. And I was not a fan of MCPS policy to leave mobility-impaired kids inside the building during active shooter incidents and fires. The building just needs to be accessible, and it is not.

We need a pool three to four times the size of PB pool. The PB is underutilized for various reasons, including cost, hours, and programming.

If we can negotiate with WAU to make a huge pool and deck part of the amenities, that would give more people access to recreation. The most used pools in MoCo are the outdoor pools in the summer. It would be wonderful to push for a kid's pool, lap pool and lazy river/slide features.

0. Takoma Park city employees are currently developing a much-needed public space management plan, but it's already clear that some recent changes have been successful such as the partial closure of Laurel Avenue during the pandemic to increase public space. If elected, will you consider voting to permanently close all or part of Laurel Avenue and other commercial spots to increase the public space for our residents and commercial patrons?

A: Yes, to Laurel Ave, streeterly. I have already advocated for a streeterly in Ward 5, and the wifi garden by the library. We need more third-spaces for residents to hang out, read books, and talk to each other.

0. Cycling is a proven method to provide our kids and our poorest residents with a climate-friendly mode of travel around Takoma Park, but only if it's safe for users. Maple and Carroll Avenues are among the city's most active cycling corridors due to their proximity to community amenities. If elected, will you vote to provide our children and most vulnerable residents with a safe place to use their bicycles to access critical Takoma Park amenities?

A: I am in favor of bike safety but I don't see a suggestion here for me to comment on. Just looking at Maple Avenue, it would be possible to install a two-way protected bike lane if we are willing to lose a side of parking and shift the median over by 5.75 feet (approx). It is possible but costly. The cost of the New Ave bike lane was covered by a grant; perhaps there is a way to apply for similar funding.

0. The City of Takoma Park [currently only requires](#) vacant properties to be registered as such by their owners. If elected, would you support the creation of a vacancy tax to encourage landlords to make productive use of their properties?

A: I have lived near two vacant properties over my 15 years in Takoma Park. In both cases, the owner had specific reasons for wanting to hold the property vacant. The first was a grow house for marijuana, and the second was kicking out all the low-income tenants to change the building over to condos. Either way, I think the owner would consider it just another cost of business and continue. I would not be opposed to taxing them; I just don't think it would work.

0. How do you envision building consensus around controversial subjects likely to come before the council? What is your experience in reaching "across the isle" and thereby overcome possible division in the city?

A: Half of my family are red hat MAGA supporters, and I am a queer progressive; Thanksgiving is a challenge, but at least we all agree that marshmallows are infinitely superior to maple syrup on the yams. I work with people all the time that don't agree with my core beliefs or who might not like me personally. I tend to listen and focus on the problem or activity in front of the group and not on the differences.

The reason we have the level of factionalization that we see in Takoma Park is that we have a poor information ecosystem. The elected officials do not discuss topics where the community comes to talk, on the listservs and the Facebook group. Information both correct and incorrect gets circulated and turned into gossip. Self-appointed "elders" dominate conversations with hostile, often demeaning speech. Many people end up turning off and tuning out of the conversations. None of this behavior helps the community understand the issues any better.

0. What are your plans to allow for residents with diverse backgrounds, e.g. renters, minorities, immigrants, and young families to be an active part of the discussion and decision making in the city (e.g. in Committees)?

A: We can remove barriers to participation, like babysitting and stipends. But I think the core of the problem is that we have created the committee structure from the top down. I would suggest that instead of telling the community what committees we feel we need, we should let citizens form their own committees. We might be surprised at the different priorities. For example, creating a home-based business committee or creating a festival.

I would offer seed funding or help arrange fiscal sponsorship to help fund smaller non-city-aligned groups. The way to get anyone interested in governance is through a project or issue that they care about. The City gives seed money to most of the festivals and merchant associations, why not to smaller interest groups? It is a way to make involvement residents lead.