



Candidate: Talisha Searcy
Office: Mayor

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: My vision for revitalizing Takoma Park is rooted in our rich history of being an inclusive and progressive community. A place where it doesn't matter how much money you make or the color of your skin, in Takoma Park you can thrive. Our city should be where people live, work, enjoy restaurants, retail, events, the arts, and local green spaces. However, we must take a multi-prong approach to meet this goal.

First, we must have a clear understanding of the community needs that we are trying to address with each project. Do we want housing, jobs, a grocery store or other retail, a school, or a park? A single project may not be able to solve all of the City's problems. But, City leadership and the community must understand how each project individually advances our collective goals. This means conducting robust community engagement to ensure that we know what we want as a community before engaging partners.

Second, we have to establish a solid foundation for each project. This means proactively addressing barriers such as zoning changes that might be a deterrent for development. This approach was taken for the Recreation Center project,

where zoning modifications were established under the Takoma Langley Sector Plan. We have to also explore incentives that the City can offer to encourage development. If elected, I will prioritize updating our payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT) policy. Incentives are a signal to developers and are a critical component to financing development projects. I have worked with multi-family property owners in Ward 6 who want to improve their buildings and increase the number of affordable rental units available. However, they have to show the banks that they will have the funds needed to cover the costs of the improvements. City, along with state and county, incentives are a major factor in financing.

Lastly, we simply have to market our community - the vibrancy, the sense of community, our quality workforce, to show potential partners what our city offers. We must build relationships within the City and externally. This also means conducting market analyses and other activities that are vital to seeking out the type of partners we want to bring into the community.

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: The City's housing goal from the 2019 Housing and Economic Development Strategic Plan is to "ensure that a range of safe, high quality, affordable and stable housing options are equitably available in neighborhoods throughout the community." As we learned from the City Council's recent briefing on the Takoma Park Minor Master Plan, all types of housing is needed. We need more affordable, accessible, and safe rental housing.

Rent stabilization is a vital tool to reach the goal of maintaining rental housing affordability in the City. At the same time, rent stabilization can be viewed by developers as a barrier to housing development in Takoma Park. While working with multi-family property owners to fund building improvements in Ward 6, I've learned that prospective rents are a critical component of a housing project's financial outlook. Thus, to address barriers that rent stabilization may have on future development, the policy must be paired with other financial incentives. As mayor, I will prioritize a review of the impact of policies; such as short-term rent

stabilization exemptions and modifications of payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT) on housing creation in the City.

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 Thrive 2050 and its tenets particularly as it relates to housing and compact growth and infill development. I believe development adjacent to public transit is critical to the vitality of our community and presents unique opportunities for growth. However, we face a land shortage in the county. According to Thrive 2050, residential land uses are the predominant land use category in the county and single-family homes comprise 92 percent of the total residential acres. Additionally, transportation is our largest source of greenhouse gas emissions. Transit-oriented, mixed-use development near the metro and future Purple Line stations helps to address climate change by decreasing reliance on cars.

Without modifications to land use designations, which create more opportunities for housing, members of our community may be displaced from their homes near transit hubs due to gentrification. We are witnessing this first hand with the impact of the Purple Line. Without creative action, we could have serious consequences for housing affordability and availability in our City. As your mayor, I will support working with Montgomery County to explore zoning modifications that will allow for the flexibility necessary to keep people in our community.

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 support building a new high school in Takoma Park/Silver Spring. I have heard from students in the area about how challenging it is to be a student at Blair High School. Getting to your class on time because the halls are too crowded to reach

your locker or having to wait in line at the bathroom or in the cafeteria. When we reflect on all that our youth have faced in the past few years, it is even more critical that our schools create a safe environment, close to home, with space necessary for students to thrive. As your mayor, I will advocate for increased school capacity in the City.

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: I disagree with the proposal because we can think boldly and creatively to address both needs: increased school capacity and an indoor swimming pool. The Piney Branch Elementary School (PBES) pool is the only Montgomery County indoor swimming pool inside the beltway and provides our children with an opportunity to learn one of the most important life skills - how to swim. PBES can be renovated to provide more classroom space. We can also lobby the County to maintain the indoor pool. There are also additional opportunities for growth in the City such as our future Recreation Center. We should do everything we can to capitalize on all opportunities. I have shown during my tenure on the City Council that there are opportunities to bring in resources from the county and the state that can further support the needs of our community.

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: I believe that our use of public spaces must support building inclusive City services that uphold our commitments to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. The Laurel Avenue streetery has been an important addition to improving the vitality and walkability of Old Town. As mayor, I will support continued partial closure of Laurel Ave and work to identify other opportunities

throughout the city to open public spaces for business and recreational use. Doing so would require close collaboration and coordination with residents, area businesses, places of worship, and the State Highway Administration to maintain public safety and mitigate any negative impacts on residents, cyclists, pedestrians, as well as traffic flow.

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: There is a growing need for bike lanes in our city, not only for Carroll and Maple Avenues but also to increase connectivity for all residents to future Purple Line stations and Metro. As mayor, I will support adding and improving bike lanes and will advocate for state and county funding to support this work. Additionally, I have spent my years on Council addressing traffic and pedestrian safety issues including adding sidewalks, traffic calming, New Ave Bikeway project, and advocating for bike lanes and pedestrian safety measures around the Takoma/Langley Purple Line station. We can also do more to protect cyclists and pedestrians through lowering speed limits and traffic calming measures, which I will continue to support as mayor.

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: Yes, I support a vacancy tax for both vacant commercial and residential properties. This was a strategy outlined in the City's Housing and Economic Development Strategic Plan, which I fully support. Vacant properties can require more City resources and can be a public safety hazard. We also want to encourage the reuse or redevelopment of these properties and taxation can motivate property owners to take these steps.

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

A: To build consensus, first we have to meet people where they are. We have to educate as many people as we can on the issue. Then, we LISTEN to their thoughts and needs. During my tenure on Council, I have learned that we can agree on a goal. However, we often disagree on how to reach the goal. Therefore, starting with where we agree and recognizing and valuing everyone’s lived experience is key. At the end of the day, the key to consensus is making sure that everyone feels heard and their needs considered.

I have a proven history of reaching across the aisle to get things done in the City. I have built relationships at all levels - county, state, local nonprofits - that allow us to leverage available resources to meet those community needs. For example, while on Council, I worked with the District 20 state delegation to address the impact of the Purple Line construction on local businesses. This required working with the Takoma Langley Crossroads Development Authority to identify the needs of the businesses in Ward 6. From there, building on our relationships with Delegates Wilkins and Charkoudian, we identified ways to drive state legislation that would provide grants for businesses impacted all along the Purple Line. As mayor, I will continue to work collaboratively with all stakeholders to meet community needs.

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 have to consider equity first in everything that we do. Equity can not be an afterthought used to justify decision-making that happened in isolation. That means continuing to modify our community engagement approach. While on Council, I worked to transform our committee process and reduce barriers to participation including offering financial stipends and virtual meetings. As we have learned from a number of community engagement activities in the City, our go-to outreach of a survey is not the best approach to solicit feedback from our diverse

resident population. In addition to surveys, the City must hold focus groups and canvass multi-family buildings to understand residents' needs. Special attention should be given to engaging residents in our multi-family buildings and immigrant populations. This information is essential to making decisions that are equitable and inclusive. Moreover, these are proven approaches to increasing community engagement.