Zoning Commission
Carol Mitten, Chair

Office of Planning's
Takoma Overlay Zone
January 24, 2005

Testimony of
Faith E. Wheeler

Thank you, Madam Chair, for this opportunity to testify on the Takoma Overlay Zone, a document which is likely to either make or break the future of Old Takoma for decades to come.

I am, Faith Wheeler, 26-year resident of Takoma, ANC Commissioner (4B02), Old Takoma Business Association Board member, Plan Takoma member, Historic Takoma member, former Board member of the Takoma Theatre Arts Project, and former trainer and program analyst in development and management issues and projects at a multi-national development finance institution in Washington. Today, I am testifying on my own behalf.

For Old Takoma, it is essential that we achieve an uncommonly successful and sustainable revitalization in Old Takoma. I believe that's what all of us want.

Since perhaps the most important key to successful revitalization of a traditional neighborhood commercial district is to convey its sense of place, then we are obliged to do everything within our power to achieve that.

There are several interests involved in revitalizing the DC part of Old Takoma (i.e., the area including and around the commercial corridor that runs from the Takoma Theatre to the DC/Maryland line). To name a few:

- Residents
- Business owners
- Plan Takoma
- Old Takoma Business Association (OTBA)
- Historic Takoma Inc. (HTI)
- Takoma Theatre Arts Project (TTAP)
- Advisory Neighborhood Commission 4B (ANC 4B)
- Developers
- DC Government

(I play a role in seven of those interested parties named and have had 30 years of experience working with development issues.)

ZONING COMMISSION
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EXHIBIT No. 10

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There are several revitalization efforts underway.

As you may know, the Old Takoma Business Association has been awarded the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street designation (Maryland side to begin with), and its four committees (Organization, Design, Promotion, and Economic Restructuring) are at work to revitalize Old Takoma's traditional neighborhood commercial district. The objective is to draw business back to and enliven our potentially spectacular commercial district. To do this, as a community we will showcase what is unique about our historic neighborhoods, convey the best of our Takoma character and values, enhance it and update it.

We need your help to do this.

DC Cultural Tourism is considering a proposal for a Heritage Trail that showcases historic sites near Takoma and may be interested in creating a Heritage Trail in Takoma. The DC Preservation League sometimes organizes tours to historic sites in Takoma. Metro Savory owner, Philippe Duverger, organizes busloads of European tourists to come see and spend in Old Takoma. Doesn't it make eminent sense to polish this jewel in the rough? It can be far more of an attraction for visitors, tourists and shoppers who delight in our small town feel than tall buildings bordering narrow streets ever will.

We know that the Mayor is interested in attracting 100,000 more residents. Takoma DC, itself, has attracted a number of new families, many with young children. Between rush hours, we see them pushing strollers along the tree-lined residential streets, as I once did. They have come, attracted to the comfortable, small-town feel of Old Takoma. We would like them to stay, and stay in DC.

We also know that the proposed 575 units within a four-square block area around the Takoma Metro station on our narrow streets will mean more traffic congestion and more air pollution (meaning hot and dirty air) right here where we live and breathe. Neither is inviting for small children, nor for many adults. We also know that Walter Reed expects 901 additional vehicular trips per day, with its 25 additional projects. And if the 26th additional project is allowed, that would bring approximately 750 more staff to Walter Reed. Montgomery College is building additional capacity to accommodate 980 new students. Columbia Union College is expanding. Washington Adventist Hospital proposes to construct a 124,800 sq. ft. hospital building and a 134,546 sq. ft. medical office building. As many as 1500 new housing units are being constructed in South Silver Spring.

DDOT's 2003 Takoma Transportation Study showed a number of failing and low performing intersections in and around Old Takoma, without improvements:

Intersections	LOS Feb 2003		LOS 2012		LOS 2022		All F's
	am	pm	am	pm	am	pm	
1. Blair/Georgia	F	F	F	F	F	F	x
2. Blair/Piney Branch	F	F	F	F	F	F	x
3. Piney Branch/Aspen	D	D	D	F	E	F	
4. 4th/Blair/Cedar	F	F	F	F	F	F	x
5. Carroll/Willow	C	F	D	F	E	F	
6. Blair/Aspen	C	E	E	F	F	F	
7. Blair/Van Buren	F	D	F	F	F	F	
8. Eastern/Kansas	D	E	F	F	F	F	
9. Eastern/ New Hampshire	F	F	F	F	F	F	x

These data did not take into consideration the 1500 units in South Silver Spring, the expansion of Columbia Union College, the 901 additional vehicular trips daily generated by Walter Reed, nor the possible addition of 750 staff members at Walter Reed.

As you see, we have serious traffic congestion problems.

On page 8 of the Office of Planning's Zoning Proposal, we see a reference to Ward 4 Objectives for Land Use/Zoning under Section 1529:

a) Protect and enhance existing residential neighborhoods;
b) Protect the ward's residential areas from incompatible land uses and from activities generating excessive traffic, parking, noise, litter and other damaging environmental impacts;

The city's Comprehensive Plan -- to be publicly discussed this week -- promotes an inclusive city. Takoma has been one of the most diverse residential neighborhoods in the city for decades. But its economic diversity is at risk with the high prices set for so many new apartments and condominiums.

On page 8 of the Office of Planning's Zoning Proposal, we see a reference to Ward 4 Objectives for Housing under Section 1508.1:

> Provide for the housing needs of low- and moderate-income households, improve the District's low-rent housing programs, encourage home ownership and reduce the overall cost of housing among low- and moderate-income households in the ward:..."

The Comprehensive Plan also promotes adequate open space. More appropriate to the Takoma character would be to develop a well-designed and landscaped public park and gardens for residents and visitors alike to enjoy an ample natural setting. Such an area should be large enough to respectfully accommodate our diverse populations in Takoma as well as to accommodate performances and events.

f) Encourage the appropriate and compatible development of land adjacent to the .... Takoma Metrorail station(s)

Regarding community comment, while the Office of Planning presented its proposal conceptually to Plan Takoma, it did not contact the Presidents of Historic Takoma Inc, nor of the Old Takoma Business Association. Questions raised at the Plan Takoma meeting were not reported in this October 18 Final Report. Also, regretfully, the Advisory Neighborhood Commission 4B has not yet voted on this Report in a public meeting nor authorized an opinion to be written. The new Commission will hold its first meeting on January 27.

I respectfully request the Zoning Commission to ask the Office of Planning to meet with Old Takoma Business Association and Historic Takoma Inc Board members, and ANC 4B Commissioners to hear their concerns and then return to the Zoning Commission with a revised Final Report, incorporating these concerns. We must do everything possible to ensure an uncommonly successful and sustainable revitalization in Old Takoma.

Thank you.