

TAKOMA THEATRE CONSERVANCY

PO BOX 55288
WASHINGTON, DC 20040

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Testimony for the DC Zoning Commission

Case No. 08-06-4

(Comprehensive Zoning Regulations Rewrite: Arts & Culture)

Presented by Loretta Neumann, President,
Takoma Theatre Conservancy

September 18, 2008

I am testifying on behalf of the Takoma Theatre Conservancy, a nonprofit organization incorporated in the District of Columbia on April 3, 2007. I live at 7124 Piney Branch Road NW, have been a resident of Takoma DC for 34 years, and have been involved in planning and zoning issues related to the Takoma Community since the mid 1970s. I was a member of the Arts and Culture Working Group and participated in all of the meetings and deliberations of that group that led to the proposals that are now before you.

The goal of the Conservancy is to save the 85-year old Takoma Theatre from being converted into a facility other than its historical purpose as a theatre. We are seeking to acquire, preserve and revive the Takoma Theatre as a cultural arts and education center. Included with my testimony are copies of our most recent brochures. I have also brought a copy of a Needs Assessment report that was produced under a grant from the DC Neighborhood Investment Fund, which not only provides very positive findings for the potential uses of the Takoma Theatre but also contains much useful data on other theatres throughout the DC area.

At the outset, I want to emphasize that the Conservancy supports the concept of using zoning and other governmental tools to facilitate arts and cultural activities in DC. For the most part, the arts—especially performing arts—cannot exist with only private support. Arts facilities are not evenly distributed throughout the District. For example, **the Takoma is the only independent performing arts theater** in upper Northwest/Northeast DC (Wards 3, 4 & 5); others are single purpose (film or dance) or affiliated with educational institutions (limited availability for outside productions). Defining areas as Arts Districts and providing zoning incentives to support arts activities can do a great deal to remedy this mal-distribution. But this must be done with finesse.

Following are some of our concerns with the proposals you are considering.

- (1) **Arts District vs. Arts Overlay.** While we generally support the proposals that you are considering at this hearing, we are troubled by the first recommendation stated in the announcement of the hearing to “create stand-alone arts districts instead of arts overlays.” We do not understand how this would impact the present zoning in our commercial area, which is C-2-A. In addition, Takoma has a neighborhood commercial overlay zone that was added a couple years ago. An arts overlay zone would be very compatible. **We could not support designating an arts district in our community that supplanted the current zoning.**

- (2) **Criteria and Process.** During the development of the recommendations from the Arts and Culture Working Group, we defined criteria for judging potential arts districts.

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We also developed a list of potential arts districts, and Takoma was among the ones at the top of the list as our community met most if not all of the criteria. In addition to the Takoma Theatre, the Takoma community has many attributes that would make for a successful arts district, as recommended by the Working Group—namely the presence of rail and bus, potential for economic development, opportunities for other government support, existing arts uses in the area and nearby, potential to be a “destination,” potential for complementary uses, Comprehensive Plan policies and land use designation, existing zoning and presence of an historic district. The Conservancy is also concerned to assure that the process of designating Arts Districts is a very transparent one and provides for early involvement by communities like Takoma. **We therefore strongly urge inclusion of criteria and a description of the process that will be used in selecting arts districts.**

- (3) **Incentives.** We generally support the proposed incentives. In addition, we note again that the zoning on the Takoma Theatre and the surrounding commercial area is C-2-A, under which a bonus FAR (2.5) is giving to residential uses but not to theatre uses (which are limited to the commercial FAR of 1.5). If it were in an arts overlay district, then we would suggest that the additional bonus be at least equal to that of residential. The Takoma Theatre was built as a movie theatre and, despite some modifications in the 1980’s to expand the stage and add small dressing rooms, it is inadequate for large live productions. The needs assessment indicates a number of additional spaces – rehearsal spaces, classrooms, studios, dressing rooms, etc.—that are needed to make the theatre more viable as a cultural arts and education center. While future studies will be needed to determine the size of these spaces, some additional zoning relief may be required on part of the undeveloped portion of the lot.
- (4) **Historic Preservation.** We would further note that the Takoma Theatre and surrounding commercial and residential areas are within the Takoma Historic District. The theatre itself has been determined by the DC Historic Preservation Review Board to be a contributing building to the historic district. It cannot be readily torn down nor can other contributing buildings in the district. However, a number of vacant properties and non-contributing buildings are in the historic district that could benefit from the incentives that are being proposed. **Reference needs to be made in your proposal as to how an arts district designation would affect, and be affected by, historic landmarks and districts.**
- (5) **Arts Uses.** The Working Group was very concerned to assure the integrity of the preferred arts use list (PAUL) that would qualify for the special zoning incentives for arts districts. While bars and restaurants, for example, may be welcomed additions in an arts district, in most cases of themselves they are not arts facilities. **The final PAUL needs to be very careful in this regard.**

Lastly, it’s unclear to us the relationship between the proposals in the hearing announcement (undated) and the more detailed recommendations made by the Office of Planning dated August 28, 2008. The relationship of these two documents needs to be clarified.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Help Save the Historic Takoma Theatre and Create a Vibrant Community Cultural Arts Center

Takoma Theatre Conservancy PO Box 55288 Washington DC 20040

TakomaTheatreDC.org



The Takoma Theatre at Fourth and Butternut Streets NW is located within the Takoma Historic District and is two blocks from the Takoma Metro station.

To save the Takoma Theatre for future generations we need the support of hundreds of people who believe as we do that the Takoma is both a meaningful part of our history and vital to our future. Your membership in the Conservancy is what we need to show that you share our vision and want to be a part of the Takoma's restoration.

We have formed the Takoma Theatre Conservancy first to save the building and then to create a wealth of arts and education programs that will be an economic and cultural benefit to the neighborhood.

Please join us in this effort.

*Loretta Neumann, President
Takoma Theatre Conservancy
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A HISTORY OF THE THEATRE

The Takoma Theatre opened its doors as a silent film theater in 1924, and was one of the first neighborhood theaters in the 1930s capable of showing movies with sound. It was designed by the architect, John J. Zink, who later designed the Uptown in DC, the Flower in Silver Spring, and the Senator in Baltimore and more than 200 other theaters between the 1920s and 1950s. It remains one of the few with architectural features essentially intact. It includes an acoustically near perfect auditorium, common to early theaters when live acts often preceded film showings.

The Takoma Theatre has been central to neighborhood life since it opened. Generations of children attended Saturday morning movies and teens took their dates to the Theatre at night. The Takoma Fourth of July parade used to begin there. It was one of the first in DC to be integrated. By the 1970s, however, the quality of films had declined. A local group, Neighborhood Films, was able however to rent the Theatre for weekend classic film programs. The now popular Takoma Park Folk Festival started as a fund-raising event for their programs. Nevertheless, the owner

closed the Theatre, unable to sustain it financially.

In 1980, the local area became a historic district. In 1984, the current owner purchased and renovated the Theatre to produce and present plays. After several seasons, however, it again became dark except for occasional performances.

In 2002, community members formed the Takoma Theatre Arts Project (TTAP) to lease and re-animate the Theatre with a variety of productions. The lease ended in 2005, but the period demonstrated that there was interest in the Theatre for a wide variety of uses including film premiers, drama, dance, comedy, and music. When in 2007 the current owner applied to raze the Theatre, the Takoma Theatre Conservancy was formed to save it. The DC Historic Preservation Board denied the owner's application. The DC Historic Preservation League included the Theatre on its list of the year's Most Endangered Places. The Conservancy now seeks to purchase the Theatre and create a community cultural arts center.

8 Things We Plan to Do to Recreate a Vibrant Takoma Theatre

1. Save the building! We will never have another Takoma Theatre — ever.
2. Raise public and private funds for its acquisition, renovation and operation.
3. Renovate the auditorium, lobby area, and entrance to preserve the original design while adding new spaces to better accommodate modern theatre uses.
4. Hire professional management to develop sustaining theatre-related programs and new arts, educational, and community uses for the site.
5. Develop partnerships with several arts and education

organizations that can use the Theatre on an on-going basis and provide performance space for other large and small companies.

6. Encourage use of the theatre by youth-oriented programs and provide a range of educational arts-related programs for people of all ages.
7. Develop services to support small performance groups and help them develop into stronger companies.
8. Integrate the Theatre into the surrounding community by establishing it as a center for community cultural activities, and a catalyst for local economic development.



The auditorium in 2004. The acoustically near-perfect auditorium includes a classical Greek-inspired frieze encircling a dome that dominates the ceiling and originally radiated a purple light.



From a 2004 Takoma Theatre Arts Project Fundraiser. A vaudeville performance organized by Neil Gladd (center in white).

WHY SAVE THE THEATRE? -- WHO IS THE CONSERVANCY?

Do we need another theater in DC?

This is the only performing arts theater in upper Northwest and Northeast DC or Takoma Park MD. If we let it go, we may never have another. With a capacity of over 500 seats, it ranks as one of the larger performance venues outside the downtown area. The auditorium is perfect for drama, musical concerts, comedy, film festivals and community uses such as youth concerts, school productions, political debates, book readings, and business meetings. The building also has spaces that could support classes, small theater performances, as well as retail uses, such as a café, restaurant, or other neighborhood gathering places.

Who is the Takoma Theatre Conservancy?

The Conservancy is incorporated as a nonprofit organization with 501(c)(3) status -- donations are tax deductible. It is governed by a Board of Directors who collectively have decades of experience creating and

managing organizations; members include educators, theater owner, producer/playwright, author, historian, community business owners, and government and management consultants. The Board is also supported by a multi-disciplinary Advisory Council.

What has the Conservancy Accomplished?

The mission of the Conservancy is to purchase, renovate, and oversee the Takoma Theatre as a professionally managed, community-based cultural arts center. To aid in these efforts, the Board has obtained pro bono legal and architectural assistance from well-known Washington firms. The Conservancy has also received grant funds for planning, including a grant from the DC government to support nationally known professional consultants in theater management, architectural studies and fundraising planning. For further information and to stay in touch, please visit our website:

www.takomatheatre.org

HELP SAVE THE TAKOMA — Please join, or send whatever amount you can afford. It will be greatly appreciated and used to help save and revive the Theatre.

Name(s):

Home Address:City & StateZip

Phone Numbers: (H)(W)(C)

E-Mail Address:

Contribution (Membership is per household):

☐ \$50 Member (annual)

☐ \$200 Founding Member (First year)

☐ \$..... Other amount

I would like to help with:

☐ Programming & Marketing

☐ Membership & Community Outreach

☐ Public Relations

☐ Finances & Fund Raising

☐ Facility Acquisition & Development

☐ Other

Please make your tax deductible check payable to the **Takoma Theatre Conservancy**. Detach form and mail with check to:

Takoma Theatre Conservancy

PO Box 55288

Washington DC 20040

***The historic Takoma Theatre—
A place to bring us together***



**Let's Open
the Doors!**

It can be more than a building...

The Takoma Theatre should be saved as a Community Cultural Arts & Education Center

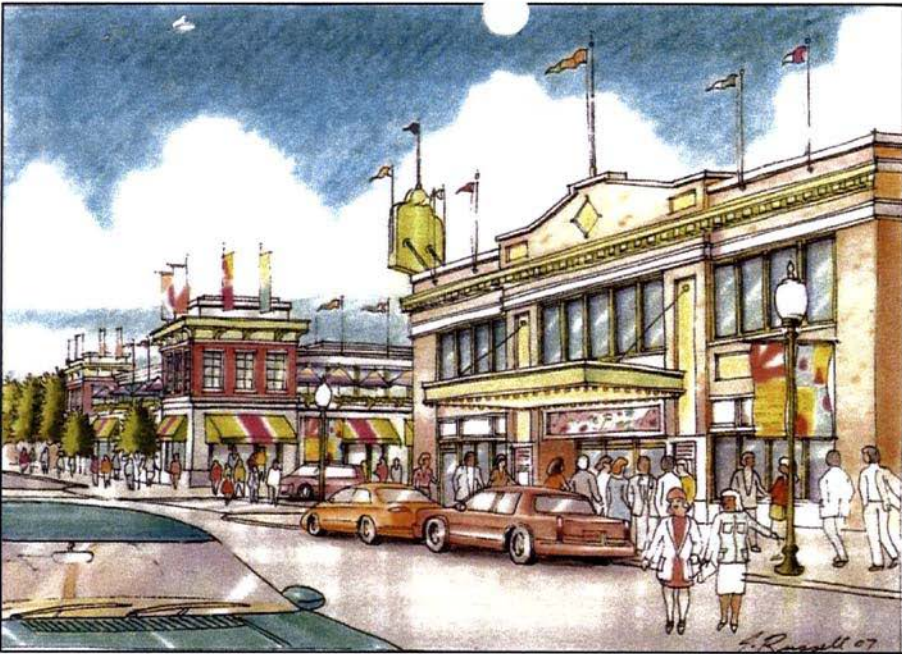
Why?

- Built in 1923 and designed by noted architect John Zink as a silent movie theatre, the Takoma Theatre remains relatively intact. It is a **unique, historical facility** that should be preserved for theater use.
- The Takoma is the **only independent performing arts theater** in upper Northwest/Northeast DC (Wards 3, 4 & 5) and Takoma Park, MD. Others are single purpose (film or dance) or affiliated with educational institutions (limited availability for outside productions).
- A nationally recognized theater consulting firm studied the feasibility of reviving the Takoma Theatre as a cultural arts center. They found that the community demand and potential audience is there, performers and others want to use it, and its size and location give it a “competitive advantage.” In short, they concluded, **it can work!**

Who supports this goal?

The Takoma Theatre Conservancy, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, was incorporated in April 2007 by residents of DC and Maryland, to save and revive the Takoma Theatre. Over the past 18 months, **the Conservancy has received widespread support** and accomplished the following:

- Acquired more than 1000 signatures on petitions to save the Takoma and nearly 150 individual donations.
- Sought and received grants from the DC Administration and DC Council to study the theatre’s physical needs and potential uses.
- Obtained support and funding from several private foundations and organizations: The DC Humanities Council, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Takoma Theatre Arts Project, Neighbors Inc., Historic Takoma, Inc., Takoma Foundation, Dupont Circle Conservancy, and Silver Spring Historical Society.
- Procured professional consultants, many of whom have donated services, including architectural (Martinez & Johnson), brokerage (Demers Real Estate), fund raising (The McConnell Consulting Group), legal (Williams & Connally, LLP) and printing (Steve Carroll Printing).



Drawing courtesy of James Russell © 2008

What can the Takoma Theatre do?

Revitalized as a Community Cultural Arts and Education Center, the Takoma Theatre – located less than two blocks from the Takoma Metrorail Station – can **light up a now dark corner** of the neighborhood and help rejuvenate the adjacent commercial area.

Specifically in the arts, the Takoma can

- host a wide array of theatrical, film and musical programs,
- support a variety of theater and arts groups and local performers,
- provide classes for people of all ages, especially youth who lack access to arts in their schools, and
- offer vocational training and internships for high school students and young adults.

And the Takoma Theatre can serve **as a community resource**, a meeting place to bring people together.

What is needed?

The auditorium of the Takoma Theatre is currently closed (the front offices are being rented). The **owner has publicly stated that he wants to develop the property for other purposes**. Meanwhile, the Takoma Theatre Conservancy is quietly but actively working to obtain the information and assistance needed to bring the Takoma back to life as a theatre and a public resource for the community. Many volunteers have helped with this effort.

The major need now is to **raise the initial funds** necessary to gain access to the theatre, to support an offer of purchase, and to meet preliminary needs related to acquisition, including further architectural and engineering assessments and other essential work.

How can you help?

This effort needs your financial support as well as your continuing interest. Your support will help us move forward with this exciting project. **We greatly appreciate your gift at this time.**

Please also understand that this is just the start of a larger campaign to acquire, renovate and expand the Takoma Theatre, which will require substantial additional public and private funds. But **this is the critical first step** to open the doors and bring the Takoma Theatre back to life.

Please consider making a generous gift.

Thank you!

Takoma Theatre Conservancy

Loretta Neumann, President; Carolivia Herron, Vice President;
Steve Smith, Treasurer; Louise Kelley, Secretary; and John Buck,
Peter Kent, Paul Ruppert, and Faye Williams, Board of Directors

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