



Unification!

The tangled journey of One Takoma

On July 1, 1997, Mayor Ed Sharp stood before a giant map of Takoma Park, flanked by politicians and activists, and cut a ribbon tracing the Prince George's County line, officially marking the unification of the City.

More than 19 years of relentless lobbying and savvy organizing had gone into that simple ribbon cutting. There was a precedent—in 1968 Laurel had unified in Prince George's County, with three Montgomery County neighborhoods making the switch. But it had happened

less than half a dozen times in state history.

Takoma Park was divided even before the city's incorporation in 1890. The hodgepodge of land purchases made by founding father B.F. Gilbert had cut across all the local boundaries—Montgomery and Prince George's as well as the District. It was all rural land in those days and few people living here or occupying the governmental offices cared about boundary lines. But as the city grew and politics became more complicated, the difficulties of dealing with multiple jurisdictions grew with it. 57 percent of the city's 2.36 square miles was in Montgomery (with two-thirds of the population) and 43 percent in Prince George's (with one-third of the population).

Sam Abbott was the first to raise the idea of unifying—while campaigning for mayor in 1978. Abbott lost that first mayoral bid but when he was elected two years later, he put it on the front burner. Citizens for a Referendum to Unify Takoma Park in One County formed soon after.

As Abbott put it at the time, "Thus begins an experiment in the exercise of citizen initiative and involvement." Tom Gagliardo remembers telling him it would take a million years. It took 19 years and Abbott regrettably did not live to see the final vote.

Many residents agreed that split jurisdiction wasn't a sensible way to run a city government and they were willing to fight to simplify the government, increase efficiency and decrease confusion.

It was confusing enough for individual residents: two phone books added difficulty when calling a taxi or determining which county got your taxes or your building permit request. If your house was in both counties (sometimes the boundary ran right through the living room), the location of the front door supposedly determined your county.

City administration was a nightmare: Two sets of officials, policies, departments, laws that didn't match, different building and zoning codes and election rules. Police filed different paperwork depending on where the arrest took place. One policeman missed a Prince George's court hearing to testify in Montgomery County and was hit by a bench warrant. Garbage had to be collected separately because garbage from one county couldn't be dumped in

Clarification from June "Takoma Archives": Washington Adventist Hospital recently purchased property six miles north of Takoma Park off Cherry Hill Road as shown in this map on left.



Montgomery County Councilmember Derick Berlage hands the Takoma Park Unification Proclamation to Mayor Edward F. Sharp at Unification Day ceremonies at City Hall July 1. Looking on, from left, county councilmembers Neal Potter and Ike Leggett and County Council Executive Douglas Duncan. Photo by Chris Lambert

Mayor Ed Sharp receives an official proclamation of a unified Takoma—from the front page of the August 1997 City of Takoma Park Newsletter.

the other. Even the mayor had to take two oaths, one before each county clerk, at his swearing-in.

Taxes were the big issue. Beyond the tangles of where to pay taxes and differences in tax rates, there was the issue of rebates. The two counties were supposed to return some of the county taxes to the city to pay for services like police, recreation and trash collection. But Montgomery County gave five times more (\$226,000 versus \$40,000). Prince George's refusal to pay its share toward the fire station nearly forced closure of the station.

But the biggest benefit of a unified city would clearly be increased lobbying clout. A member of the Montgomery County Council once told local activist Lynne Bradley that Takoma Park only had 9,000 people - he was counting only the Montgomery—County voters. Ironically, those lobbying skills were honed in the effort to get a referendum. As then-

Delegate Dana Dembrow put it, "We are in a stimulus-response profession. This issue is not going to be decided by some far-off belief—it's going to be decided by what you do."

The first hurdle was the perceived slight to Prince George's and the accompanying prejudices of each county against the other. One Prince George's delegate chided the residents who supported unification, saying "I think some of them would just like to be part of the chablis and brie set." At the same time, Takoma Park was presented as "a nuclear free zone of aging tree-hugging hippies who let aliens vote in city elections." Unification proponents had to be careful to be pro-unity and not anti-Prince George's.

Rino Aldrighetti decided that since all politics are personal, it would be necessary to court people personally. The strategy became one of deploying enough residents to overwhelm the politicians.

But the route to referendum required at



ONE VOICE

Takoma Park to hold Unification Vote November 7. All Registered Voters Within City Eligible to Make History

After years of defeat in Annapolis, Takoma Park residents—one-third of whom live in Prince George's County and two-thirds in Montgomery—finally won the right to choose a single home in 1994. Takoma Park citizens will finally have a chance to unify their divided city on November 7. Although no city councilmembers are opposed in the municipal elections, voters will choose whether or not to unify into either Montgomery or Prince Georges County. Since two-thirds of the city is located in Montgomery County, the common belief is that Prince George's residents will decide to join them.

Photo: Eric Bond

IMAGE FROM TAKOMA VOICE

Advocacy group One Takoma informed voters of their historic choice in the 1995 city election.

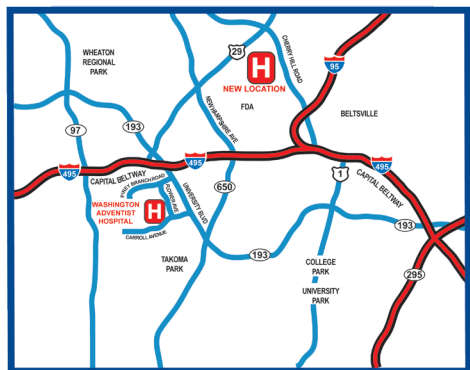




PHOTO COURTESY THE ABBOTT FAMILY

Sam Abbott (on left) was the first to propose unifying Takoma Park into one county.



This cartoon in the 1984 Takoma Park Newsletter reflected the resistance of Prince George's County officials to losing its section of Takoma Park. One lawmaker declared that the Berlin Wall would fall before his delegation would allow a unified Takoma Park. His words turned out to be prescient.

least seven separate votes, beginning with the subcommittee of the Prince George's delegation.

There were 13 failures from the time state delegate Stu Bainum introduced the first bill in September 1981. A 1982 straw poll and a 1987 non-binding referendum of Prince George's residents overwhelming favored unity (2170 for, 409 against), Prince George's delegates resisted any

vote that allowed Prince George's residents to leave the county.

In 1984, Annapolis tried looking for other solutions and, in 1987, they discussed a land swap. It looked like unification would never happen. Charles Ryan, chairman of the Prince George's delegation, insisted that Takoma Park would stay divided as long as the Berlin Wall stood (it fell in 1989).

Then, in late 1993, the door opened again. Mayor Ed Sharp got all 13 city candidates to support unification and Steve DelGuidice (Takoma Park mayor turned Prince George's Councilman) brokered a majority of the PG Council to back a joint referendum.

The activists regrouped and Mayor Sharp reached

out to old players, especially those who supported Abbott's losing mayoral campaign against DelGuidice. Condie Clayton (who ran against Sharp) and Tom Gagliardo were among those who returned. According to Gagliardo, "in working with unification, a lot of old wounds were healed."

Activists traded in their turquoise "One Takoma" t-shirts for suits, and headed to Annapolis every Monday night while phone trees barraged the delegates. State elections played into the mix, neutralizing the long-standing opposition of Parris Glendening, whose gubernatorial race needed Takoma Park support. With the Prince George's delegation and the House finally voting in favor, the pressure was



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10th Anniversary of Unified Takoma, continued

on Senate President Mike Miller, who had long maintained that “over his dead body would he lose this treasured part of Prince George’s.” He allowed himself to be swayed by fellow delegates who needed Takoma Park votes in their state races.

Getting the referendum through the legislature was the tough part. All that

remained was the city vote. One Takoma could openly talk about unity into Montgomery County. The oddities of state law (and democracy) made for interesting language on the 1995 ballot. Residents of Prince George’s could vote yes or no on joining Montgomery County while residents of Montgomery County could vote yes or no on joining Prince George’s.

Meanwhile, the 800 residents of Pinecrest, Hampshire Knolls and Westmoreland Avenue took advantage of

the time before the November 1995 election to seek and win annexation to the city in time to be part of the historic vote.

Though there were still those who preferred the status quo, the final vote was decisive: 87.8 percent on the Prince

George’s side favored unity and 91.5 percent on the Montgomery side. Official unification was set for July 1, 1997 with some implementation delayed until 1999, to make for an orderly transition, especially in the schools.

With unification won, the activists turned their focus on pushing for a new Blair high school, the renovation of Takoma Middle School, the opening of

Silver Spring International Middle School, and Sligo Creek Elementary, and the expansion of Montgomery College. Many of the leaders in these battles came from the ranks of One Takoma, or from what was once Prince George’s.

As Ed Sharp said at the unification celebration, “We do know how to organize and we do know how to have our voices heard—let that be a warning to you.”

| To Unify into Montgomery County | |
|--|---|
| Montgomery County Residents: Vote AGAINST | Prince George’s County Residents: Vote FOR |
| <p>Montgomery County Ballot</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> For Alteration of the Prince George’s County/Montgomery County Boundary to Place All of Takoma Park in Prince George’s County.</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Against Alteration of the Prince George’s County Boundary to Place All of Takoma Park in Prince George’s County</p> | <p>Prince George’s County Ballot</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> For Alteration of the Prince George’s County/Montgomery County Boundary to Place All of Takoma Park in Montgomery County.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Against Alteration of the Prince George’s County Boundary to Place All of Takoma Park in Montgomery County</p> |

Voters had to negotiate this tricky ballot to unify the city.

Mayor Ed Sharp looks back...

The success of the unification effort in the 1994 Maryland legislative session (was it really that long ago?) taught me three lessons: (1) Grass roots lobbying really can get results; (2) Things can happen in an election year that can’t happen at other times; and (3) Sometimes you have to get lucky.

The lobbying effort undertaken by Takoma Park residents was extensive, with dozens of people directly involved. That insured that there were enough volunteers for One Takoma, over a six month period, to raise money, write and distribute information (this was pre-Internet, so handing out pamphlets door-to-door was a major means of communication), garner publicity, and, most important of all, attend all the meetings of all the committees in both houses of the Maryland General Assembly. I was later told that this persistence was noticed by a number of delegates and confirmed them in their support for unification. So, maybe it really is true that 90% of life is showing up. Everyone’s contribution was valuable, but I want to particularly note the efforts of Tom Gagliardo, Bev Habada, and Kathy Porter. The three of them were always there and involved in everything that went on.

Because 1994 was an election year, a number of politicians at the county and state levels were receptive to Takoma Park’s interest in unification who might not otherwise have been. This was especially true in Prince George’s County, which everyone knew would lose territory if unification were ever put to a vote. The County Executive, Parris Glendening, was running for Governor for the first time that year. He had been a staunch opponent of unification, and it would never be approved as long as he was the County Executive. But because Takoma Park would remain in Maryland if he were Governor, he was no longer concerned about this particular boundary change and stayed away from the issue. Then there were at least two members of the Prince George’s County Council who were running for County Executive and wanted votes from the Prince George’s side of Takoma Park. They supported a resolution by the County Council endorsing unification, making it a majority vote in favor. It’s likely that had they not done so, the Prince George’s County House and Senate delegations in the Maryland General Assembly also would not have supported the bill and it would have died. In addition, there was a Prince George’s County Senator running for County Executive who helped keep the unification bill on the Senate agenda. This was crucial because it could have been killed by simply not being put up for a vote. Had this been 1995, none of these factors would have worked in Takoma Park’s favor.

As with any successful political campaign, the unification effort got some lucky breaks. I’ll cite just two: (1) Steve Del Guidice did not live in Takoma Park; (2) Peter Franchot did live in Takoma Park.

Steve was elected to the Prince George’s County Council in 1990, during the middle of his third term as Takoma Park’s Mayor. One reason some Prince George’s delegates gave for opposing unification during discussions in 1991 and 1992 was that Steve would have to leave the County Council. That argument was more of an excuse than a reason (Steve could always move, of course) but there was always a chance that it might have persuaded just enough delegates to vote no and cost unification the support of the Prince George’s delegation. However, when Steve moved to Hyattsville before the 1994 legislative session, that argument was removed completely.

Peter (now the Comptroller of Maryland) had represented Takoma Park as a delegate since 1986. He had steadily risen in prominence in Annapolis and was well-versed in the process and personalities of the House of Delegates. From the beginning, he provided candid and skillful advice on how to get the unification bill passed. I’m convinced that because of his attachment to the city, he was especially focused and effective in bringing about a successful result. If he had not given unification the attention he did, we would never have won.

— Ed Sharp



May 1995—Governor William Donald Schaefer, surrounded by civic activists and political supporters signs the Takoma Park unification bill into law. Note, longtime unification opponent, Maryland Senate President Mike Miller hides his face in his coat.

Photo: Eric Bond

Takoma Unites

City Council Remains Same in Historic Unification Election

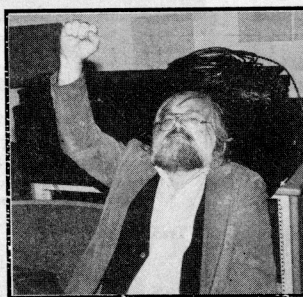
by Tom Gagliardo

Ho Chi Minh finished poorly (one write-in vote) in Takoma Park’s November 7th elections, as the officially unopposed mayoral and council incumbents retained their seats. Unification into Montgomery County was approved by 91.5% of Montgomery County voters

and 87.8% in Prince George’s County. Voter turnout was 31%, ranging from lows of 7.5% and 19% in Wards 4 (Upper Maple Avenue) and 5 (Between the Creeks) to 48% in Ward 2 (South of Sligo and Sligo-Long Branch).

“The overwhelming vote gives us a mandate to tackle the implementation issues of unification in the spirit of

continued on page 7



The Voice was on the scene to cover the referendum signing ceremony in Annapolis and city-wide vote and that changed Takoma Park forever.