

Positions on Issues

of Deborah A. Vollmer, Candidate for Town Council,

Town of Chevy Chase

Mansionization. The builders and developers, and the real estate agents who represent them, have entirely too much control over our Town. We need to have a Town Council that is willing to stand up to development interests, to protect the unique character of our Town. Existing ordinances simply do not provide sufficient protection to residents from the ravages of teardowns and new construction, which continues, even as nationally the market for new homes has cratered.

Many good people put in many long hours and a lot of hard work to craft the new building ordinance. Yet, while I submit that the new ordinance is a positive step forward, I do not believe that it goes far enough. Homeowners are completely helpless, when a builder/developer decides to build next door, with total disregard to for the rights of the owner of the adjacent property. The PrePAC meetings are of little help, as the homeowners on adjacent land have no real input into the decision as to what is to be built next door to them, but can only listen to the plans as set forth by the builder/developer.

Our tree canopy is being destroyed bit by bit; the neighbors of the new huge houses are being deprived in some instances of sunlight and in some instances, the established use of shared driveways is seriously impaired by the new construction. We are also losing much of our history as, one after another, older, well-built, modest-sized houses are demolished to make way for huge monstrosities. One would think that this trend would have been curbed by the downturn in the housing market, but in fact, the trend continues, to the detriment of our Town.

Some of the changes to the building code that I have in mind include: procedures to give homeowners of properties adjacent to contemplated new construction more of a voice in opposing projects which have a negative effect on that homeowner's right to quiet enjoyment of his/her

property. I would strengthen provisions protecting our tree canopy, and I would codify the right of a homeowner not to have sunlight blocked unreasonably by new construction. I would reaffirm in the code the right to unobstructed access via shared driveways, and ban the construction of such abominations as a two-car garage fronting at a right angle to a six foot wide shared driveway, to replace a one-car detached garage. I would strengthen the rights of a homeowner to oppose building permits that have an adverse effect on that homeowner's rights, and on the environment, generally.

I have a few specific thoughts as to how to implement these changes. It would start with the Pre-PAC (pre-permit application consultation). That is now nothing more than an informal opportunity for neighbors to meet with the homeowner or developer planning to build. I would strengthen the rights of neighboring homeowners at the Pre-PAC, providing that they could announce to the permit applicant at the pre-PAC an intention to appeal any permit that might be granted based on the plans under consideration, on specified grounds, which would include at least the following: anticipated deprivation of significant sunlight, removal of trees creating damage to the Town's tree canopy, significant removal of green space, negative impacts on drainage, negative impact on easement rights, including but not limited to those with respect to a shared driveway, and any other anticipated diminishment of the value of the neighbor's property. If the applicant failed to meet the concerns of the neighbor, the neighbor would have a right of appeal with regard to any building permit issued. The appeal would be heard before the entire Town Council, with a balancing of interests, in the same manner as occurs in a variance hearing.

Historic Sites. I would develop a program for designating properties within our Town to be historic structures, worthy of preservation. Residents would have a procedure whereby they could petition to have well-built, older homes preserved. This would supplement the already existing procedure for historic designation in Montgomery County. I believe that the County program is inadequate, because the County will rarely use historic designation to protect isolated older structures, or even small clusters of two, or three, or four houses, but in much of our Town this is all that is left of our architectural heritage.

Appointment of Commission to Study and Make Recommendations: re: Affordable Housing. Many of our older homes, if they could be preserved, just might be affordable to some of the folks we like to have around, but

who cannot afford to live here. I am thinking of people like school teachers and firefighters, who do not happen to be independently wealthy. We should make it possible for people like this to rent or buy within our Town, and the older homes that have been well-maintained just might be suitably affordable to some of these people. The Commission would study just how such a program might be implemented, and make recommendations to the Town Council.

Voting rights in Town Elections. To be eligible to vote in Town elections, a person must be a U.S. citizen, over the age of eighteen, registered to vote in the State of Maryland, and a resident in the Town for at least thirty days. In many respects, these rules are progressive. But we have residents in this Town who are citizens of other nations, some of whom are homeowners, who have been here for many years. These people are affected by actions taken by our Town government, and they should be allowed to vote. It can be done; we should follow the example of Takoma Park. I raised this same issue, when I ran for Town Council in 2009, and evidently it died in committee. So here we are, with one more election cycle, and these folks are still not able to vote!

Dog Parks. During the 2009 election cycle there was a lot of interest in this Town for the establishment of a dog park, where dogs could be allowed to run free, while their human companions socialize. Opponents were concerned about such issues as dog poop, trampled grass, and fencing. Proponents say that all of these problems can be addressed, and that dog parks can be kept clean and enjoyable. I would encourage the proponents to gather relevant information regarding the feasibility of having a dog park in our town, and having it managed in such a way that it is an asset to our community. If elected to the Council, I am willing to work with the proponents toward the end of establishing a dog park. As park land in our Town is limited, I would explore the option of having fixed hours, allowing for multiple uses of the chosen park. Zimmerman Park has been suggested as the possible site for a dog park, but there may be drainage concerns with that particular property that might not make that the best location. Other locations should also be considered.

Saving the Trail. I support the efforts of our Town Council to save the Capital Crescent (Georgetown Branch) Trail as the linear park that it is. I oppose the plan to put a light-rail train on the surface of the Trail. The Trail is like an oasis in overdeveloped Bethesda and Chevy Chase. We should cherish and preserve the trees and the greenspace that make our Trail special. I would favor addressing the transportation issue by expanding the use of buses over existing roadways, and making them as clean, energy-efficient, and comfortable as one can make a bus, and running them with enough frequency that people can rely on them.

Some consideration should also be given to the fact that the consolidation of Walter Reed with Naval Medical (BRAC) may well mean that it would make more sense to have any transportation link be with the Medical Center Metro rather than downtown Bethesda. Buses have the advantage of being flexible; routes can be changed to meet actual needs.

In the long run, I would be open to considering an underground Purple Line, but only if the need in terms of actual ridership is established, and only if the political will exists to spend the money necessary to make it happen.

These are just a few ideas that I have, that I would pursue if I am elected to the Town Council. Please feel free to contact me by e-mail at dvollmer@bellatlantic.net, or at dvollmer@verizon.net, or by telephone at (301) 652-5762 if you have any questions. Thank you.

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