

Developer sees a future for land near Metro

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Aug. 22, 2001



Ricky Carioti/The Gazette

Architect Russell Katz has purchased this lot near the Takoma Metro station and hopes to construct a building with retail, office and apartment space. He hopes his development will attract more business.

Russell Katz sees promise in Takoma D.C., where few else have. He sees it in a pie-shaped vacant lot, a lot once strewn with piles of trash, rocks and drug paraphernalia, decorated only by graffiti.

The lot -- on Carroll Street, NW, just a few steps into the District next to the Takoma Metro underpass -- went up for sale earlier

this year and Katz, an independent architect and developer, bought it.

With his purchase, Katz has invested in what many locals see as no-man's land and identify as blighted.

Businesses around the station are sparse ~ a 7-Eleven store, a cleaners, a funeral home. And unlike other Metro stations, such as Silver Spring, there are no new, towering offices or high-rise apartment buildings, existing or planned.

This lack of development has left many Takoma D.C., and Takoma Park, Md., residents wondering what went wrong. Why haven't more developers and architects taken an interest in the pedestrian-friendly Takoma Metro area?

Katz says he can't figure it out, but he hasn't let the area's emptiness discourage him. Quite the opposite, actually. His architectural background made him see promise in what he calls an awkwardly shaped lot.

He envisions an environmentally progressive, multi-million dollar building on the site, with retail space on the ground floor and apartments and office space above. There will be a roof garden with grass. Storm water from atop will travel down and nourish a rich, green courtyard below, that both workers and apartment-dwellers can look into. Katz will design the building so noise from passing trains will vanish.

The lot is zoned for a variety of commercial, residential and light industrial uses. And to Katz's relief, aside from a couple small variances, he will need no zoning changes.

Takoma residents, such as Sara Green ~ longtime community activist, resident and member of Takoma's Area Neighborhood Commission ~ are elated with his plans.

Residents like Green have become wary of developers, as much of the community has been fighting off a townhouse development adjacent to their Metro station for over a year.

But Katz is different, she said. "He's really working with the community."

Plans for the structure to be built on the lot are still very preliminary, but Katz shared everything he has so far at a community meeting with local residents some weeks ago.

His environmentally sound ideas received great neighborhood support, Green said.

"I've never dealt with people that are more engaged and informed," he said. "I think there are a lot of people that are interested in building this with the environment in mind."

Katz, now a D.C. resident, has a history in the area. He grew up in Silver Spring and has always enjoyed Takoma and Takoma Park, with their diversity and strong community spirits, he said.

His love for the neighborhood led him to purchase and renovate an apartment building on nearby Eastern Avenue in January 1999.

Green says the apartment building has been a great success and this has built trust on both sides -- builder and resident -- for Katz's future investments.

Takoma Park Mayor Kathy Porter said she is also pleased with Katz's plans to brighten the area. Porter recognizes the stark differences in business in Takoma. The area sits just down the road from Takoma Park's successful Old Town shopping area.

She said she thinks Katz's building might help to link the neighboring communities.

"It sounds like [his development] could be a big plus," Porter said.

Ward 4 District Councilman Adrian Fenty said a renewed general interest in D.C. has brought a lot of new residents into Takoma, but not a lot of new businesses.

Fenty said the media has taken an interest in the newest D.C. residential hot spots — such as Logan Circle and U Street — and businesses have followed. But the Takoma neighborhood has been residentially strong for so long that perhaps potential investors just haven't taken note of it.

Katz took note, though. And he's determined to make his plans work and start changing an otherwise bleak landscape.

"I've dedicated all my resources to this," he said. "I'm going to get it done."

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