

THE TAKOMA VOICE, November 2011 page 6

## IS THE INCOME GAP CHANGING THE FACE OF TAKOMA PARK

By Lauren Hammer

The gap between the haves and have-nots in Takoma Park widened significantly during the last decade, according to U. S. Census data.

Community Health and Empowerment through Education and Research (CHEER), a local non-profit organization, analyzed the data and released a report showing that, as in other parts of the U. S., the middle class in Takoma Park is disappearing.

By comparing data from the 2000 Decennial Census to the most recent American Community Survey CHEER found that the number of upper-income households increased here by more than 50 percent over the last decade. Meanwhile, middle-income households declined, and lower-income households remained stable.

Kathy Porter, a former mayor of Takoma Park and a CHEER board member, sees the influence of city policy and housing prices on population trends. "We've had rent stabilization since the early 1980's so we're not losing our low income renters, which is the good news," she commented. However, because Takoma Park is a desirable location with close proximity to the District, many in the middle class are priced out of the housing. "That's why we're losing the middle," she said.

Hank Prensky, a local real estate agent, concurred, "There's activity at the extremes. There continues to be buyers at the lower end and higher end and maybe less in the middle."

Bruce Baker, the CHEER director, expressed concern that the trend could change the character of Takoma Park. "The city population is moving in a direction contrary to the goals of the community," he said. "If we don't do something, change will continue and this could become the kind of place that the

community has not envisioned for itself.”

Prensky holds out hope that because Takoma Park continues to promote policies and programs that keep living costs more affordable for renters and low-income homeowners the city will remain a cultural and ethnic melting pot. “It’s what I see as Takoma Park’s great, solid, encouraging, positive values,” he said.

But Baker emphasized that a lack of middle-class housing means that people in apartment buildings who are saving up to buy a house will be less likely to find an affordable one in Takoma Park and are likely to move elsewhere.

A large majority of residents who were interviewed for CHEER’s first “report card” on housing said they favored trying to maintain a diversity of housing prices. One homeowner, Cindy Dyballa, said, “I would like if the people who live and rent here could also be able to purchase here. I don’t think Takoma Park has changed so much that it’s just a rich place, but I can tell that it is heading that way and that makes me uncomfortable.”

Another homeowner, Susan Wood, stated, “I can’t imagine how people who don’t already own a home can afford to purchase a home in Takoma Park. Ten years ago the price rise had just started. I don’t think we could buy here now.”

Porter also worries about the long-term repercussions. “The more different people are from each other, the harder it is to relate to each other,” she said. “I don’t want to see Takoma Park split in two.”

She acknowledged that finding a way to promote middle-income housing stock is not easy. “From a policy point of view, you can keep apartments affordable for tenants, but it’s a lot more difficult to preserve affordable home ownership opportunities. There are programs, but they tend to be a lot more expensive to do.”

Rent stabilization itself is controversial because it results in lost revenue to the city government. A policy to help middle-income homeownership would likely cause even greater controversy. However, Porter observed there might be considerable support for such a policy anyway. “We’re a community that values diversity. People moving in share that value. We already have a reservoir of good will.”

She added, “Our City government and organizations like CHEER want to make diversity work.”

CHEER is sponsoring an open meeting to discuss housing issues and concerns on Thursday, November 17 at 7:30 pm in the Lilac room of the Takoma Park Community Center. The full report “The Changing Face of Takoma Park: Income Diversity 2000 to 2009” is available online at [www.communitycheer.org](http://www.communitycheer.org).