

Jack's December report

At the November meeting, the ANC did the following:

- Advised ABRA to renew tavern liquor licenses for Elle and Mola restaurants;
- Advised DDOT, DPR, and DGS to work with the Mount Pleasant 7-11 and Greenspaces For DC on a mutually agreeable plan for both improving and maintaining as public space the “public parking”.

Of course we called for **renewal of the tavern liquor licenses** for the Elle and Mola restaurants. They're good, neighborhood-friendly places, and illustrate that we needn't worry about restaurants having “tavern” liquor licenses, instead of the more burdensome “restaurant” licenses.

The resolution concerning the **“public parking” next to the 7-11** warrants an explanation of the peculiar term, which has nothing whatsoever to do with parked cars, and which Mount Pleasant residents really need to understand. The term stems from the Parking Act of 1870, which said that up to half the width of streets in the District could be set aside “as parks”. Hence, they're called “parkings”.

Mount Pleasant has its unusually spacious feel, many of the houses being set well back from the street. This is because their front yards are “parkings” – unused street rights-of-way. Kenyon Street at the 7-11, for example, is an 80-foot-wide right-of-way, of which 50 feet is roadway and sidewalk, leaving 15 feet on either side of Kenyon unused. The 15 feet on the south side is part of the parking lot for the paint store (and isn't maintained as parkland), while the 15 feet on the north side is most of the depth of the small park adjacent to the 7-11.

Lamont Street and Kilbourne Place, and 18th Street and 19th Street south of Park Road, are 90-foot rights-of-way, of which 30 feet is actual road, 12 feet on either side is sidewalk and treebox space, and the remaining 18 feet on either side is our residential front yards. That 18 feet is the reason for the setback of houses from the street, giving Mount Pleasant its luxurious, suburban-residential appearance.

There's a whole section of the DC Municipal Regulations governing what we property owners can do with our “parkings”. We can put front porches on them, but no actual building structure. And we can fence them in, with fences no more than 42 inches tall, using them as our private front yards. The area may be nominally “public space”, but that term means only public ownership, not open to public use or access. In the text of the law, the public parking “*shall be under the immediate care and keeping of the owners or occupants of the premises abutting on the public parking*”.

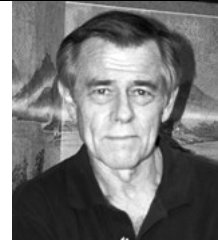
So, the little park next to the 7-11 is such a “parking”, and it's up to the 7-11 to provide “care and keeping” of the property. This is the choice made by the 7-11 management: their “parking” is open to the public. It's a favorite spot for Latino men to congregate, socializing and playing checkers and whatnot.

The ANC resolution comes about because there's an effort to make this quasi-public park into an actual public park, with maintenance coming from the District Government. I worry

ANC 1D03 NEWSLETTER #198

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about this because what's done there could be a precedent for what could be done with any other “parking” in Mount Pleasant. If the 7-11's parking can be taken and converted to a public park, well, why not any other conveniently located neighborhood parkings? People have argued that any “parking” is “public space”, and therefore should best be used for public, rather than private, purposes.

So, while encouraging this effort to enhance the 7-11's “parking”, I press for assurance that what's done there does not compromise the rights the rest of us property owners have to our “parkings”. Jon Stewart put this text in the resolution to satisfy me: *“Maintenance of public parkings are [sic] typically the responsibility of property owners and for their private enjoyment, and this principle cannot be abrogated”*.

I might mention also that **District maintenance of parks** is not good. Just look at the disaster that is the park in front of 1900 Lamont. In 2001 the lot was transferred from the apartment house to DPR, and responsibility for maintenance given to DGS (the Department of General Services). The result has been an environmental catastrophe. What was a nice grassy lot is now barren clay, with deep erosion ditches. The DGS assigns the maintenance job to contractors, who naturally want to do just as little as possible, and hurry off to the next job on their list.

So, imagining that this would be a good prescription for the “parking” adjacent to the 7-11 is, I think, a mistake. I've told the advocates of an “Amigos Park” at this location that they should work something out privately with the 7-11, and leave the DC Government out of it. But they won't listen to me.

Well, speaking of **parking** – meaning parked cars, now – there was a significant development lately along P Street in Capitol Hill, where some 26 curbside parking spots were taken in order to build a bicycle track. Their ANC protested, but DDOT asserted that, there being no residences along that side of the street, there was no need for curbside parking on that side of the street.

It's a good thing, I think, that nobody thought of that when DDOT undertook the redesign of the 2000 block of Park Road, the last block before the Piney Branch overpass. The west side of that block has no residences, and so, by DDOT logic, need have no curbside parking. There is a bike lane there, but if this project were being undertaken today, there would perhaps be a protected bike track there, twice or more the width of the bike lane, for bicyclist safety, and a whole lot of parking spots would be lost, far more than the several that we eliminated at the end of the bridge.

This reflects, I think, a recent change in philosophy at DDOT, as they search now for every opportunity to enhance bicycling safety in DC. I'm a longtime bicyclist, and I used to bike-commute, way back when bicycle commuting was rare, and DDOT did next to nothing for bicyclists. So sure, I like seeing improved bicycling facilities, and I'm quite proud of having brought about the protected bike tracks on Klinge Road, into and out of Rock Creek Park. However, one has to respect the serious need for curbside parking, too. There are many more motorists in Mount Pleasant than bicyclists, so one has to judge the value of a protected bike track versus the real and immediate need for residential automobile parking.

So I'm glad that DDOT did not suggest that parking be eliminated on the west side of that block of Park Road, in order to install a bike track, instead of the bike lane. A factor in my evaluation is that Park Road through Rock Creek Park is extremely bicyclist-hostile, and we should not encourage bicyclists to use that route across the park. We bicyclists should take Klinge Road instead. It might be a longer route, but it's the safest bicycling route over to Connecticut Avenue.

Theft from auto is a crime that is way too easy to commit, and which rarely leads to capture and conviction. It's always been a headache in Mount Pleasant. In recent years the frequency of thefts from auto has declined, but still, residents suffer one or two such thefts every week.

Lately there's been a surge in thefts from auto, around five a week. No part of Mount Pleasant seems to be safe from such thefts. Our residential row-house blocks are especially vulnerable, late at night when there are few people on the street.

The perps roam around, peering into car windows to see if there's anything that looks valuable inside. And the only way to avoid being a victim is to make certain that nothing of any apparent value is visible from outside your parked car. What's really wretched about these thefts is that, besides the lost personal property, your car tends to suffer some expensive damage too.

Life in the city has its rough edges. There are some who will say that this is "tolerating" crime. No, it's recognizing the practical reality that we just can't put enough police on patrol to prevent these thefts. The perps are smart enough to wait until no one is in view to do their deed, which takes only seconds, and then they're gone.

The Stoddard Baptist Home recently installed **new lights in its little parking lot**. Unhappy neighbors complain that the new lights are really, really bright. I took my handy light meter to the lot to measure light levels. And yes, the light in that parking lot is way brighter than it needs to be, and the light across the alley, onto Monroe Street houses, is about three times as much as the recommended maximum onto residential windows.

The Home management is working on reducing these light levels, and the light may already be significantly reduced, as I write this newsletter.

The **Taquitos Nacional** shop opened at 3213 Mount Pleasant Street on November 18, and seems to be a great success.

All of Mount Pleasant south of Oak Street is a historic district, with troublesome regulations that try to force our houses to look just as they did many decades ago. The insistence that all "alterations" be hidden from street view has impaired modern efforts at energy conservation and renewable-energy production. People weren't thinking of solar panels in 1985, when the District's preservation law was written.

Nonetheless, Mount Pleasant has a remarkable number of **solar panel installations**, however compromised in performance by the not-visible-from-the-street mandate. The Office of Planning (of which historic preservation is a part) has issued a new draft volume of Sustainability Guidelines for Older and Historic Buildings, which may provide a little more flexibility. Solar panels are still, ideally, hidden from public view, but if visible, "Use low-profile panels set coplanar and flush with the roof, and panel and panel frames that match the color of the surrounding roof. The use of a solar skin or solar shingles that match the texture and appearance of the roof is encouraged".

I suppose that's an improvement. Let's see how flexible the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) is in judging a match to "the texture and appearance of the roof". And "coplanar and flush with the roof" is definitely not ideal for solar panels, which work best tilted to look at the sun, not the overhead sky.

Remarkable in this new book is the illustration showing solar energy installations in Mount Pleasant, from Lamont Street to Hobart. More than 50 such installations are shown. So I guess historic preservation hasn't been a great impediment.

The best way to monitor developments in the neighborhood is to **sign up to NextDoor.com** on the internet. It's wonderful for finding lost pets, and matching found pets with their humans. We use it for ANC announcements, and for dialog with the public about neighborhood issues. Most posters follow the "disagree without being disagreeable" rule, though of course there's the small population of those who believe that "an ounce of insult is worth a pound of logic". The internet is notorious for nasty discussions, but NextDoor has fairly few.

Last week, as I was vacuuming up leaves from the steps behind our house leading up from the alley, I found someone's card wallet, complete with credit cards, driver's license, and Federal ID. An internet search didn't help me locate the owner, who was not a DC resident. So I posted the find on NextDoor. Evidently somebody who knew the owner saw the post, told the young man about it, gave him my contact information, and he came to collect his property. A useful service, for sure!

The poor guy had been the victim of a nighttime robbery on Adams Mill Road, the block between Kenyon and Walbridge. Two youths hid in one of the stairwells along the sidewalk, and took him by surprise from behind, as his attention was focused on his smartphone.

The next meeting of the ANC will be on Tuesday, December 17, 7:00 pm, at the Mount Pleasant Library.