

Jack's May report

At the April meeting, the ANC passed no resolutions. Half an hour was spent on Public Discussion; another half hour for presentations, mostly by Polly Donaldson, Director of Housing and Community Development; a quarter hour on routine ANC matters; half an hour on Stuart Karaffa's Comprehensive Plan resolution. And then it was 8:45 pm, at which time we must halt the meeting and set about disassembling the PA and video systems, to be clear of the Library by their 9 pm closing time.

Until October, 2013, this ANC met at La Casa Community Center, and our meetings could go on as long and late as we wanted. With the move to the Library (over “no” votes from Yasmin and me), we were promised that the Library “will allow ANC1D to extend the closing time by 1 hour if required”. Well, no, the Library won't do that, that was a misunderstanding. The Library closes at 9 sharp, and we are expected to be gone by that time.

There were four new resolutions on the April agenda, awaiting ANC action; none could be considered, due to that 8:45 compulsory stop time. Residents attending our meetings have to be aware that we don't have time to permit public participation in our discussions. Back at La Casa, we could allow plenty of audience participation, and let the meetings run as late as needed. But at the Library, no.

On April 6 we were informed that a DDOT contractor is starting work on **replacing the streetlights along Mount Pleasant Street**, from Park Road to Harvard Street. This is a longstanding request for the industrial-type “cobra” streetlights to be replaced with Washington Uprights and Pendants, appropriate for a historic district.

This notice was greeted with joy by residents who wanted the historic streetlights. But there's a problem: the new streetlights will feature LED lamps, instead of the HPS (high pressure sodium) lamps that we're accustomed to. The LEDs offer high energy efficiency and long service lifetime, “persuasive” advantages, as I noted in last month's newsletter. But the LEDs produce *blue-white light*, not the yellow-orange of the HPS lamps. Many people find the white light from LED streetlights to be “cold” and harsh, in comparison to the “warm”, yellow-orange light of the HPS lights.

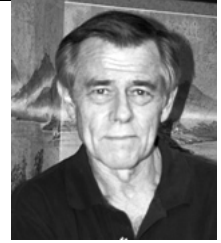
Responding to complaints about the color of LED streetlights, modified versions of the lamps have been developed that have less blue. These LED lamps are characterized by a temperature. The first-generation LED lamps, very blue, are 5000 K types (as are those in our alleys, which elicited some complaint when they were installed). The phosphor in LED lamps (precisely as in fluorescents) can be changed to shift the spectrum to less blue and more red. It seems that so-called 3000 K LED lamps are now considered acceptable – still white light, to be sure, but not so harsh as the blue-white from the 5000 K LEDs.

If the lamps for the Mount Pleasant Street streetlights were 3000 K types, I think there would be little argument. But DDOT has not yet “certified” 3000 K LEDs, and intends to use 4000 K LEDs – not as blue as the 5000 K alley units, but

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not fully shifted towards the color that today is widely accepted.

Well, will 4000 K lamps be tolerable, given that this will be on our commercial strip, not out among the row houses? That's hard to say, having seen none.

On May 3, Councilmember Mary Cheh held a hearing on the topic, worrying about popular resistance to the LED streetlights being installed around the city. DDOT Director Leif Dormsjo showed that most cities are preferring the 3000 K lamps, some even insisting on 2700 K.

I objected strenuously at that meeting to the decision to use 4000 K lamps here, arguing that we would be committed to the use of these lamps, without any assurance that the color will be tolerable. Yes, Mount Pleasant Street is primarily commercial, but it's residential, too, and it's part of the historic district. I am certain that there will be vociferous complaint about the light from these LED lamps, and I can't advise the ANC to endorse their installation.

Director Dormsjo is now investigating the possibility of getting 3000 K lamps, instead of the 4000 K units, in the Mount Pleasant Street streetlights. We should hear back from him before the May 23 ANC meeting.

There was some discussion at the April ANC meeting of Stuart Karaffa's **Comprehensive Plan resolution**. Stuart wants the ANC to sign a letter stating “priorities” for possible modifications to the District's Plan. This letter is intended to advise the Office of Planning as it considers, later this year, amendments to the District's Comprehensive Plan.

The letter, composed primarily by Greater Greater Washington, calls for relaxing zoning restrictions to bring about a housing boom in the District, hoping for so much housing being built that prices drop and housing becomes, through market forces, “affordable”. Excerpts:

“When rezoning or granting significant zoning relief, the District should affirm through the Comprehensive Plan that affordable housing (in addition to any underlying requirement) is *the highest priority benefit*” – i.e., superseding any quality-of-life considerations.

“[T]he District should encourage the success of neighborhood commercial corridors and locally owned businesses, especially in disadvantaged communities. This includes *increased housing density* that supports businesses”. Applicable to Mount Pleasant, this calls for increasing housing density, presumably by changing the zoning restrictions that currently limit housing density here.

“[T]he District should affirm that the Zoning Commission has the purview to allow *increased density* for Planned Unit Developments that supersedes the levels in the Comprehensive Plan’s maps” – that is, permit any density limits written into the Plan to be exceeded.

Well, we're all sympathetic to the goal of affordable housing, surely. But what does “increased density” mean to our row-house neighborhood? How does one achieve “increased density” here?

Plainly the goal of this letter is more dwelling units on every lot. Our zoning currently specifies that there must be at least 900 square feet of lot area per dwelling unit, a provision intended specifically to limit density in a row-house neighborhood. This “priorities letter” implies that that should be changed, to put more families onto each row-house lot. We are already seeing row houses being turned into three- and four-unit apartment houses, where the lot size permits. This would result in more such conversions, on smaller lots.

Given the restrictions of historic district regulation, our row houses cannot be made taller, and are limited in rearward extent by the zoning limit of 60% lot coverage. The zoning regulations prevent our row-house areas from becoming all house and no yard space. The “priorities” of this letter could also result in an increase of the maximum lot coverage, so our houses could be expanded out the back, adding more dwelling units per lot, at the expense of open space.

My sense of Mount Pleasant is that this is not something that residents want. “Higher density” may win favor from modern urban engineers who want to see compact, high-density cities, where everything one could want is within walking distance, and little land is set aside for yards and gardens and open space. Do residents of Mount Pleasant want to see the neighborhood transformed into a high-density neighborhood, more like Manhattan than the spacious, leafy neighborhood we know? I think not.

It should be no surprise that this letter of priorities is being endorsed not just by affordable-housing advocates, but by *developers* – “strange bedfellows”, a business-oriented website calls them. The “priorities” call for a building boom, so of course developers are enthusiastic about it. That should worry us residents.

I consider this list of Comprehensive Plan priorities to be profoundly contrary to what residents of Mount Pleasant want, and I will continue to oppose our signing up to it.

I noted in my April newsletter that rather ugly **bench dividers** had appeared on April 14 on the benches in Lamont Park, the purpose being to prevent anyone from lying down on the bench. Nobody knew who put them there. Neighborhood reaction expressed on Nextdoor Mount Pleasant was overwhelmingly negative, 15 or 20 posters calling for these dividers to be removed, and not one poster proposing that they stay.

I had planned a resolution for the April 25 ANC meeting calling for these dividers to be removed, but that turned out to be unnecessary, as they disappeared on the 24th. “The Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) would like to

thank the community for bringing this to our attention. The installation of the middle dividers was not authorized by the District government. Therefore, at DPR’s request, the Department of General Services (DGS) removed the dividers earlier this week.”

So, who put them onto the benches? I found myself the object of hostile words from a member of the Mount Pleasant business community, who complained about drunks sleeping on the benches, and blamed “the ANC” for the removal of the reclining-prevention dividers. So I surmise that business owners brought about the dividers, and now they want the ANC to get them back.

Burglaries are seldom “closed by arrest”; nationwide, just one in ten is. But an arrest of a 16-year-old cleared three February burglaries here, one on Kenyon, one on Lamont, and one on 18th Street. The juvenile is from northeast DC, so why was he “working” our neighborhood? He must have had some connection to the area. Basement windows seem to have been the favored means of entry.

Does our neighborhood suffer an exceptional number of burglaries? I think not. District-wide, in 2016, the per-capita average was 3.15 burglaries per 1000 residents; in Mount Pleasant, the rate was half that. But the 2016 burglary count here seems to have been unusually low, and the 2017 count will likely be twice the 2016 number, a return to our average over recent years. So Mount Pleasant's burglary rate appears to be close to the average for the District.

As Lieutenant Micah Pate cautioned residents at the April PSA meeting: this is not an unsafe neighborhood, but don't be careless. Don't make it easy for a burglar to get into your house. Lock your doors, latch your windows shut.

I insist that the ANC is to deal with neighborhood issues, not citywide matters. We know our neighborhood, and can speak with authority on neighborhood matters; but for citywide issues, we're neither elected nor qualified to speak with any authority. Nonetheless, some commissioners want the ANC to take positions on citywide issues, such as the DC budget.

In 2011, a **Tax Revision Commission** (TRC) was established by the Council, to propose recommendations to “*improve fairness, broaden the tax base, increase the District’s competitiveness, encourage business and employment growth, and promote simplification*”. The TRC advised tax reductions aimed primarily at lower-income residents, and reductions in business taxes to make the District competitive with suburbs in attracting employers. The Council put those reductions in the District Code, making them mandatory.

One ANC resolution calls for us to sign a letter telling the Council to “postpone” these tax reductions, arguing that the funds are needed now. But the tax reductions, which amount to just one-half of one percent of the DC local revenues, are important components of the TRC advice. I think that's too little to warrant putting off the TRC recommendations, even for one year. Besides, next year we would surely be going through exactly the same debate.

The next meeting of the ANC will be on Tuesday, May 23, 7:00 pm, at the Mount Pleasant Library.