

## Jack's October/November report

At the September ANC1D business meeting, the ANC did the following:

- Supported the expansion of Ellē Restaurant into what was the Old School Hardware shop;
- Supported the effort by the resident-owners of the Renaissance (3060 16th Street) to get historic preservation approval of the removal of some of the decorative balconies on the building;
- Advised approval by the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) of a garage-roof deck and fencing behind 1656 Hobart Street;
- Advised approval by the HPRB of plans to renovate 3118 Mount Pleasant Street.

At the October business meeting, the ANC approved a grant of \$10,000 to Food for All DC, for food aid to Mount Pleasant families affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

I didn't manage to get an **October newsletter** out. In August, Canada lifted its ban on US visitors for “nonessential” travel, allowing us to visit our cabin in northern Ontario for the first time in almost two years. So we went there in August, and again in October, about half the month each time. I don't do a newsletter in August, so no change there. But two weeks away in October left not enough time for that newsletter. So here it is, merged with November!

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The September ANC1D meeting illustrates the importance of **historic preservation matters** here. We on the ANC try to keep the historic preservation enforcers reasonable. We want to prevent incongruous development, certainly, but to residents flexibility in modifications to their own homes. Call it “historic preservation light”. (Boston has such a thing, called “historic conservation district”. DC does not.) Strict preservation – don't change anything, make everything look just as it did 75 years ago – is not what the people of Mount Pleasant wanted, when historic district designation was imposed on us in 1986. Yes, I was here at the time.

The District's historic preservation law does not ban alterations, but requires that they be “compatible with the character of the historic district”. That's a pretty vague standard, generally interpreted strictly by the preservationists, while we on the ANC advocate a more flexible interpretation of what is “compatible”, and what is not. Unfortunately, the people empowered to make that judgment, on the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB), are committed preservationists, and it's not easy to persuade them to support the ANC's judgments.

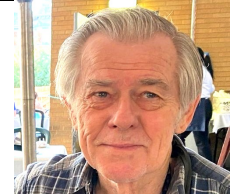
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We did succeed in one case. The ANC in September endorsed a Hobart resident's request for a **roof deck and perimeter fence** on an alley garage. The HPRB complained that these fences are ugly, and the HPO objected to fences around such decks in general, arguing that fences are supposed to stand on the ground, not on a garage roof. All too often, one sees “preservation” being used as an excuse for imposing esthetic sensibilities, even if not based on preservation.

## ANC 1D03 NEWSLETTER #217

Jack McKay, November 7, 2021

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The ANC observed that there are many such garage-roof decks and surrounding fences in Mount Pleasant, so one could hardly argue that this one would be “not compatible” with the styles of the historic district. The HPRB conceded the point and “*recommended approval of a permit*”. Score one for the ANC.

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As for the proposed renovation of **3118 Mount Pleasant Street** (the now-vacant site of Logan's Antiques), surely the neighborhood will benefit from a bit of renovation to this very plain row house shop. The developer is not going to tear the old building down and put up something modern, which is what historic preservation in Mount Pleasant does prevent. The HPRB “*approved the concept and delegated further review to staff*”, a step in adapting that structure to renewed, productive use.

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Then there was the matter of the **balconies on the Renaissance (Kenesaw) apartment** building, which I've mentioned before. This is a very difficult situation, because the building is indeed architecturally distinguished, reflecting a period, circa 1900, when 16th Street featured upscale apartment houses.

Today the building is owned by a residents' co-op, with some apartments sold as condos to obtain financial resources for building renovation. The balconies on the exterior of the building are not functional, but are merely decorations. Many of them are badly deteriorated, and the resident-owners of the building – many of them immigrants, of modest resources – cannot afford to repair and replace them all. So they're asking historic preservation for permission to remove some of the less-visible balconies, saving substantially over the cost of restoring them.

Many people agree that, given that this building has become affordable housing for many of our immigrant residents, we should allow some cost-saving flexibility. But the HPRB is allowed no flexibility in this matter. Its job is to declare whether proposed work is or is not “compatible with the character of the historic district”, period. They are not allowed to consider cost, nor community benefits, in their decisions. If it's not compatible, then the HPRB must say so, however sympathetic the board members may be to the residents.

And so, the HPRB had no choice but to recommend “*denial of the removal of 25 [balconies], as proposed, as incompatible with the purposes of the preservation law.*” The ANC supported the residents' application, but we knew that the HPRB could not.

This denial of historic preservation approval will be appealed to the so-called **Mayor's Agent**. Technically, the Mayor makes these permit decisions, the HPRB merely advising on "compatibility". The Mayor's Agent (currently Peter Byrne, Professor of Law at Georgetown University) makes the actual decisions, and he does have some flexibility under the historic preservation law. He can allow the permit, even for a project that fails the compatibility test, in order to allow a project of "special merit", including "social or other benefits having a high priority for community services".

The Mayor's Agent will hold a hearing on this matter on December 17. The ANC will be there, to argue that the benefits of affordable housing for some of Mount Pleasant's diverse population warrant allowing the cost-saving removal of some of the balconies. The members of this ANC are unanimously on the side of the residents, considering the well-being of our neighbors, and their ability to live in this increasingly expensive neighborhood, much more important than the cosmetics of some purely decorative balconies.

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The **2020 census numbers** are out, and here's what I find for Mount Pleasant today: 52% white non-Hispanic, 11% Black non-Hispanic, 29% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 15% "other". (Interpreting the census data is tricky, because of the many subdivisions under ethnicity, and category overlaps.) I am dismayed by the decline in Black population here, now down to about one-ninth of the total. Compare 1990, when Black residents were 36% of the neighborhood population.

For some 50 years, Mount Pleasant has featured diversity, everyone being welcome here, of whatever racial or ethnic background. In my opinion, everyone choosing to move into this neighborhood does so encouraged by the neighborhood's diversity, not despite it. People who are not comfortable with diversity don't choose to reside in Mount Pleasant.

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**Redistricting**, required to address the results of the 2020 census, is under way. At the moment, the ward boundaries are being adjusted to account for population changes.

The District Code requires that the eight wards have roughly equal populations. It happens that Ward One, with the current boundaries, is close to the ideal count of one-eighth of the District population, namely 86,193 residents, and so does not require any boundary adjustments.

However, other wards will have to change, and their changes could ripple through to our ward. Ward Six, in particular, has 22,000 too many residents, whereas Wards Seven and Eight (east of the Anacostia) have, together, 17,000 too few.

Will the changes in other ward boundaries, required to adjust their populations, result in changes in Ward One boundaries? That's possible, but I expect any such changes to be small, and to be confined to the east edge of the ward.

Once the ward boundaries are defined, attention will shift to ANC and SMD (single-member district) boundaries. Mount Pleasant's ANC will increase from five to six members. In fact, prior to the 2010 census, the Mount Pleasant ANC did consist of six commissioners, so this will be a restoration of the previous count.

**The left turn from northbound 16th Street onto Park Road** is a major entry route into Mount Pleasant. Prior to 2007, that turn had to be made by making a circuit of the little park in front of the Sacred Heart church. That traffic isolated the park, cutting it off from the church, and from events adjacent to the church. It also led to the construction of a bike-rack barrier to pedestrians across the 16th Street sidewalk at the Pine Street turn, because traffic turning right to make the left could do so at speed.

In short, DDOT degraded pedestrian travel, and use of the Sacred Heart park, and access into Mount Pleasant, in the interest of expediting 16th Street traffic to the suburbs. In 2007 we persuaded DDOT to permit the left turn directly off 16th, to better serve pedestrians and residents. DDOT also added a left-turn phase to the traffic light. This has served well for the past 14 years.

Unfortunately, due to the bus-only lanes now being implemented on 16th Street, that left turn off 16th has again been prohibited.

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A resolution proposed for the November ANC meeting calls for **changes on 17th Street** north of Park Road to favor pedestrian and bicyclist use. The resolution warns that "*removal of street parking, or removal of a direction of vehicular travel, may be necessary*" to accomplish the changes. In short, lots of curbside parking on 17th, from Park Road to Piney Branch Parkway, could be lost. Or 17th north of Newton could become one-way northbound, as it is now south of Newton.

I understand the desire for better sidewalks and accommodations for bicyclists, but there are many Mount Pleasant residents who need to own cars and who do not have off-street parking. I think we should proceed very cautiously with resolutions that entail substantial losses in curbside parking. So I will vote against this resolution.

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Work on **the park at 1900 Lamont** should begin on November 8. It's possible that the improvements will benefit me financially, as my house abuts the park. For that reason, I've had to carefully avoid any actions favoring the improvements, as that would be a clear conflict of interest. Last April, for example, the ANC passed a resolution in support of the improvements. After instinctively voting in favor of the resolution, I quickly rescinded my vote, and abstained instead.

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We're off **Daylight Saving Time** now, so sunset is coming at 5 pm, and will continue to come even earlier until late December. The evening rush hour now comes in darkness, and drivers and pedestrians alike will have to be especially cautious. I've observed that pedestrians often overestimate their own visibility to motorists. We mustn't assume that, because we can see the car, the driver of the car can see us.

Daylight Saving Time will resume on March 13, 2022.

**The November meeting of the ANC will take place at 7 pm, November 16. Due to the pandemic, it will have to be a "virtual" meeting, accessible only via the internet, using Zoom software. See the ANC1D website, [anc1d.org](http://anc1d.org), for details.**