

Jack's September report

At the July meeting, the ANC did the following:

- Passed, 4 to 0 (Paul Karrer absent) a resolution condemning ICE activities and advising increased funding for the Immigrant Justice Legal Services Grant Program (Stuart Karaffa's resolution);
- Rejected the proposal for increased security measures at the Zoo (Stuart);
- Recommended amendment of the Door Repair and Replacement Guidelines of the Historic Preservation Office (HPO) (Jon Stewart's resolution);
- Advised the HPO that the Draft Sustainability Guide of Existing and Historic Properties is "not yet suitable for adoption" (Jon);
- Requested an explanation from the HPO of its role in decisions concerning overhead signs for the 16th Street bus lane project (Jon);
- Advised HPRB approval of an electrical utility cabinet at 1900 Lamont Street (Jack).

There was **no August newsletter**, of course – DC practically shuts down for that notoriously hot and humid month. OK, now it's September, and time to get back to work!

On August 6, our **brand-new Bancroft Elementary** opened its doors. Later that month I toured the new buildings, and all I can say is, wow! It's beautiful, and spacious, and impressive, a far cry from our grimy old Bancroft. For years, many Mount Pleasant parents declined to send their children to Bancroft, preferring west-of-the-Park schools like Eaton. Well, no more, I think. Now Bancroft's virtually a magnet school, attracting children from well outside the neighborhood, known as an excellent elementary school featuring completely bilingual education.

Some nearby residents have asked for tours, especially those who live next door and have had to put up with two years of construction activity. The principal, Mr. Arthur Mola, is receptive to the idea, but right now they're still really busy with the new school year and their new buildings, some of which continue to need finishing work.

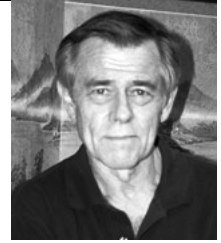
The **apartment house at 1900 Lamont** wants to "heavy up" its electrical service, which probably isn't much better than it was at the time of its construction, in 1923. As one resident posted, they "will be able to run microwaves and air conditioners at the same time!"

But the heavier electrical service required a Pepco cable through the park, then under the walkway to the window well at the alley end of the building, and finally into a large cabinet, 7.5 feet tall, along the wall. I thought that location was barely visible to begin with, and the view of the building from the alley is hardly an architectural treasure. But the Historic Preservation Office (HPO) objected, the policy being to hide all such electrical fixtures from sight. As is commonly the case, in my opinion, these historic preservation demands are more about architectural esthetics than about preservation. Surely there was electrical service in Mount Pleasant in 1923! But the cabinet would be a plain, utilitarian thing, and the HPO insisted that it be put indoors, out of sight.

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At the July ANC meeting, the architect presented his arguments that it was not possible to put the cabinet indoors. We instructed him that, if he was to get HPRB approval, he had to have iron-clad reasons to reject proposals for putting this cabinet indoors. That was good advice: the HPRB grilled the poor guy at length, insisting on proof that it was really not possible to hide the cabinet indoors. In the end, they conceded, reluctantly, and approved outside installation, but with half a page of specific requirements (e.g., paint the cabinet "to roughly match that of the building's base").

I heard recently from a neighbor who in installing **solar panels**, and is dismayed to be told by the HPO to mount the panels flat on a deck, rather than tilted to face the sun, to hide the panels from street view. You have to do it, I told him. In this historic district, one is fortunate to be allowed to install solar panels at all.

Many times I've argued that, when Mount Pleasant became designated "historic" (1986), the idea was only to fend off incongruous development that clashed with the traditional design of the neighborhood. But in practice, historic preservation amounts to handcuffs on all of us residents, prohibiting even minor changes to the appearance of our homes.

Commissioner Jon Stewart's resolution about "decisions concerning overhead signs for the 16th Street bus lane project" has to do with the DDOT proposal to **expedite bus transit on 16th Street with rush-hour bus-only lanes** (anticipated to come into being by 2020).

The 16th Street bus-only lane was planned to run from Arkansas Avenue to U Street. In order to have such a lane, without devastating consequences for automobile traffic, one lane of 16th Street would be made "reversible", as is done on Connecticut Avenue.

Traffic engineers were especially concerned about the 16th Street intersection with Harvard Street and Mount Pleasant Street, where the complexity of the intersection could be dangerously confusing with the reversible lane. DDOT proposed overhead lane signal lights to make the lane assignments through the intersection clear.

But historic preservationists objected, asserting that the overhead signal lights were not appropriate for this "historic" route to the White House. This is not due to Mount Pleasant being a designated Historic District, but is about historic preservation in the District in general. DDOT insisted that the overhead signals were essential for safety. Prevented from

having such signals, DDOT has cut back the bus-only lane concept, the lane to end at Irving Street, instead of U.

It's an illustration of the way that historic preservation confounds many efforts to improve living in DC, from roof-top solar panels to increased electrical service to expedited urban transit. Why are overhead lane signals such a historic preservation problem? At what point should modern-day urban needs supersede the esthetic concerns of historic preservationists? Would a couple of overhead signal lights to indicate a reversible lane really be such a blot on the landscape? Perhaps traffic on 16th Street should be limited to historically correct horse-drawn carriages.

I very frequently disagree with the Greater Greater Washington blog (the owner of that blog has me permanently black-balled), but in this case they have a point: *"historic preservation trumps all other considerations in DC"* (July 13, 2018).

Homicides are a terrible problem in the District, but rare here. In September, the first in Mount Pleasant in two years took place, at a 16th Street apartment house. As is most frequently the case these days, the homicide did not take place as an element of committing a crime, e.g., robbery, against an innocent victim, but was simply an argument between two men, culminating in personal violence.

Tragic as this is for the individuals involved, this violence does not represent a threat to the public at large, and does not imply that Mount Pleasant is a dangerous neighborhood.

On August 22 **the owner of Don Juan's Restaurant, Rosa Ruiz Canales**, was found dead, in her home. She was just 48, and was much liked in the neighborhood by patrons of the restaurant. Years ago she worked for the restaurant, then purchased it in 1992, along with her husband, Alberto Ferrufino. Rosa leaves her husband and four sons. They, and the neighborhood, will miss her dearly.

Several **historic preservation issues** are upcoming: 1866 Monroe, 1833 Lamont, 3150 17th, 3143 19th, 2044 Pierce Mill. These will be taken up by the ANC when they appear on the HPRB monthly agenda. That's so we'll have the Historic Preservation Office staff report in hand when we consider an application.

My approach to historic preservation is to respect its valid objectives while resisting the most aggressive preservationist demands. Yes, we want to fend off modern construction by developers, contrary to the traditional style of the neighborhood. But we do not, I think, want homeowners to be locked forever in the current appearance of their homes, prevented from making even modest changes needed to provide for their families. Our houses are places for families to live in, not historic museum pieces for display to passers-by.

An example of this came up in the June ANC meeting, concerning a window replacement at 1627 Monroe. The homeowner had, unfortunately, had the window installed before the historic preservation permit was issued, because the window company installers had assured him that the permit was in hand, "back at the office". Well, no, it wasn't.

But aside from that (the window contractor appeared at the HPRB hearing to admit responsibility), the replacement

window was hardly distinguishable from the original window. Mostly, it was a little bit larger, and who doesn't want a bit more sunlight in the living room?

The HPRB accepted the ANC's request that the no-permit installation be overlooked, and the window replacement considered on its own merits. Well: "The Board found that the alteration is incompatible with the character of this house, its consistently fenestrated row, and with the historic district in general." So the homeowner is being told to remove his brand-new window and – do what? Re-install the original?

I don't believe that Mount Pleasant wanted such strict regulation when historic district designation was considered in 1985, and I don't believe it's what Mount Pleasant residents want now. But we've got it, and ANC "advice" seldom prevails at the HPRB.

The intersection of Park Road, Klinge Road, and Walbridge Place has long been troublesome. A key problem is that westbound traffic on Park Road makes a turn here, and the cars appear around that corner rather abruptly, being concealed by poles and vegetation, until they round that bend. This is very intimidating, for residents attempting to access their parked cars, and for pedestrians taking the crosswalk across Park Road to the Klinge side of the intersection.

We've asked for changes to that intersection to enhance visibility, especially of pedestrians about to cross in the crosswalk. Our advice includes a "bumpout" of the curb so that the pedestrians can wait a few feet out from the present curb, where they will readily be visible to Park Road motorists.

DDOT has proposed a temporary measure, something that can be done immediately, in conjunction with the imminent repaving of that block of Park Road. They offer posts in the street to create the bulbout, pushing the traffic lane out away from the curb, and allowing pedestrians to be better seen by westbound drivers.

Meeting with DDOT on September 6, Jon Stewart and I asked for something more substantial than yellow posts to define this temporary bulbout, so DDOT is considering temporary curbing to make a more substantial lane boundary.

As part of the proposal to enhance safety along this block, DDOT is proposing that **Pierce Mill Road** be reconfigured to bring exiting traffic out to Park Road, with a Stop sign at the merging point. Fine, if this were an ordinary road carrying through traffic. But it's just a one-block dead end, and Pierce Mill Road residents don't need a stop sign to tell them to stop and look before merging onto Park Road. The stop sign would cost several precious parking spots, for no evident improvement in safety. I'm fighting this.

How to **slow traffic entering Mount Pleasant** from Rock Creek Park? I asked DDOT for a median island at the entrance, at the bottom of this hill, so that incoming drivers will encounter a big "Entering Mount Pleasant, Slow Down" sign. DDOT is considering the possibility. The visual obstacle in the middle of Park Road could slow traffic in both directions.

The next meeting of the ANC will be on Tuesday, September 25, 7:00 pm, at the Mount Pleasant Library.