

April report to constituents

Here is news of the **April 3 and 11 ANC meetings**, and other happenings in Mount Pleasant. At the April 3 meeting only three commissioners appeared, so we had to schedule a special meeting to handle the business of the month. (We used the time at the April 3 meeting for a public forum on, mainly, historic preservation.) At the April 11 meeting, the ANC:

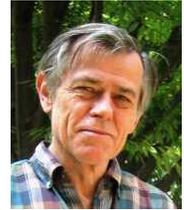
- Advised DDOT Public Space to rescind its recent order to the Bestway to clear out of the area adjacent to 17th Street. We and Councilmember Graham have been working for many months for a solution to the Bestway/Don Juan's trash storage problem, and one seems to be at hand, but certain bureaucrats at DDOT continue to obstruct this compromise solution.
- Advised Mayor Fenty to reappoint Mr. Peter Feather as the Ward One member of the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board upon the expiration of his term on May 7. Mr. Feather, an Adams Morgan resident, has been even-handed and fair on the ABC Board.
- Advised the Historic Preservation Review Board to allow the newly installed windows at 2017 Rosemount Avenue to stay. The residents, young and new to the neighborhood, didn't know that permits are required for window replacement in historic districts, and are now in a heap of trouble. We think their new windows look just fine, and there's no public justification for forcing these residents to absorb a huge cost in removing brand-new windows and replacing them with restorations or replicas of the originals. (My resolution.)
- Advised the District Council to confirm the nomination of Geoffrey Griffis to the DC Zoning Commission.
- Advised Mayor Fenty to seek out a new chairperson for the Historic Preservation Review Board, upon the expiration of Tersh Boasberg's term on July 1. This is not to criticize Tersh, but to suggest that this is an opportune time for reform of historic preservation regulation in the District.
- Endorsed Councilmember Graham's efforts to have the aggressive tactics of recent "Fight Back" efforts scaled back. No one wants the "Fight Backs" terminated, but these cleanup efforts should be constructive and educational, as in the past, and not punitive, as they have become. (My resolution.)

All these resolutions passed by 5 to 0 votes (Commissioner Jane Zara absent).

ANC 1D03 NEWSLETTER #56

Jack McKay, April 23, 2007

Jack McKay
3200 19th St, Tel. 462-8692
jack.mckay@verizon.net
<http://DCJack.org>



The **next ANC meeting** is on Tuesday, May 1, 7:00 pm, La Casa Community Center, 3166 Mt Pleasant Street. For an agenda, see anc1d.org.

Lately a young couple on Rosemount Avenue, just six months in Mount Pleasant, have been ordered by the Historic Preservation Office (HPO) to rip out their **brand-new replacement windows** and front door and spend thousands of dollars for "historically correct" replacements. The HPO complains that the new windows don't look exactly like the original (1936) windows, and that the front door is "not compatible with a Tudor Revival rowhouse". These newcomers didn't know that permits were required for such work in historic districts, but this is no excuse. "[A]n applicant's voluntary conduct which blatantly ignores historic preservation laws and regulations cannot be condoned," they write, severely.

What is more important here: the letter of the law, or the esthetics of the replacement windows? As one neighbor wrote, "I found it hard to pick out which house was at fault, [because] they had matched the style and character [of the originals] pretty well." Another wrote that I should "take pictures of the front of their house and of the fronts of others and present them to the DC Historic Preservation Office. See if these 'experts' can tell the difference. Taking our good looking windows is crazy." The ANC not only agreed that the new windows look just fine, and ought to be allowed to stay, but made me delete from my resolution an offer by the homeowners to change the frame color to better match the brick.

This is more than a matter of these two homeowners and their windows: it's about making the Historic Preservation Office be more flexible, and more respectful of the wishes of the residents of Mount Pleasant, in their enforcement of the regulations here, as the chair of the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB), Tersh Boasberg, has promised. It seems to me that Mount Pleasant wanted historic district designation only to fend off ugly development, not to impose rigid historical authenticity on every modest row-house dwelling. This is a living neighborhood, not a national monument, and it shouldn't be necessary for every detail of one's house to look exactly as it did when the house was built. The law in fact says explicitly that "compatibility does not require matching or copying of attributes". All that matters is that the result of one's alterations have "characteristics that allow for a harmonious relationship". In short, if it looks okay, then, by law, it is okay, and I believe that's what Mount Pleasant residents want from historic district regulation.

We'll see, in an HPRB hearing in May, just how flexible they will be.

“Fight Back” operations are concerted assaults on problem areas by multiple city agencies “to tackle stubborn crime and disorder problems in specific neighborhoods”. Mount Pleasant, with the lowest crime rate in the District east of Rock Creek Park, hardly qualifies, despite our occasional problems. Worse, under leadership that changed with the incoming Fenty administration, these “Fight Backs” have suddenly become commando assaults on neighborhood businesses. A recent effort in Shaw appeared to be harassment of immigrant-entrepreneur businesses, upsetting the owners and their customers.

On March 20, the day before the “Fight Back” here, Councilmember Graham publicly disassociated himself from these operations, complaining about the “random and exhaustive inspections that the ‘Fight Backs’ are now implementing”. I thought this was a courageous move by the Councilmember, because it would be, and was, viewed by some as failing to support enforcement of the laws. I had already been dismayed by statements by some of the “Fight Back” people in Columbia Heights boasting about the heavy fines they had imposed on businesses, as if the object of the exercise was harsh punishment, not cleaning up neighborhood problems.

Responsible for this escalation was Mayor Fenty’s new head of the Office of Neighborhood Services, Merrit Drucker, who resigned a week after Graham’s criticism. In my dealings with Merrit, I perceived a man with an unrealistic notion of what our neighborhoods should look like, and an unfortunate readiness to accomplish his goals with punitive fines. He wanted Mount Pleasant to look as spiffy-clean as Chevy Chase, and was ready to hammer any resident or business owner who didn’t submit to his direction.

The matter was moot, because of Merrit’s resignation, but the Councilmember was grateful for our support.

Since May, 2006 – almost a full year – we’ve been promised a full-scale **study of traffic** in Mount Pleasant, which we want in order to rationalize the traffic patterns here, and perhaps gain some control over the traffic that rushes across our neighborhood. DDOT had trouble identifying a contractor to do the job. Last October they finally had two candidates, but DDOT felt that these companies would need some assistance in outreach to the neighborhood, in particular to our Latino community. I recommended Ingleside Terrace resident Lillian Perdomo’s Multicultural Community Services. Still, we wait, while the bureaucratic wheels slowly turn. It seems now to be close, as DDOT has called us for a meeting to discuss this task.

That burglary wave is over, thanks to effective work by the Metropolitan Police, and car theft and break-ins are down from the “normal” levels. **Robberies were up in March**, nine according to my count, versus the normal of three or four in a month. As is always the case, almost all of these robberies – eight of the nine – occurred east of 17th Street. Only one, a purse snatch at 18th and Lamont, took place west of 17th.

Rosemount Avenue now has sidewalks on both sides of the street, where before there was sidewalk only on the east side. This has reduced the width of the roadbed to the standard width in Mount Pleasant, 32 feet. As everyone here knows, this allows parking on both sides, and for cars to pass each other on the street, albeit cautiously. (This tends to keep speeds down.)

But this change (which came as a surprise to everyone, including me and the ANC) upset a number of residents, who complain that morning traffic into the Rosemount Center will be confounded by the narrower street. That could be so, as I’ve noticed that parents bringing their children to the Center are unskilled at handling their cars on our narrow streets. That problem can be dealt with, if necessary, by prohibiting parking on one side of the street, on school days only, during school hours only, as is done in front of Bancroft Elementary.

Some residents are unhappy that I wasn’t willing to put up a big fight to have the District rip out the newly constructed curb and sidewalk, and build a narrower sidewalk, so that residents could park there at all hours, not just overnight. Sorry, but I thought it unreasonable to spend DC taxpayer’s money to widen this road simply so that residents could park there during the day, and I’m certain that the ANC would have agreed with that. Here on the “west end” of Mount Pleasant, there’s plenty of parking available during the day. Our parking problem comes in the evening, when residents come home from work.

The residents argued the point themselves, quite forcefully. But DDOT declined to take out their new sidewalk and curb, so Rosemount Avenue is now 32 feet wide, just as in the rest of Mount Pleasant.

The house at 3222 19th Street has been a wreck for years. Lately the DCRA has hired a contractor to put a roof on it, at our insistence, because the rainwater penetration was no doubt causing damage to the adjacent house in the row, as well as destroying the interior of 3222. The homeowner doesn’t live in the house (he did, despite its appalling physical state, for some years), and the squatters who moved in for a while have been forcibly removed.

In the windstorm of April 16, what was a sleeping porch on the back of the house collapsed, and now lies in a heap in the back yard. A fleet of Fire Department vehicles arrived upon a neighbor’s call, perhaps fearing that the entire house was going to come crashing down.

This house is one of several neighborhood examples of “demolition by neglect”, as irresponsible owners let their houses decay and rot. The historic preservation law gives the Historic Preservation bureaucracy legal authority to prevent this, but they don’t. The HPO will mercilessly harass the constructive homeowner who tries to improve his property with new windows or doors or nice flagstones for a front walk, but will do nothing about the grossly negligent homeowner who lets his house crumble to an ugly ruin.