

February report to constituents

Here is news of the **February 6 ANC meeting**, and other happenings in Mount Pleasant. At this meeting, the ANC:

- Advised the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board to approve the application by Don Juan's Restaurant for an entertainment endorsement to their liquor license.
- Agreed to suggest to Mount Pleasant restaurant owners that, in their liquor license renewal applications (due in March), they specify their intent to "rewrite their voluntary agreements".

The current controversy over historic preservation regulations in Mount Pleasant brought many residents to the meeting, as well as Mount Pleasant's Historic Preservation inspector, and two members of the Historic Preservation Review Board. Most of the meeting was devoted to this discussion. Two resolutions were brought up concerning historic preservation, but these were tabled until the March meeting, because commissioners want to learn more about the experience of Mount Pleasant residents in the 20 years since this was designated a historic district. A committee was established for this investigation, led by new commissioner Jane Zara. This committee met on February 19 for preliminary discussions of historic preservation in Mount Pleasant. The ANC will sponsor a public forum on the topic, probably on March 26.

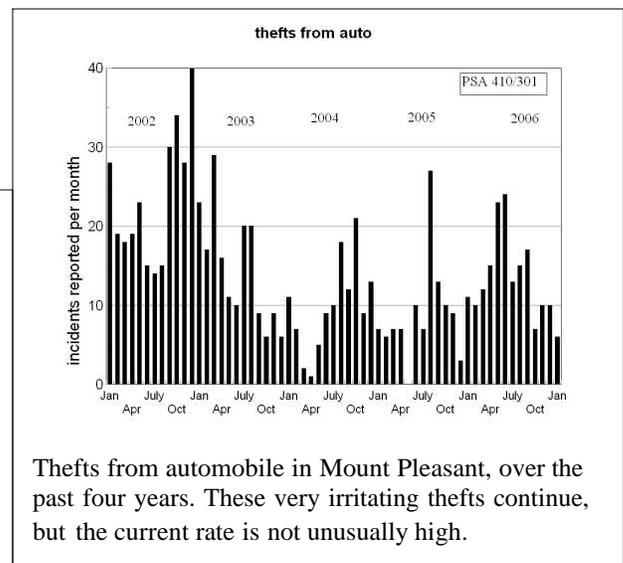
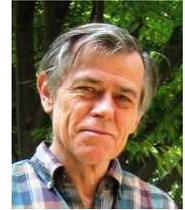
There have been several recent reports of **thefts from auto** in Mount Pleasant, one right next to my garage in the alley between 19th Street and Walbridge Place. The perps smashed my neighbor's car window, and found nothing worth stealing, thus costing her a good deal of time and money for nothing. This is aggravating, to say the least.

But there's no sign of any particular increase in these irritating acts. As the chart shows, the number of incidents lately is well below what we've suffered through in the past. For what it's worth, the per-resident rate of automobile break-ins is higher in Adams Morgan and Columbia Heights than it is here.

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Jack McKay, February 27, 2007

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Recently DDOT has been **repaving Rosemount Avenue**, to repair the damage done by water line work and other excavation jobs. Much to everyone's surprise, that repaving included building a brand new sidewalk along the west side of the street. DDOT decided that, as long as they were repaving the street, they should rebuild the street to its original plans, which include this sidewalk.

The first I heard of the sidewalk was in an e-mail from a resident on February 21, claiming that it "will essentially take away all of the parking spaces in front of the [Rosemount] center. If parking were to be allowed, no fire trucks, no ambulances, no delivery trucks, trash trucks, mail trucks or even cars would be able to negotiate the entrance to the street or the Rosemount Center." Well, no, those scary claims just aren't so. Rosemount Avenue is a standard 50-foot right-of-way, of which 10 feet on either side is for sidewalk, tree box, and curb, and the remaining 30 feet is the normal curb-to-curb pavement width (see, e.g., 19th Street, Lamont Street, or pretty much any other residential street in the area). Parked cars take up about 7 feet, so cars parked on both sides leave a 16-foot clear passageway. This is sufficient for two cars to pass by each other side by side, carefully, and it's ample for ambulances, fire engines, and trash trucks to get through.

There are concerns about traffic to and from the Rosemount Center, on a block that is not a through street. But because parents' cars can still pass side by side on the narrowed street, as they did before, the reduced width may be less troublesome than feared. The construction is not yet complete, and the road is not yet 30 feet wide, so traffic problems seen now may cease when the work is finished. One possibility, if traffic problems continue, is to prohibit parking on the west side of the road, during school hours only, as is done on Newton Street in front of Bancroft Elementary.

It would certainly be better if DDOT would tell us about such plans before the work is under way, so that we would not discover these things only when concrete was being poured. For better or worse, it's too late now to undo this sidewalk, and I'm trying to make the best of a difficult situation.

The Walbridge Place historic preservation dispute has led the ANC to a wide-ranging review of **historic district designation** in Mount Pleasant. Has historic district designation, imposed in 1987, been a good thing for the people of Mount Pleasant? What problems have residents encountered in dealing with historic preservation regulations? If called upon today to vote for or against historic district designation, how would residents vote?

It seems to me that there are several problems in the manner in which historic preservation has been implemented in the District:

1. The historic preservation rules are vague and subjective. The law says that “alterations of existing structures [and] new construction and subdivision of lots in an historic district [must be] compatible with the character of the historic district”. Well, what is “compatible”, and what is not? To some, this means merely esthetically pleasing, and blending reasonably with the neighborhood. To others, “compatible” means “never change anything from its original appearance”, as if Mount Pleasant were historic Williamsburg, not a living neighborhood but a static museum piece. You may not know whether your design is “compatible” or not until the Historic Preservation Office passes judgment.

2. There is no distinction between fine buildings and the humblest of houses. The great mansions up above Park Road ought to be preserved intact, certainly. But the law holds the simplest of row houses, and these mansions, to the same rigorous standard.

3. There is no distinction between developers and homeowners. No one wants developers to be allowed to tear down good old buildings and put up modern, outsized things. But what about the homeowner who just wants to make some improvements on his own home? The longtime homeowner-resident is held to the same rigorous standards as the outside developer. Curiously, the Historic Preservation Office has permitted a seven-unit condominium monster on Irving Street, while punishing a homeowner who dared to improve his front walk with a few bricks and paving stones. (Bare concrete front walks and steps are the “historic” style, so you’re not allowed anything nicer.) I think residents deserve more freedom for alterations on their own homes than developers are allowed for their big developments, such as the big condos on Brown Street.

4. There are no historic preservation variances. If you want to deviate from zoning regulations, for good reason, you can request a variance from the Board of Zoning Adjustment. If you want to deviate from building codes, you can request a variance from the Board of Appeals and Review. But if you are denied a permit by the Historic Preservation Office and the Historic Preservation Review Board, you are done for. No one, not even the Mayor himself, can override their judgment and allow a variance. *There are no variances allowed from historic preservation regulation, and Historic Preservation decisions.*

5. There are no “hardship” exceptions. Other cities with historic districts allow exceptions where strict regulation would result in severe personal or financial hardships. Cambridge, Massachusetts, for example, has this rule: “If a Commission determines that denial of an application would cause substantial hardship to the applicant, *financial or otherwise*, and that the work may be approved without substantial detriment to the district or the building, a Certificate of Hardship may be issued.” Why is it that historic Cambridge can allow hardship exceptions, but the District cannot? In February, this ANC has passed a resolution calling for such a hardship exception to be added to the District’s law. (The Mount Pleasant Neighborhood Alliance objects, and demands that the ANC rescind this modest resolution.) Look around your own home, and ask, what will you do if a member of your family comes home one day in a wheelchair?

6. The Historic Preservation Review Board is biased towards stringent regulation. Five of the seven board members are career advocates of historic preservation. The two “citizen members” are as bureaucratic as the professionals. No one on the Board advocates for homeowners, nor for the disabled, the elderly, or the poor.



Historic Preservation allowed developers to build this seven-unit condominium monster on the back of an Irving Street row house, dwarfing the adjacent home. But homeowners making minor alterations, such as upgrading their front walks with brickwork or paving stones, are forced to rip out their work.

The **next ANC meeting** is on Tuesday, March 6, 7:00 pm, La Casa Community Center, 3166 Mt Pleasant Street. For an agenda, see anc1d.org.

A reminder about **snow**: District law requires that you clear the sidewalks on all sides of your house within eight daylight hours after the snow stops. This means renters, group home occupants, and condominium dwellers, too, not just homeowners.

Daylight saving time begins this year on March 11, three weeks earlier than in previous years. Sunrise will come at 7:30, instead of 6:30, and sunset at 7 pm, instead of 6 pm. Nobody enjoys getting up when it’s still dark, but that later sunrise will reduce traffic accidents and injuries, by putting the later portions of the evening rush hour in daylight, instead of darkness.

“Turf Wars”, by former resident Gabriella Ghalia Modan, is a recently published book about culture conflict in Mount Pleasant. A reading and signing of the book by the author brought a standing-room-only crowd to Busboys and Poets, on 14th Street, on February 22. The book makes for fascinating reading as a perceptive observation of Mount Pleasanters, and our class and culture conflicts, by an academic outsider.