

Jack's January report

At the December meeting, the ANC didn't do anything. No "unfinished business", no "new business". So we listened to residents for a while, and a couple of presentations by visitors, then packed up and went home. That was the final meeting of the 2015-2016 session of this ANC.

The new year begins, with a **mostly-new ANC**. Yasmin Romero-Latin is a veteran of our 2011-2014 commission, while the other three commissioners are first-termers. I'm optimistic about this new group, which will bring youthful energy to the commission, while I can provide the perspective of a long-time Mount Pleasant resident (43 years) and 1D commissioner (14 years).

For many years, until the autumn of 2014, the ANC held its meetings at **La Casa Community Center**, on Mount Pleasant Street. The owners of the Center, the Community of Christ, were extremely generous in making its building available, at little or no cost, to community groups.

In recent years, faced with dwindling membership and increasing age, the Community of Christ folks decided that they could no longer manage the building, and should dispose of it. They could have sold it for a hefty profit, a prime location in what is now expensive property. They chose instead to give it away, carefully choosing an organization that does good for the people, and will use the location to serve the neighborhood. The building will continue to be available for use by neighborhood organizations.

So, last November, **La Clinica del Pueblo** acquired the building, for the price of assuming the mortgage loan. La Clinica del Pueblo – the "People's Clinic" – "is a non-profit, federally qualified health center that serves the Latino and immigrant populations of the Washington, DC metro area . . . [providing] culturally appropriate health services, focusing on those most in need." The Mount Pleasant site will not be a medical service location, but will house the Community Health Advocacy and the health care interpretation program.

La Clinica says that the donation of this building by the Community of Christ is the finest donation they have ever received. I think this institution will be a marvelous benefit to Mount Pleasant, enhancing our role as a center of Latino culture and population in the District.

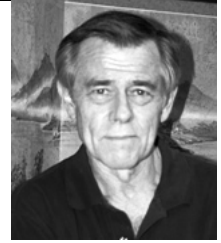
The **speed camera** on the 2000 block of Park Road has been moved to the west side of the street, "to insure the technician could deploy and service the unit properly". Well, okay, though I think the downhill direction is more subject to speeding. The camera is currently issuing only about two tickets a day. Perhaps word has gotten out that, on that block, the numerous "photo enforced" signs are to be taken seriously.

Under our row-house zoning, houses are supposed to have no more than **one dwelling unit per 900 square feet of lot area**. The model structure under this zoning is a "flat", consisting of a single-family dwelling plus a basement apartment. Two families per row-house lot amounts to a population density which I think Mount Pleasant residents find quite high enough. It's a compromise between the low density of

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suburban-style detached-house neighborhoods, and high-density apartment-house neighborhoods.

Lately there have been several **row houses converted to three- and four-unit apartment houses**. One can argue that this promotes affordability in a neighborhood that is becoming terribly expensive. On the other hand, do residents want to see Mount Pleasant become a neighborhood of small apartment houses, three or four families living in each row house? My sense of this neighborhood is that this would not be viewed with favor, especially with the worry that each family would bring a car or two, and expect to be able to park it on the street.

At the least, the neighborhood should have a say in a decision to convert a row house into an apartment house. Last October I noted that 1833 Lamont was being renovated as a four-unit apartment house, without notice to the ANC of such a conversion, even though the lot area, according to the 900 square foot rule, allows only two dwelling units. My reading of the recently revised zoning regulations is that such a conversion is simply not allowed: "There *shall be* a minimum of nine hundred square feet (900 sq. ft.) of land area per dwelling unit".

Well, the owners of this house showed me that it already had four separate dwelling units, with four kitchens (one dismantled, but the utility connections still in place). Evidently the owners of the house had been permitted, 50 years ago, to make the house into a four-unit apartment house. No one today knows on what grounds the conversion was allowed; there's no record of a "special exception" or variance.

Since it was not a "conversion", but was a restoration of the pre-existing condition, I saw no reason to pursue the matter. Historic Mount Pleasant did, arguing that the house had not actually been in use as a four-unit apartment house for many years. Two of the units had been combined, so it was in practice a three-unit apartment house, and HMP argued that it ought to stay that way.

I didn't see a lot of difference between three units and four, so I didn't ask the ANC to join HMP in its complaint to the Board of Zoning Adjustment (BZA). I do think that, with changes in ownership, or other efforts to permit major renovations to a building, the District should favor reversion of properties to compliance with the zoning regulations. But that's not DC's policy.

DC policy is that, once a deviation from the regulations is permitted, it is permitted in perpetuity, even if ownership

changes, and even if there is no record of why the deviation was permitted in the first place. The people who brought about the conversion of 1833 Lamont to a four-unit apartment house, circa 1967, are long gone, and no documents survive to explain their decision. But it lives on, forever.

The BZA rejected testimony that it hadn't been used as a four-unit building for many years, and accepted the DCRA argument that, because nobody had filed paperwork to change it from four units to three, on paper it was still four units, and the physical reality at the house was irrelevant. So the HMP complaint was dismissed, by a BZA vote of three to one, and a four-unit apartment house it will now be, in physical reality, as well as on DCRA paper. Neither the ANC, nor the neighbors, have any say about it.

About that **40-foot parking rule**: ordinarily one must park a minimum of 40 feet from an intersection, a rather generous distance, and that's where the no-parking signs are placed. The exception is this: if it is an RPP (residential parking) block, and your car has an RPP sticker, then that minimum distance is 25 feet, despite the no-parking sign at 40 feet. Hence, we residents can park extending up to 15 feet beyond the no-parking sign, and yet be legal. Mind that this is only for, in practice, the "approach" end of a block – the back end of your car toward the intersection, not the front end.

The **2016 crime data** are in, and show again that Mount Pleasant is, compared to the rest of the District, a low-crime neighborhood. Of the 56 PSAs (Police Service Areas) in the District, only 12 have lower robbery-per-resident rates than Mount Pleasant, and most of those are way off in far North-west. As for burglaries, only 6 of the 56 PSAs have lower burglary-per-resident rates than Mount Pleasant.

Yes, robberies happen, and burglaries too. This is the inner city, and one cannot afford to be careless. But the robbery and burglary rates here are about half the DC average, and half the rates that prevail just on the other side of 16th Street. We can't very well call for "more police" in our neighborhood, not when those police would presumably have to come from neighborhoods with much higher crime rates.

Of course there's concern about **the snatching of a woman from the 1600 block of Monroe**, near 17th Street, by a bunch of men in a van, at 3:30 AM on December 18. The police held a special neighborhood meeting on January 5 to try to allay residents' concerns about that incident. They actually had very little to say about it, because it's in the hands of a kidnapping squad.

What the police tell me about this incident is that it is just bizarre: nobody snatches random people from the street to commit assaults and robberies. Even robbers are smart enough to know that doing a kidnapping is far more serious than perpetrating a robbery. In my 42 years here, I've never ever heard of such a thing. Robberies and burglaries, sure. But a kidnapping, off the street? I suspect that there's more to this than we're being told. And I don't think we have to worry about any repetition of this very unusual crime.

The plans for two houses on **the vacant lot at 1842-44 Monroe** were reviewed by the HPRB on December 15, and

received general approval: "The Board approved the project in concept, delegating to staff further review, considering three-level rowhouses not to be incompatible with the character of the historic district, with the conditions that: the third floor be lowered so that each building is two stories plus an attic that is perhaps under a well-proportioned mansard; the houses be repeating twins rather than mirror twins; the utility meters be concealed, beyond merely screening with vegetation; the window openings be less horizontal, with a preference for single and not ganged windows throughout; the houses' field brick not be of two different colors; and that the applicant address the points raised in the staff report."

Cold weather is upon us, bringing hefty home heating bills. I've written before that the plunging cost of gas heat has made heating with gas considerably less costly than with oil. Long ago, oil heat was the standard here, but most residents have converted to gas, as we did long ago. The oil delivery trucks that used to frequent our streets are now seldom seen.

Nonetheless, one can tell from the odor in the air that some residents still use heating oil. A year ago I wrote that oil heat costs twice as much as gas heat. Now, with natural gas prices dropping due to greatly increased domestic supply, **fuel for oil heat now costs 2.7 times as much, per unit heat, as gas.** We switched so long ago that I can't find the records of it, and I don't recall how much it cost to convert.

Red-top parking meters, indicating spaces reserved for drivers with disability tags or placards, have been appearing around the District, as DDOT attempts to bring about a new disability-parking policy. The result has been enormous confusion, for both disabled and able-bodied drivers.

Past policy has been for disabled drivers to be able to park at any parking meter, for up to twice the nominal time limit, for free. It was the "free" part that led to widespread bogus disabled-driver placards. In 2012, DDOT attempted to eliminate the free-parking privilege, instead setting aside red-top-meter places for disabled drivers only.

That attempt encountered strong objections from both disabled and able-bodied drivers. The non-disabled drivers objected to metered spots being set aside for the disabled only. Disabled drivers objected to having to pay to park.

That DDOT effort was abruptly terminated. But now it's coming back, in limited form. Outside the Central Business District, the free-parking for disabled drivers policy remains in force, and able-bodied drivers are permitted to park at red-top meters. The more stringent policy will soon ("early 2017") be enforced in the CBD, that is, south of Massachusetts Avenue. When? I'll keep everyone posted.

The **72 degrees observed here on January 12** was not, perhaps surprisingly, a record high for the date, though it was far above the normal for mid-January. In 2016 the District tied three daily record highs, and set four new daily-high records. It was a warm year, and 2017 is starting off even warmer. That's nice now, but we're not going to be so happy about it in July and August.

The next meeting of the ANC will be on <u>Tuesday, January 24</u> , 7:00 pm, at the Mount Pleasant Library.
