

Jack's July report

At the June 17 meeting, the ANC:

* Supported an application by a Park Road resident for Historic Preservation Office approval of his roof deck.

It was in the fall of 1986 that, after considerable neighborhood controversy, Mount Pleasant was **designated a historic district**. "The community itself was split over the decision," said one member of the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB), and the ANC had withdrawn its support for historic district designation in 1985. The regulations for historic district designation were revised in 2009 to require that an applicant demonstrate "broad community support" for that designation. Mount Pleasant historic district advocates would surely have failed that condition in 1986.

What residents wanted at that time was the prevention of destructive renovation, that is, the tearing down of old houses, and their replacement by modern things. The condominium structure at the corner of 18th Street and Park Road, featuring open garages staring out onto 18th, is cited as incongruous development that was to be prevented.

Fair enough, but the consequence of historic district designation has been the locking of homeowners into the current appearance of their homes, whatever their current needs, and at whatever expense. The roof deck application for 1742 Park Road, supported by the ANC at the June meeting, is an example of the demands imposed on homeowners by the handful of historic preservationists who now control this process in our neighborhood.

The roof deck is to be built almost entirely on the rear of the building, out of view from the street. I requested a "flag test" to show how much of the deck, if anything, would be visible from Park Road. The test showed that only a tiny portion of the deck would be visible, and then only for a viewer peering up at the rooftops from a particular location across Park Road, in a particular direction. The initial opinion from the HPO was that this would be acceptable, "given the number of prominent roof decks on that alley (whether permitted or no)". The ANC resolution asserted that this was not objectionable. But the local historic preservationists – Historic Mount Pleasant (HMP) – disagreed, insisting that the deck must be totally invisible from the street. As for other roof decks in the area that are visible, those are, Historic Mount Pleasant (HMP) said, "illegal". Perhaps the owners of those roof decks should be worried.

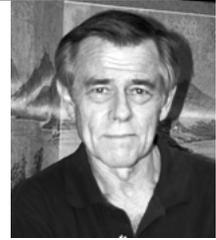
The applicant will get his roof deck, having modified the design to be totally invisible from the street. As is invariably the case, HMP's opinion prevails, the ANC's opinion does not.

I continue to try to retrieve at least a few of the **four curbside parking spaces lost on 18th Street** when DDOT increased the no-parking areas adjacent to the alley entrance from 5 feet to 20-25 feet. But DDOT refuses to revisit the issue and has ignored our request for a compromise. Our resolution of February advised keeping the additional space at the troublesome location, where drivers exiting the alley on the west side of 18th have difficulty seeing traffic approaching from the left, while restoring the other three lost parking spots, to

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the right of this exit, and on the east side of the street. But DDOT won't even look into that possibility, simply repeating their argument that this alley entrance presented a safety problem, and so 20-25 foot spacings were invoked on all four locations adjacent to the alleys. That could be an excuse for eliminating parking spaces adjacent to alleys anywhere.

Just one commissioner, China Terrell, brought about that loss in curbside parking, responding to the concerns of residents with garages along that alley. I've got a formal ANC resolution, passed by the ANC, three votes to one, over China's "no" lone vote, but DDOT prefers to ignore that. Forget "great weight"; there is no legal recourse when an agency rejects an ANC's advice.

The revised recommendations of **the Mayor's committee studying school boundaries** appeared on June 12, and, as I anticipated, the most controversial elements of it are gone. The lotteries, and middle-school "choice sets", are no longer part of the recommendations. Bancroft students will continue to have a guaranteed path to Deal and Wilson.

It is clear that the District must develop "quality schools" in every neighborhood. The middle-school problem is most severe. That's the point at which parents become most concerned about sending their children to DC public schools, as east-of-the-Park middle schools have reputations not only for poor test performance, but for troublesome students.

The revised recommendations call for several new middle schools, hoping to overcome that problem. One in particular would be a new MacFarland Middle School, some blocks north of here, in 16th Street Heights. This would be a dual-language, Spanish/English school, and Bancroft graduates would be able to choose between that and Deal.

But the revised recommendations have still run into a public buzz-saw of objections. Crestwood residents, for example, just north of us, would lose their assured access to Deal and Wilson, instead being zoned into Ward Four middle and high schools. Crestwood parents have made it clear that they want no part of that, any more than Mount Pleasant parents did. The promise of a new, improved MacFarland Middle School is nice, but few parents will give up assured access to Deal for the promise of a new school to come. Would it really be a match for Deal?

Even if the current recommendations are accepted – that's up to Mayor Gray, alone, the District Council having no say – either Muriel Bowser or David Catania would, upon taking

office, halt the implementation of those recommendations and undertake the development of a new approach.

There will be **at least two changes on this ANC** next year. China has already said that she's not going to run for re-election (she campaigned for, and won, the position of chairperson of Ward One Democrats). Yasmin will be moving back into what was the Deauville, perhaps in October, and that will put her in what is currently Phil Greiner's ANC district, leaving her current single-member district vacant.

Candidates are needed for the Mount Pleasant ANC! To be on the November ballot, candidates must file petitions by August 6 with 25 or more signatures of registered voters resident within the pertinent single-member district.

A resident of the 1800 block of Park Road called with an awful problem – **a clogged sewer line**, resulting in sewage backups into his house, and orders to stop using water – toilets! – until the line could be cleared. Snaking the line did not work, because this property has what is called a “running trap” built into the sewer line. (No, I had never heard of such a thing either.) Well, here's what one on-line plumbing source has to say about “running traps”:

“Running traps . . . are an outdated plumbing implementation that was built into a lot of buildings before the 1950s. They are named traps because they trap a bit of water, lessening the risk of sewer gases or small rodents coming back up through the sewer. The problem is that they are nearly impossible to keep clean, meaning they can become clogged, allowing raw sewage to back up into your building.

“ . . . international plumbing code forbids the installation of them on any new buildings. . . . The only thing they can do for a building now is cause problems. That's why we recommend getting rid of them wherever they are found.”

(<http://www.absolutedp.com/2013/remove-your-running-trap-before-disaster-strikes>)

What's worse, in this case a garage had been built on top of the sewer line where the trap was located, so getting to the trap to remove it was no small task. The owner was lucky that only his alley steps, and not the garage floor, had to be jack-hammered to rubble to reach, and dig out, the trap.

How many Mount Pleasant homes have these sewer-line traps? Plenty, I'll bet.

A resident of the 3300 block of 19th called to complain that **DDOT would not issue them a Visitor Parking Pass**. I checked into the RPP database and found that the 3300 block was not listed as RPP, though it was zoned for Residential Permit Parking in 2009. (The 3100 block is listed twice, so this is perhaps a keyboard blunder.)

DDOT assures me that this has been fixed. I'll believe that when I hear from residents that they are getting their visitor passes.

The ANC has long been receiving complaints about **trash, and neglected treeboxes**, on and adjacent to Mount Pleasant Street. The fact is, it is the legal responsibility of the adjacent property owner to keep the public spaces clean, and street trees watered and maintained. There's a proposal that the

ANC use its public funds to pay for some of this, on Mount Pleasant Street, but I do not believe that public funds should be used for work that is legally the responsibility of the private sector. That's why we can't call on DPW to do anything about trash-cluttered sidewalks, or DDOT for neglected street trees: they respond that they're not going to expend their resources to cover for nonfeasance by the property owners. Furthermore, negligent property owners will not be cited and fined for failing to meet their responsibilities.

The solution to the problem is for property owners (and us residents) to do, voluntarily, what they (we) are legally required to do – keep abutting public spaces clean, and care for any nearby street trees.

The business owners, in particular the 7-11, and McCormick Paints, must be persuaded to do their parts. The ANC has no authority whatsoever in this matter. It's up to the business community to deal with this problem.

The ANC heard at the June meeting from **the developer for 1821 Newton Street**, who has plans to convert that into a six-unit condominium. The HPO recommended, with no input from the ANC, that the HPRB give conditional approval for those plans. Similarly, plans for 1682 Irving Street are being rejected by the HPO, again with no advice from the ANC.

Here's how historic preservation permit decisions are made:

- (1) Historic Mount Pleasant (HMP) evaluates the permit application, commonly inviting the applicant, but conducting the evaluation in a private home, not in public, and making nothing about their decisions public;
- (2) HMP meets, in private, with the Historic Preservation Office (HPO), to agree on the guidance to be given by the HPO to the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB);
- (3) The HPRB considers the application, and generally accepts the HPO guidance, though frequently with additional recommendations, and judges the application “compatible with the character of the historic district”, or not.

The HPRB likes to hear that the applicant has been to the ANC, if only to confirm that the neighborhood has been informed about the proposed work. ANC “advice” is ignored, as we ANC commissioners are not considered experts in historic compatibility. Similarly, the public may be heard from at HPRB hearings, but the HPRB decision is a technical matter of “compatible, or not”, and is not a political decision, so such public testimony counts for little. The board members listen patiently, then issue the same judgment they had in mind before the public testimony.

HMP's advice really governs the outcome, because the HPO considers them the experts on historic preservation compatibility standards for Mount Pleasant. It would be good if HMP would make its proceedings just a bit transparent to the Mount Pleasant public. Posting their judgments concerning permit applications on the internet, so the people of Mount Pleasant could see what HMP is telling the HPO, would be a nice start.

The next meeting of the ANC will be on Tuesday, July 15, 7:00 pm, at the Mount Pleasant Library.
