

Jack's July report

At the June meeting, the ANC did the following:

- Passed Stuart Karaffa's resolution advising the Office of Planning concerning their consideration of proposed amendments to the Comprehensive Plan; and
- Approved payment to ANCs 1A and 1B to share the cost of a booth at the Columbia Heights Day festival.

The June ANC1D meeting was almost entirely devoted to discussion of **the proposed revision of the Comprehensive Plan**. The Office of Planning issued a call, closing on June 23, for proposed amendments to the current Plan. The Office has received more than 3000 proposed amendments, which it will consider during the coming months.

One might ask, what's the significance of this Plan? Essentially, zoning regulations are written according to directions set by the Plan: "The Home Rule Charter requires that zoning 'shall not be inconsistent' with the Comprehensive Plan." So what goes into the Plan may well lead to changes to our zoning regulations.

The ANC had on its June agenda a resolution in support of a "*Priorities Letter*" advocating, as a solution to the problem of high housing costs, increased density in DC neighborhoods. The authors of this Letter assume, evidently, that new housing construction is being prevented by zoning restrictions, and if we just relax those zoning limits, there would be so much more housing built that market forces would bring down the high prices of housing in the District.

"Through the Comprehensive Plan, the District should encourage the success of neighborhood commercial corridors and locally owned businesses, especially in disadvantaged communities. This includes increased housing density that supports businesses and providing equitable opportunities for locally owned businesses in mixed-use and commercial developments." That is, "increased housing density" is the prescription for neighborhoods such as Mount Pleasant.

Also, *"Through the Comprehensive Plan, the District should affirm that the Zoning Commission has the purview to allow increased density for Planned Unit Developments that supersedes the levels in the Comprehensive Plan's maps in exchange for community benefits."* So even higher densities written into the Comprehensive Plan might be overridden, in exchange for "community benefits". Zoning Commission "purview" means that approval of such variances from zoning density limits would not be subject to community approval.

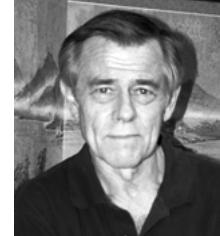
Well, what would this mean for Mount Pleasant, and specifically, the row-house portions of Mount Pleasant? How would a significantly increased density of housing be achieved here?

The principal factor governing density in our row-house areas is the provision requiring 900 square feet of lot area per dwelling unit (with a minimum of two dwelling units permitted, whatever the lot area). Historically, our row houses consist of two units: a principal dwelling unit, and a basement apartment. But with housing prices going sky-high, row houses on larger lots are being turned into mini-

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apartment houses. For example (and there are plenty of examples), 1830 Lamont now consists of four condominiums. Across the street, 1855 Lamont, has become four rental units. (The zoning regulations make no distinction between condominium and rental apartments, merely specifying "dwelling units", whether for rent or for purchase.)

There are many more. It seems to be pretty easy already, under existing regulations, to cut up row houses into multiple dwelling units. Many Mount Pleasant lots are large enough to allow three or more dwelling units within the 900 square feet provision. That limit to the number of dwelling units can furthermore be exceeded as a "special exception", a deviation from the regulations far easier to obtain than a variance.

Now the "Priorities Letter" appears to call for changes to the zoning regulations to allow even more conversions of row houses to multiple-dwelling-unit buildings. This could be accomplished by, for example, reducing that requirement for at least 900 square feet of lot area per dwelling unit.

I don't know anyone who is happy about our row houses becoming so desirable that they now sell for over a million dollars. But is the answer the subdivision of even more row houses into mini-condominium apartments, selling for half that? How is this already changing the nature of the neighborhood, and does Mount Pleasant want to see even more families packed into this already-compact neighborhood?

My sense of the matter is that apartment-house conversion will do little to increase the supply of "affordable" housing (a half-million-dollar apartment does not meet anyone's definition of "affordable"), and the conversion of row houses to multiple ownership, or multiple rentals, isn't considered a favorable development by many longtime Mount Pleasant homeowners. The density we've got is already high, and the prescription by this "Priorities Letter" for even more is not popular in Mount Pleasant. A frequent complaint is that curbside parking is already troublesome, with the density that we've got.

I hear the other point of view as well, that only small condos make Mount Pleasant accessible by people who could never afford a million-dollar row house. But I have to agree with those who say that Mount Pleasant already offers relatively high urban density, and homes with space for families with children.

Commissioner Stuart Karaffa, who proposed that our ANC endorse this "Priorities Letter", made two substantial concessions to my concerns. First, he withdrew the proposal that the ANC endorse the Priorities Letter, replacing it with a

resolution of advice to the Office of Planning concerning proposed revisions to the Comprehensive Plan; that avoided our signing up to the prescription for “higher density”. Then, in his own resolution of advice, he included the statement that “The conversion of rowhouse flats to apartment houses of three or more units should not be encouraged”. These changes addressed my concerns, and the ANC passed his resolution by a 4 to 0 vote (Yasmin absent).

We will have to keep a close eye on the Office of Planning as it considers the proposed changes to the Comprehensive Plan. That's our ANC job: to watch this stuff, and to worry about what the Office of Planning might do to the zoning regulations that would affect our neighborhood.

The **Klinge Valley Trail** opened to the public on June 24, marking the end of a long and bitterly contentious affair. Whether you approve of this outcome or not, there it is, and the Trail is a superb addition to the outdoor resources of the area. It's a wide bike-hike path, passing through Rock Creek Park far underneath Connecticut Avenue, alongside Klinge Creek, offering landscaped cutouts, with benches, for quiet enjoyment of the Park. There's not a whisper of automobile noise to disturb the peace of the Park.

As I've noted before: the advocates of rebuilding Klinge Road as an automobile road across the Park won a complete and total political victory in 2003, the District Council ordering the restoration of the automobile road, and yet, that road never came to pass. Evidently the Federal Government – presumably, the National Park Service – was quietly vetoing the road, believing that there are better uses for the National Park than yet another automobile commuter route. So, in 2007, the District Council gave up the fight and agreed to turn the route into a recreation trail for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Mayor Bowser, back then the Councilmember from Ward Four, was one of the last-ditch holdouts for the automobile road, and alluded to that during her remarks opening the Trail, observing that she was perhaps “a little later than others” in coming around to the point of view that the nature trail is a better use of the area than the automobile road.

Residents who weren't here for the early years of that battle, which began with the DDOT closing of the road in 1991 due to storm damage, may not know why the road was considered so valuable by Mount Pleasant and Crestwood residents. In those days many of us went across the Park for shops, restaurants, and schools, there being few resources east of Rock Creek Park. Mount Pleasant Street was pretty shabby back then, and 14th Street was dreadful, recovering only very slowly from the damage done in 1968, after the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King. We went to the west of the Park for everything, and Klinge Road was a marvelous time-saver.

But in recent years the east side of the Park has improved dramatically, and there's no longer any need to go west of the Park to find good shops, schools, and restaurants. So there's far less need today for this traffic-avoiding route to the west of Rock Creek Park, whereas there is a need for good bicycle routes and nature-walk areas here in the center of the city. The Trail connects directly to the bike path in Rock Creek

Park heading downtown, so this development will promote bicycle commuting.

Speaking of bicycle commuting – there are plans to **enhance the Rock Creek Park bike path**, from Broad Branch to P Street, and to add a bike lane alongside Piney Branch Parkway to connect to that bike path. Some path improvements have already been made, in conjunction with the Beach Drive rehabilitation work.

The bike path project, initiated in 2011, has proceeded at an excruciatingly slow pace. The preliminary design plans were completed in 2013, and environmental approval was achieved in 2014. The project is now supposed to be begun in earnest in the spring of 2018, and to continue into 2019.

The work will include widening that dangerously narrow sidewalk through the Beach Drive tunnel, accomplished by taking two feet from the traffic lanes. There will be a new bridge for pedestrians and bicycles across Rock Creek south of the tunnel, alongside the existing bridge. During my bicycle-commuting years, those were two dreadful locations, far too narrow for safety, and the cause of countless bicyclist-pedestrian conflicts.

The ANC continues to pay close attention to the plans for 16th Street bus service, including the proposal to **eliminate bus stops at Newton and Lamont**. There will be another DDOT meeting on the topic on July 27, and we'll be there. Evidently the final decision about these bus stops is still well in the future. I'm confident that this ANC will do all it can to retain the bus stops at Newton and Lamont.

The **streetlight work on Mount Pleasant Street** has been quite a large project, entailing much excavation for new poles and power lines. But the end is near: on Saturday, August 19, the contractor will install the new poles on the east side of the street, from Harvard Street to Park Road. The west side will be done at a later date. Parking will, of course, be severely affected on that date.

Some residents have asked if the “cobra” **streetlights along Klinge Road and Walbridge Place** could be replaced with the “historically correct” Washington Upright streetlights. I presume that these blocks have cobras because they're designated “minor arterials”, whereas our side streets, already with Uprights, are designated residential. But there are Uprights on Park Road, also a “minor arterial”, so it's not impossible to have the Uprights on these blocks.

Besides being more esthetically pleasing, the Uprights do a better job of illuminating sidewalks, because the lamps are below the tree canopy, whereas the lamps of the cobras are higher than the canopy, leaving the sidewalks dark.

I think some of the cobras on Klinge and Walbridge could be replaced with Uprights, improving sidewalk illumination, yet providing adequate street illumination, because these streets are narrow (29 feet). I'll offer a resolution at the July 25 ANC meeting asking DDOT to assess the cost and feasibility of this change.

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