

March report to constituents

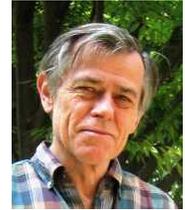
Here is news of the **March 6 ANC meeting**, and other happenings in Mount Pleasant. At this meeting, the ANC:

- Advised DDOT to allow left turns from northbound 16th Street directly onto Park Road, instead of taking the roundabout around the little park in front of Sacred Heart (my resolution)
- Advised the MPD to install a red-light camera on Park Road at the Klinge/Walbridge intersection, to help put a stop to the frequent running of the red-arrow light for westbound Park Road traffic (my resolution)
- Advised the MPD to reinstate a program that promotes security patrols in large apartment buildings.
- Advised the District Council, and the DCRA, to require large apartment buildings to develop security plans.

ANC 1D03 NEWSLETTER #55

Jack McKay, March 28, 2007

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There's been some disruptive activity in the neighborhood lately. On the evening of Monday, March 19, I happened to be on the 1800 block of Monroe, and found rather a lot of people bustling about the street. There are always people hanging around in that area, and that's fine, but the numbers on this evening were way above normal. Other residents were concerned, and called the police to investigate.

Arriving shortly before midnight, the MPD found "unusual" pedestrian activity in the block, but nothing improper. At that time they received a call for **gunshots**. An 18th Street resident reports "a series of 8-10 gunshots, in two groups of 4-5, on 18th Street between Park Road and Monroe St. One car headed north on 18th, then turn right on Newton. There was a 20-30s black male chasing after the car on foot, who then jumped in the car and sped away." Another resident reports that "I was driving last night on Park Rd. headed East just before 11:30 when a vehicle pulled out behind me from 18th St., shooting as it rounded the curve." A third says "I was walking with a friend down Park from Mt Pleasant when the car rounded the corner and started firing. Apologies if it was your yard I dove into!"

The police reacted instantly. Inspector Burke writes that "The area was flooded with police officers within minutes of the calls. The officers observed three young males departing from the area of the reported gunshots and robbery. They appeared to be concerned about the police presence. Additionally, one of the officers recognized the individuals as being from the area of 17th and Euclid Street, which is known for narcotics and crimes of violence." One of these Adams Morgan youths was found to be carrying a loaded 9-mm gun magazine. (The gun had presumably been ditched.)

This is far beyond the usual minor misbehavior that takes place around 18th and Monroe. It's one thing to have neighborhood youths hanging about the street; it's quite something else to have young men arriving here from Adams Morgan to join, or perhaps fight with, our neighbors, and to have people shooting at each other on our streets. The police have responded with very tight surveillance, and the block has been quiet since then.

For several years I've been advocating an end to the requirement **that traffic on northbound 16th Street, wanting to go left onto Park Road, go around the park in front of Sacred Heart**. The around-the-park arrangement makes no sense for traffic, because Park Road between 14th and 16th is already heavily congested, and merging this left-turn traffic into it only exacerbates the congestion. More importantly, this right turn off 16th is very hostile to pedestrians, and the 16th Street sidewalk is blocked by bicycle rack barriers to force them to go around the park and cross Pine in front of the church.

If traffic instead is allowed to make the left turn the usual way, from 16th Street, then traffic on Pine Street will drop to almost nothing, so Pine can become a quiet pedestrian mall, the bike-rack pedestrian barriers can come down, the small park will be pedestrian-accessible, and the weekend mercado that operates on the Sacred Heart sidewalk can set up on both sides of the street.

I was able to get this advice incorporated in the Columbia Heights Traffic Study in 2003, but DDOT has done nothing about it, because they give higher priority to rushing commuter traffic along 16th Street than to pedestrians in the neighborhood. DDOT argues that cars stopped to make the left turn would impede that all-important commuter traffic flow. But buses, and the occasional automobile, already make the left turn that way, and Harvard Street, a few blocks south, already reduces traffic to one through lane by holding left-turn traffic in the left lane, so this can't really make much difference.

The fatal Metrobus accident of January 16 brought pressure to "do something" about this intersection. Nobody knows why that accident occurred, nor is there any evidence that a left-turn cycle to the traffic light, and corresponding "Don't Walk" for pedestrians crossing Park Road, would have prevented it. Nonetheless, this could help, and the time is right to overcome DDOT's objections and bring about the pedestrian-friendly arrangement recommended three years ago.

I continue my intensive investigation of **historic district regulation in Mount Pleasant**. On March 4, Tersh Boasberg, chairperson of the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB), visited me in my home, for a frank discussion of the District's historic preservation law. Commissioner Jane Zara organized a public forum on historic preservation, held on March 26, which was well attended (about 60 people), indicating how great is interest in this subject.

Historic District designation is, I think, a sledgehammer solution to the problem of preventing "incongruous" development. Being designated a historic district subjects residents to over 100 pages of historic preservation regulations. These regulations are written for seriously historic structures, buildings of such importance that not a brick should be disturbed. The law is not written for a living community of modest row houses, where change is a natural and desirable part of life. Residents agree, I think, that change should be prohibited when it threatens to result in a structure that is seriously "incongruous" with the rest of the neighborhood, but not when a resident is simply attempting modest improvements to his own house.

The law requires that alterations to our homes be "compatible with the character of the historic district". "Compatible" might mean just "not incongruous" (the definition employed in Massachusetts), but too often the Historic Preservation Office (HPO) takes "compatible" to mean "identical to nearby houses". Hence, on 18th Street an owner was forced to remove a nice cut-stone-topped edging to his front walk, and replace it with "historically correct" bare concrete; on Irving Street, a homeowner has been denied permission to build a front entrance to a basement apartment, because the door and steps would be visible from the street; on Rosemount Avenue, a young couple is told that they've got to remove their brand new replacement windows, eat the cost paid for them, and then pay again to restore "historically correct" wood frame windows; on Newton Street, homeowners are told that they cannot have a natural stone staircase, but must build bare concrete steps, because that's the traditional, circa-1930 style of the neighborhood.

It seems to me that there has to be a substantial public need to justify prohibiting homeowners from doing what they want with their own homes, and forcing them into extra costs to do things a "historically correct" way. Historic preservation regulation appears to be forcing our diverse neighborhood into peas-in-a-pod conformity, because downtown bureaucrats are insistent on preventing any change from some ideal notion of what Mount Pleasant looked like 70 years ago. This has gone far beyond simply fending off incongruous development, and is far beyond, I think, what residents want.

The HPO enforces these regulations with no legal requirement to consider the costs imposed on the homeowners, except for those of very low incomes. The law protects homeowners from "unreasonable economic hardship", but that expression applies only in the case of a "taking" of the property, that is, the property rendered utterly useless as a consequence of the regulations. Anything short of that is not a "taking", and is therefore not an "unreasonable economic hardship", even if it brings financial ruin to the homeowner. Is this what Mount Pleasant residents bargained for, when they agreed to the designation of Mount Pleasant as a historic district in 1986?

Massachusetts provides for "certificates of hardship", for financial or other (i.e., disability) reasons. The District's harsh historic preservation law allows no such exceptions. Why not, I ask? Are our modest row houses so historically precious that they must be preserved without change, regardless of the hardships imposed on the people who live in them?

One message from the Historic Preservation bureaucrats at the Forum was that they are flexible, and do respond to the wishes of a neighborhood. Mount Pleasant has been represented only by Historic Mount Pleasant, a band of dedicated advocates of historic preservation. This ANC is stepping forward to represent the views of the whole of the neighborhood.

Massachusetts also requires a two-thirds majority vote of a city council, or a town meeting, to declare an area a "historic district". I wonder what such a vote would yield here in Mount Pleasant, today.

The **running of the red-arrow light on Park Road at Klingle/Walbridge** has been a continuing problem. There's much less than in the past, thanks to the additional intersection lights and signage, but it still occurs too often (once every fifteen to thirty minutes). This is quite hazardous to pedestrians attempting to cross Park Road in the crosswalk just beyond the intersection.

Plans were already under way to install a red-light camera here, to teach DC drivers the hard way that the red arrow means "stop and wait", even if the light next to it is a solid green. Inspector Burke said that getting this camera could be expedited with an ANC resolution in support of the red light, so I did that.

The **next ANC meeting** is on Tuesday, April 3, 7:00 pm, La Casa Community Center, 3166 Mt Pleasant Street. For an agenda, see anc1d.org.

The spring **Hazardous Household Waste and e-cycling collection** will be held Saturday, April 21, 2007, from 9 am to 3 pm at Carter Barron Amphitheatre, 16th and Kennedy Streets NW.

Pretty much everyone knows that dog owners are required to **clean up their dog's poop**. Years ago, almost no one did that, and you had to walk with your eyes to the ground watching for the stuff. Today the great majority of dog owners and dog walkers do the right thing, and walking around is far less treacherous than in the past. Still, a very few dog owners won't bother, and constituents want me to remind them that this is required by the law, and by respect for the neighborhood.