

Jack's March report

At the February 18 meeting, the ANC:

- * Advised DDOT to restore some of the parking lost on 18th Street to enlarged no-parking zones;
- * Advised ABRA to approve the request by Don Jaime's Restaurant for a tavern license;
- * Advised the Office of Planning, and the Zoning Commission, to keep 40% lot coverage limits in force where they currently exist.

For months I've been trying to get the commissioners to support my effort to recover some of the **curbside parking spots lost on 18th Street** when DDOT increased the no-parking distances adjacent to the alley from the normal 5 feet to an excessive 20 to 25 feet. The commission finally did so at the February meeting, by a 3 to 1 vote (China Terrell alone voting "no"). My resolution calls for retention of the 25-foot spacing for the most troublesome direction, for drivers exiting the alley on the west side of 18th and trying to see traffic coming south on 18th. For the other three locations we advise 10-foot spacing. This is twice the 5 feet prescribed by law, but would recover 39 feet of lost curbside parking space, good for at least two parked cars, possibly three.

It would be helpful at this time if residents who sought this expansion of no-parking adjacent to that alley e-mailed their approval of this ANC compromise to me and/or to Council-member Graham. Let's see some compassion for our neighbors who don't have their own off-street parking spots, and struggle to find curbside parking when they come home.

The commission voted unanimously to support the request by **Don Jaime's Restaurant** to change its liquor license from CR (restaurant) to CT (tavern) (my resolution). This does not mean that Jaime Carrillo intends to change his restaurant into a bar. In order to keep a CR liquor license, at least 45% of gross receipts must be for food. Mr. Carrillo, and other Latino restaurateurs, have had trouble achieving that level. The food sales criteria set for the CR license were devised for conventional sit-down restaurants in Georgetown or downtown, not for Mount Pleasant's Latino restaurants, which combine inexpensive food with musical entertainment and drinks. The CT license allows these restaurants to operate as they do now, but without running into trouble if their food sales fall short of the CR requirement.

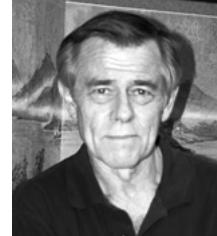
The commission also passed my resolution **advising the Zoning Commission to keep lots currently with 40% coverage limits at that limit**. This is made necessary by the change proposed in the new zoning regulations that would make all lots 60% maximum.

The problem encountered here with current regulations has been the provision allowing an increase from 40% lot coverage to 60% upon conversion to an apartment house. This has permitted a couple of structures to grow enormous additions on the rear, looming over neighbors' houses and back yards. This has happened at 1728 Park Road, and was part of the plan for 1867 Park Road, much to the dismay of neighbors.

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The proposed zoning regulations make this problem even worse, by permitting any dwelling currently limited to 40% lot coverage (detached and semi-detached houses) to expand to 60%, not just if converted to an apartment house.

Councilmember Graham arranged a meeting on February 8 for a discussion of the **new zoning regulations**, now in final draft form. I'm not alone in discovering that this has been a flawed process. Like many others, I thought that this rewriting of the zoning regulations was simply a reorganization and updating of the existing regulations, which have grown "like Topsy" over the decades. But this Zoning Commission, consisting of five appointed individuals, decided to write a whole new zoning book, based on their notions of what's good for the future of DC.

Hence, real changes are embedded in the revised regulations, urban ideas perhaps better suited to the 21st century than those underlying the current, circa 1958 code. Obvious goals include fewer cars, neighborhoods designed to be "walkable", and higher density, for a future in which residents could manage without cars. But these ideas should be thoroughly understood by and approved by the public, before such important changes are made. The Zoning Commission will protest that they've had plenty of neighborhood meetings, but who has time to go to long evening meetings of eye-glazing discussions of obscure bits of zoning code? Self-selected urban-design advocates have dominated this process, and now their ideas are being imposed on a dismayed public.

CM Graham was plainly unhappy that the District Council has no approval authority for this code. I think our elected representatives ought to be empowered to review these new zoning regulations before they are put into effect.

The **11 inches of snow** recorded in February was twice the average for that month, and March started right off with another 4 inches, which all by itself is three times the average total for that entire month. We've seen worse, to be sure – 56 inches total in the winter of 2009-2010 – but this is enough to be troublesome. Schools close, government offices close, you don't dare take a car out onto city streets. Paralysis!

A fundamental problem faced by the DC Government in dealing with snow is that heavy snowfalls are too infrequent to warrant our having the machinery and manpower on call to deal with so much snow. So these occasional snowstorms really disrupt city services, as we all know from our missed trash and recycling collections last month.

From the Washington Post, February 17: “The District’s homicide numbers — a benchmark for any big city — fell from 181 in 2007, Lanier’s first year as chief, to 88 in 2012, a half-century low.” That’s nice, but can Chief Lanier take credit for this? Fact: homicides have been declining steadily since 1993, even as police chiefs came and went (Thomas, Soulsby, Ramsey). The decline under Chief Lanier has been a continuation of that trend, which is observed nationwide, not just in DC.

I prefer **robbery as a benchmark for public safety**. Mount Pleasant residents are far more likely to be victims of robbery than of homicide. And the citywide robbery count, in contrast to homicides, has *not decreased at all since 1998*. If the decrease in homicides were due to improvements in police work, then surely robberies would be decreasing as well. But they’re not, not a bit. So homicides are declining, yes, but evidently not due to more effective police tactics.

The MPD brass speak at every opportunity about the decrease in homicides (though the homicide count so far this year, more than twice last year’s count, has stifled that boast), but they’re very quiet about robberies.

Some time ago I noted that the Council last fall passed a measure requiring DDOT to provide, by this February, a **study of speed cameras**, including “an analysis of the speed camera’s nexus with safety; and if no nexus with safety can be identified, a justification by MPD regarding the speed camera’s location”. This was to deal with complaints that certain speed cameras seemed to be more about extracting revenue from unwary motorists than actual safety.

The DDOT/MPD report appeared, and is bizarre. To begin with, of the 295 speed camera locations studied – 87 existing, 39 planned, and 169 proposed – DDOT identified a “safety nexus” *at each and every one*. Not a single speed camera, anywhere, failed their “safety nexus” exam.

The DDOT/MPD report is full of nonsensical observations and claims. At the infamous Porter Street speed camera that nabbed numerous Mount Pleasant residents for speeding, the DDOT report claims that the average speed of traffic is a pitiful 9 mph. That’s just absurd, as anyone who drives that road knows. Conversely, if the traffic speed is really about half that of a bicycle, why put a speed camera there? The obvious conclusion is that a speed camera, set to nab drivers exceeding 40 mph, would be perfectly useless.

A speed camera is planned for Connecticut Avenue just north of the Porter Street intersection. Traffic speeds measured there, with no speed camera yet in place, show an average traffic speed of just 13 mph, and an 85th-percentile speed of 21 mph, well under the posted 30 mph limit. Again, as in the Porter Street example, if the average traffic speed is only about half the posted limit, what’s the point to putting a speed camera there?

Plainly these traffic speed measurements are bogus. But DDOT and the MPD have put them in their report, and now claim that those very low speeds somehow create a safety hazard, and that installing a speed camera will somehow mitigate that safety hazard.

Proposed (not yet “planned”) speed camera locations include the 1800-2000 block of Park Road, and the 1700 block of Irving Street. In both of these cases, traffic speed measurements suggest a significant number of speed violations: the 85th-percentile speed for Park Road was one to four mph above the 25 mph limit, and for Irving Street, six mph above that limit. But it’s hard to trust any of these traffic speed measurements, since some of them are so clearly false.

BTW, the **primary election** will be held on April 1. That’s dreadfully early, for a November election, but new election rules require the very early primary.

We ANC folks are not involved in primary elections, being officially “nonpartisan”. Concerning the April primary, I know some of the Ward 1 candidates, and I suggest voting for **Jim Graham**, for Ward 1 Councilmember; **Bill O’Field**, Ward 1 Member of the State Committeeman; and **Anita Shelton**, Ward 1 Member of the State Committeewoman (and Mount Pleasant resident!).

In May, the DC Advisory Committee on Student Assignment will release its draft proposal for **revising school boundaries**.

It’s clear that the critical problem is that of middle schools. We all want our kids going to Deal, rather than to either the Columbia Heights or Cardozo Educational Campuses. Nobody wants to have their child attending a school that is perceived as inferior, or unsafe. The Great Schools ratings tell the story for middle schools in this area:

Cardozo, ranked 2 (on a scale of 1 to 10)
Columbia Heights, ranked 4
Deal Middle School, ranked 8

Well, who is going to be happy to send their middle-schooler to Columbia Heights, or Cardozo, if Deal is a possibility?

The people thinking about the boundary changes are painfully aware that Mount Pleasant parents (and pretty much everybody else in DC) want to send their kids to Deal, not to either of those Ward One middle schools. You can see them agonizing over how to tell any parent that they’re going to be zoned for Cardozo, not for Deal.

But long term, our Ward One schools really must be brought up to levels acceptable to all parents, so that no one will object to being in-boundary for Columbia Heights or Cardozo, and not for Deal. It is hardly fair to Columbia Heights residents to tell them that they’ve got to settle for those inferior Ward One schools, while we in Mount Pleasant send ours to a better, Ward Three school.

The question I have is, how are we going to improve our Ward One schools so that parents will no longer insist that our kids go to Ward Three schools? Long term that must, somehow, be done. I believe it can be done, just as Bancroft has been overcoming its history of being the elementary school for the poor and the immigrant, while children from upscale Mount Pleasant families were ferried to west-of-the-Park schools every day.

The next meeting of the ANC will be on **Tuesday, March 18, 7:00 pm, at the Mount Pleasant Library**.