

Jack's March report

At the February meeting, the ANC did the following:

- Requested that the public hearing on the Comprehensive Plan Amendment Act of 2018 (B22-0663) be postponed for 30 days, to April 20, 2018, to allow more time for ANC and community evaluation;
- Advised the Board of Zoning Adjustment (BZA) to deny the special exceptions and variances needed to build a garage on a lot at 1655/1701 Harvard Street.

For 15 years I've been hand-delivering these monthly newsletters to my corner of Mount Pleasant. It takes me about three days, and lots of walking.

This month I've got a problem: **cataract surgery**, scheduled for the week during which I would be delivering this newsletter. Aside from the day of the operation, I'm likely to be physically unable to do that manual delivery. So this newsletter is going to be an internet-only issue, hoping that most of my constituents, these days, have internet access, and will make their way to my website to find it.

There's a rumor floating around the neighborhood that the **Best World market might be replaced with a CVS**. The building – just the market, not Don Juan's Restaurant, nor the Subway sandwich shop – has been on the market for lease since last summer. I'm guessing that the owner of the building wants or needs more revenue from it than the Best World can provide. The property taxes on the lot have tripled over the past decade, to about \$40,000 a year. Realtors are asking for \$245,000 a year in lease. (Increased taxes were a factor also in the recent demise of the Pupuseria San Miguel.)

Many residents have voiced dismay about the possibility of a CVS at the Best World location. But really, the owner of the property can do pretty much what he wants with his property. The ANC is not consulted in the matter, and no one cares whether we like it or not. If the CVS rumor is true, and residents object to the CVS, the property owner is surely going to ask us, who else can pay a quarter-million a year in lease fees, and turn a profit, on this site?

I'm very skeptical that a CVS would move in here. As our marketing study of a few years ago said, Mount Pleasant businesses would fail at any effort to draw in many customers from beyond walking distance, because it's not easy to get to Mount Pleasant by car, and there's little parking available when you get here.

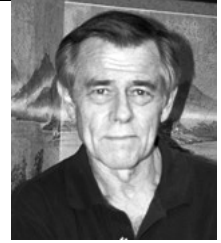
Mount Pleasant is crossed by east-west traffic arterials, and consequently sees **all too much traffic speeding through the neighborhood**. Perhaps the most severely affected block is the last block of Park Road, entering Rock Creek Park, where drivers seem to respond to the “open road” aspect of the park ahead, and hit the gas.

We've been wrestling with that problem for more than a decade. Because Park Road (like Adams Mill Road, and Irving Street, and Walbridge Place) is classified a “minor arterial”, speed humps are not permitted. The traffic hazard on this 2000 block of Park Road is compounded by the absence of sidewalks, forcing residents to walk in the street to get to and from their parked cars. My first suggestion for

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traffic “calming”, in 2006, was to build a sidewalk on the far (park) side of the road, so that people could have a safe walk to their cars, and the narrowing of the road by 10 feet would surely cause drivers to slow down. That proposal went nowhere, but I forget why. (Twelve years ago!)

In 2007, at then-Councilmember Jim Graham's suggestion, bike lanes were added, not for the benefit of bicyclists, but on the notion that the visual narrowing of the road by the bike-lane stripes would cause drivers to slow down. They didn't work: the 85th-percentile speed (85% of drivers at that speed, or lower) was (by my measurement) 39 mph before the bike lanes went in, and 37 mph afterwards, not a significant difference (less than the precision of the measurement). This is for the downhill direction; uphill, measured speeds are two or three mph lower.

But the bike lanes did have one excellent effect: drivers stayed out of them, so the bike lanes became *de facto* sidewalks, allowing residents relatively safe space, a few feet wide, to walk in the street to and from their cars.

Still, the traffic speeds continued to distress residents, and in 2008 DDOT was asked to devise traffic “calming” measures. The DDOT prescription was physical narrowing of the roadway, by the construction of concrete medians in the middle of the road. (Or painted medians, which no one believed would work.) This would affect only the downhill side of the road, by eliminating the bike lane (pedestrian safety buffer), and forcing traffic up close to the parked cars, on the theory that that proximity would cause drivers to slow down.

Well, no doubt it would, but by enough to warrant elimination of the bike lane? The DDOT information on a “choker” to reduce speeds suggests that this technique results in a 15% reduction in that 85th-percentile speed, or about 6 mph. So perhaps the 85th-percentile speed on this block would, due to narrowing, be reduced to 32 mph, comparable to the speeds measured on the 1800 block of Park Road, where traffic is already right up against parked cars. Certainly no more than that could be expected.

Residents have, it seems, a choice: a pedestrian space a few feet wide, and traffic passing by at 39 mph; or *no* pedestrian safety space, and traffic passing by at 32 mph. At least one resident of this block objected vehemently to that proposal, arguing that the safety conferred by the bike lane, providing a few feet between pedestrians and traffic, far outweighed the safety benefit of a 6-mph speed reduction. (Compare being hit by a 32-mph car, to *not* being hit by a 39-mph car.)

That opposition ended the 2008 effort, but in 2015, with the traffic speed problem continuing, residents again called on DDOT to prescribe traffic calming measures. DDOT could do no more than revive the proposal of 2009.

I voiced my objections to that proposal, arguing that the safety benefits of the bike lane greatly outweigh the supposed safety benefit of a modest speed reduction. Besides eliminating the pedestrian buffer space, there's another very undesirable consequence of the concrete-median notion for traffic calming: the median would make it impossible for a driver to dodge to the left, should a pedestrian appear, or a car door suddenly open, on the right. The current arrangement allows drivers to shift left to give pedestrians even more space than the bike lane provides people entering or exiting their parked cars. Furthermore, a driver veering left to avoid a pedestrian, or a car door, could hit that concrete median and be bounced right back into a collision.

In 2015 I was also pushing for a speed camera for that block, as a means of reducing traffic speed *without* compromising pedestrian safety. It took quite a lot of effort, but in the fall of 2016, the speed camera was installed on Park Road. This would have the benefit of identifying and fining anyone exceeding 35 mph (the posted speed limit plus 10 mph). Ideally, word gets out, and drivers slow down.

Was the camera effective at reducing speeds? My most recent measurements yield an 85th-percentile speed of 34 mph, lower than the 37-39 mph observed previously. This could be due to the speed camera, essentially capping automobile speeds at 35 mph; or it could be due to the very poor condition of the road surface. There's no way to know.

Still, residents complain about traffic speeds. I hear that DDOT is again being asked for traffic "calming" measures, and surely they will offer only what's been proposed before, the road-narrowing medians. I cannot imagine that a modest reduction in traffic speed warrants such the compromise of pedestrian safety that comes from elimination of the bike lane. Some argue that the lower speed corresponds to reduced injuries upon being hit by a car. But it's far better to avoid being hit by a car at *any* speed.

Row-house architecture is remarkably efficient in terms of energy (no heat losses from the common walls) and land area (constructed from property line to property line). But every row house has to have an end, and then what? **Should a row end house be built right up to the adjacent property line**, or should a side yard be required?

It happens that a resident of Monroe Street is faced with the prospect of a newly built row house – extending an existing row – springing up right next door to their unattached house. I wouldn't much like a 35-foot wall right on my property line, an oppressive barrier towering over my own property. The Monroe Street residents are unhappy about that prospect. A five-foot side yard wouldn't be a lot, but would allow a bit of breathing space between the resident's property and the coming row house. Furthermore, it seems to me, in the absence of a side yard, maintenance of that exterior row-house wall would be impossible – painting, say – without trespassing on the neighbor's property for access.

This sounds obscure, but it's an immediate issue at the Zoning Commission, which has to rule on an Office of Planning recommendation to eliminate any requirement for side yards on row houses. I'm asking the ANC to pass a resolution opposing this change, and requiring a five-foot side yard at the end of any row.

Two families on 18th Street want to **replace a falling-down old garage** to build a replacement, styled to match the historic district. Not good enough, says the Historic Preservation Office; it should be restored and preserved, as an example of "important remnants of an early, suburban phase of development of the neighborhood, because relatively few residents could afford a carriage and team or an automobile—and a place to store them—just after the turn of the century".

I wonder how many passers-by in this alley stop and admire this decrepit garage as an "important" bit of Mount Pleasant history. Do we care that, a century ago, only the wealthy could afford a "carriage house"?

When Mount Pleasant agreed, reluctantly, to historic district designation, in 1985, the idea was to prevent the tearing down of old houses and replacing them with modern buildings, incongruous in style with the traditional style of Mount Pleasant. In short, it was to fend off developers. It wasn't, I think, to lock us homeowners in to whatever exists, however dilapidated or shabby or useless, and whatever the needs of the homeowner.

We have **PSA meetings** once a quarter, at La Casa Community Center, on Mount Pleasant Street. Attendance has been very low, generally only a couple of residents in attendance. And the new ownership of the building requires that the front door be locked during our meetings, a very inconvenient arrangement. Hence, beginning with the April meeting, we'll try having the PSA meeting at the start of a regular ANC meeting. We'll see how well that works.

I mentioned last month that the District Council is considering a bill **to restrict short-term rentals – "AirBnB" operations – in the District**. There are many such rentals here in Mount Pleasant, AirBnB alone offering more than 200. With few exceptions, these are residents renting out a portion of their homes for a bit of additional income, in some cases income needed to afford homeownership in this neighborhood. In some cases, they're more like tiny motels, but I've heard few complaints from neighbors.

The opponents of short-term rentals assert that, by taking rental units off the regular rental market, these short-term rentals increase the prices of long-term rentals. A rather anti-short-term-rental report by McGill University, based on a detailed study of such rentals in New York City, found that these rentals increased long-term rental rates by just 1.4%. As the executive director of the Coalition for Nonprofit Housing and Economic Development said in a recent Washington Post report, short-term rentals in DC "*do not have a major impact on the housing stock*" at this time. They are competition for hotels, which are leading the effort to suppress such rentals.

The next meeting of the ANC will be on <u>Tuesday, March 20</u> , 7:00 pm, at the Mount Pleasant Library.
