

Jack's February report

At a January 22 meeting, the ANC:

- * Elected officers for 2014;
- * Set the meeting calendar for 2014.

Why the very short list of things done at the January ANC meeting? Elementary: the meeting was scheduled for January 21, and that was the big snow day, causing the Federal Government to close for the day, hence causing the Mount Pleasant Library to close. (How many cities are shut down for a mere 4 inches of snow?) Now that are meetings are at the Library, if the Library is closed, then our meeting can't take place, even if we're all present and ready to go. In contrast to La Casa Community Center, we can't go there ourselves and unlock the door.

But we really must have a January meeting, because there are things we are required by DC law to do at a January meeting, including the **election of officers for the year**. We happened to have a PSA meeting the following evening – at good old La Casa, not the Library – and the five commissioners met immediately after that meeting, specifically to handle ANC administrative matters, nothing more.

The ANC officers for 2014: Chairperson: Adam Hoey; Vice chairperson: Yasmin Romero-Latin; Secretary and Treasurer: Jack. Our monthly meetings will continue to be on the third Tuesday of every month.

Weather records we would rather not set: the high temperature on January 22 was 19 degrees, the lowest high ever recorded on that date. But it could be worse. On January 19, 1994, the high temperature for the day was a miserable 8 degrees.

February rarely has the bitter cold weather of January, but tends to have more snow. Well, spring is not far off now.

There's been an **abandoned Isuzu** clogging up 18th Street just north of Park Road for months. It's now extremely difficult to get such vehicles accepted by the District as "abandoned". They've had troubles in the past of having owners show up demanding to know why their car was towed away, simply because it had been left on the street for a long time. So now the criteria that a car must meet to be declared "abandoned" are stringent, and even cars that are very obviously dumped may not qualify.

The conclusive proof that a car is "abandoned" is expiration of the registration. This Isuzu's registration expired on January 16, and that's when I sent in the "abandoned" request. It took a couple of weeks, but the car is gone. We don't have curbside parking space to waste on such vehicles.

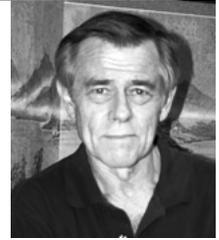
There's a decrepit Mercury on Park Road just west of 18th. Its registration will expire on February 28, and then it'll be on my hit list for removal.

That abandoned Isuzu was just south of the alley off 18th Street where DDOT, claiming "safety" as an issue, **drastically increased the no-parking distance from that alley**. The standard minimum parking distance from an alley is 5 feet. DDOT moved the no-parking signs to 20 and 25 feet from the alley entrance, on both sides of 18th Street, costing

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the neighborhood four curbside parking spaces.

I have protested this change, arguing that the increased distance might be justified in one location – towards southbound 18th Street traffic, from the alley exit on the west side of 18th – but not for all four. Councilmember Graham has been supportive of my arguments, worrying that this is setting a precedent that could cost us parking spaces adjacent to many other alleys in Mount Pleasant and Ward 1.

DDOT's reply: "safety is our utmost importance". Well, indeed, then every alley in our neighborhood could see greatly expanded no-parking zones, however costly this might be in curbside parking.

But a curious thing happened: a DDOT contractor, working on that alley, thought those big no-parking zones were just dandy places to park his big backhoe, and to stack alley materials head-high, doing a much better job of restricting visibility than any passenger car. It seems that DDOT's statement that "safety is our utmost importance" applies only to residents' parked cars, not to a DDOT contractor's vehicles and materials.

The Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) considered **the proposed development of 1867 Park Road** on January 23. Plenty of opposition was evident in the testimony, including from Councilmember Jim Graham, who said that he objected to the precedent of turning one of these grand mansions into an apartment house. The HPRB quickly dismissed his argument, noting simply that the proposed use of a building wasn't a factor to be considered in their decision. So much for the powerful Councilmember's argument.

The ANC resolution (mine) argued that it was too big, employing in particular the provision of R-4 zoning that allows apartment houses 60% lot coverage, whereas other detached houses are allowed only 40%. The Board ignored that, and did not even bother to ask questions of any of the several residents who testified in opposition to the development. As I've said before, the HPRB is not required to, nor even allowed to, have their decisions influenced by popular opinion, whether of neighbors, the ANC, or our Ward One Councilmember. They consider only the technical issue: is it compatible, or is it not? Nothing else matters.

And yet, the verdict was everything that the opponents wanted, much to the dismay of the architect representing the developer. Essentially, the Board said that the two houses to be built on the lot, joined to create a six-unit apartment house,

looked like an original house with an enormous addition attached. That interpretation – that this was an addition to the existing house – was their grounds for rejecting the conceptual design, even overriding the Historic Preservation Office staff report, which recommended “that the Board find the general concept compatible with the character of the historic district”, with only two modest changes.

The architect is now in a fix, because that joining of two buildings to create an apartment house was central to his concept. If two separate houses are built, then it's not an apartment house, and the structures are permitted only the 40% lot coverage for detached houses, rather than the 60% permitted for apartment houses. (The ANC recently passed my resolution objecting to that provision.) The architect's design occupied 48% of the lot, more than will be allowed if it isn't an apartment house.

In my testimony, I stated that this incongruous development was exactly what residents of Mount Pleasant had in mind when, in 1986, the neighborhood became a designated historic district. The HPRB didn't care about that, objecting to this proposal not because of its size, but because it looked like “an addition” to the existing house.

Historic preservation is turning out to be a weak defense against any development. This is bizarre: historic preservation gives us homeowners fits when we try to make modest improvements to our properties, but it isn't an effective defense against developers coming in with outsized plans. The HPRB will be very demanding when it comes to, for example, the materials of visible doors and windows. But that a development is simply big, or is an apartment house where only single-family dwellings existed before, they shrug off as being not under the purview of historic preservation.

And no, they don't care what neighbors think of a proposal, nor what the Councilmember thinks of it, and certainly not what the ANC says about it. They're the experts, and they judge “compatibility”, nothing else.

For years I've tried to solve the problem of **excessive traffic speeds on Park Road**. Excessive speed is due in part to Park Road being a “minor arterial”, not a neighborhood street, and much of the traffic on the road consists of drivers simply passing through Mount Pleasant, as quickly as they can.

In 2009 the ANC passed my resolution calling for speed cameras on Park Road. But the MPD has ignored this request, insisting on putting speed cameras where they wanted – e.g., on Porter Street, crossing Rock Creek Park – and not where we wanted, where speeding cars are a threat to us residents.

We tried revising the configuration of Park Road to slow traffic by passive, “calming” means. That didn't work out, because the physical narrowing of the road also caused an increased hazard to residents getting out of their parked cars on the traffic side.

Relief appears to be at hand, courtesy of CM Graham's continued support in my call for a speed camera in the 2000 block of Park Road. There's no good place for a speed camera for the 1800 or 1900 blocks, but there's an ideal spot in the 2000 block. Where the alley going to the rear of the Pierce

Mill Road residences exits onto Park Road, the bend in the road permits the installation of a camera in the “treebox” space with a clear view down that hill, staring at vehicles entering the neighborhood from Rock Creek Park. This is the location of the highest traffic speeds, as drivers exiting the Park fail to respect the sudden drop in speed limit from 35 to 25 mph.

The MPD at first ignored my observation that this location would be ideal for observing speeds as vehicles enter (or exit) the neighborhood. But with pressure from CM Graham, the MPD now appears to be promising us that speed camera.

For 15 years now I've been interacting with **Councilmember Jim Graham** on neighborhood issues. In fact, many of the things I've been able to accomplish as an ANC commissioner have been done through Jim's office. His voice carries a heck of a lot more weight among District agency officials than mine. He's been an invaluable partner. And I admire his strong, principled support for immigrants – he is one, himself – and for minorities, and for low-income residents.

Yes, he's gotten into a bit of trouble lately, but it should be evident that his mistakes have had to do with getting things done in the District Government. No one is accusing him of trying to make himself rich through his being a Councilmember. He does tend to be blunt about leaning on people to get what he wants, but that's always been about getting things done in Ward One, not about financial gain for himself.

Look at the spectacular development of Columbia Heights as an example of what Jim has been able to do, helping turn what was a barren and dangerous high-crime zone into a thriving commercial and residential area. He's not done this by being a pleasant fellow. No, when Jim pushes, you know you've been pushed. He bulls his way over obstacles.

I want to see Jim continue as our Ward One Councilmember. Yes, Brianne Nadeau is a very nice young woman, with admirable principles and positions. But she's not going to be nearly as effective a representative for Ward One as tough old Jim will be.

On January 16, DDOT held a public information meeting concerning the **Klingle Valley Trail** development. Yes, it's now “Klingle Valley”, no longer “Klingle Road”, and the only issues now are the details of the construction of that bike and hike trail. The pavement will be 10 feet wide, providing space for bicyclists to safely pass pedestrians and dog-walkers. The trail will be lit, for after-dark safety. Work on the trail is to begin this coming fall or winter.

Yes, I hear from residents who would like to have the automobile road back. Recall that in 2003, the District Council passed legislation commanding restoration of the automobile road. But by 2008, after five years of futile planning, it had become evident that the Federal Government was stonewalling that development, presumably objecting to another automobile road through Rock Creek National Park. Hence, it's the recreational trail, or nothing.

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