

Jack's February report

At the January 20 meeting, the ANC:

- Elected officers, and set a calendar of monthly meetings, for 2015;
- Advised acceptance by the HPRB of the HPO staff report for 3240 19th Street, but with relaxation of the stringent demands for invisibility of the rooftop solar panels.

ANC officers were elected for 2015. ANC chairperson is now Frank Agbro (by a 4 to 1 vote, as I voted, alone, for Adam Hoey); vice-chairperson is Rosa Rivas (again by a 4 to 1 vote, as I voted for Adam Hoey). No one objected to my continuing as commission Secretary and Treasurer.

This ANC has been meeting on the third Tuesday of each month. The commission agreed with my proposal to make this “the **Tuesday preceding the fourth Thursday**” of each month. This will frequently, but not always, be the third Tuesday. The change assures that our meeting will be just before the monthly HPRB meetings, which in turn assures us of receiving the HPO staff report each month, issued on the Friday preceding the HPRB meeting.

As I noted last month, I am concerned about the **restrictions imposed on solar energy panels** caused by the historic preservation demand that such things be totally invisible from the street. In the case of 3240 19th Street, this results in panels smaller than they could be, mounted flat whereas they would better be tilted sunwards for maximum sunlight, and mounted just a few inches above the roof surface, complicating drainage and cleaning under the panels.

Nothing in the historic preservation law requires that solar panels be invisible from the street. This rule is in the historic preservation “Guidelines”, not the law. But of course the people judging such things are, by definition, committed historic preservationists, so of course they take the most demanding position. The law requires only that alterations to buildings be “compatible with the character of the historic district”, very vague guidance which the preservationists interpret as “make everything look just as it did circa 1935”. I was especially struck by the comment by the president of Historic Mount Pleasant at the December 18 meeting of the HPRB that “*solar panels are a blight on the neighborhood*”.

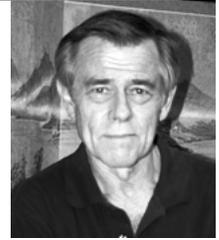
I think energy conservation, clean air, and prevention of climate change are more important than a bit of visibility of solar energy systems from the street. In 1985, when Mount Pleasant became a historic district, were people aware that that would conflict with the installation of renewable energy systems on our homes? I don't recall anyone thinking of that at the time. Well, it's a new century, solar energy systems are becoming increasingly affordable, climate change is increasingly worrisome, and I think historic preservation ought to allow a little flexibility to promote such systems. There are things more important than making our houses look as if nothing's changed in the past 80 years.

Historic district designation was accepted (over substantial opposition) in order to prevent our houses from being razed and replaced with modern structures. Fair enough. Why is it also necessary that every detail of our houses be fixed

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Jack McKay, February 8, 2015

Jack McKay
3200 19th St, Tel. 462-8692
jack.mckay@verizon.net
<http://DCJack.org>



forever, so that every house looks just as it did long ago? Our houses are our homes, not museum pieces.

I've mentioned that there are plans to **convert the Meridian Hill Baptist Church to condos**. That's the big church on 16th Street, between Irving Street and Park Road, that was severely damaged in the 2008 fire that destroyed the Deauville. The congregation had long since left town, and the conversion of this abandoned church to productive use was certainly a favorable development.

At an ANC-arranged community meeting in 2013, the developers suggested that perhaps they would not have to build the 28 off-street parking spaces required by R-5-D zoning. That notion was rejected by residents, of course, because any cars owned by residents of this building would surely be parked back among our row houses, overnight parking on 16th Street being impractical. I have been awaiting a BZA filing for a variance, anticipating that we could negotiate some kind of compromise, understanding that building underground parking is very costly, and of course this location is very well served by urban transit. Current law would reduce the off-street parking requirement by half, due to the proximity of the Columbia Heights Metro station.

Well, no notice of a BZA filing ever came, and yet, construction has begun. A phone call from the president of Historic Mount Pleasant revealed that the developers had evidently gotten permission to build with zero off-street parking! The permission came via the DCRA Zoning Administrator: “seventy five (75) parking spaces credit was granted per zoning administrator's determination letter”.

What was the basis for this “credit” of 75 parking spaces? Well, the church had a zoning requirement for 75 off-street spaces, corresponding to its Certificate of Occupancy for up to 750 persons. The church had, in fact, only a few off-street parking spots. So it was argued that the church had a de facto “variance” good for 75 off-street parking spots, and that more than covered the 28 required by R-5-D zoning for the condominium building replacing the church. Hence the “credit” of 75 spots, and the construction with zero off-street parking spaces.

As absurd as that is, it seems to be established practice in the District, and we're not going to be able to reverse this. I am pressing for efforts to minimize car ownership at this building, and further to deny residents RPP parking privileges, so their cars won't end up parked on the row-house blocks. The developer has been fully cooperative to this end.

On January 12 the Department of General Services (DGS) held a community meeting at **Bancroft Elementary** to display plans for modernization of the school. A central element of the plans is the shifting of the soccer field from the west side of the school to the east, immediately adjacent to “little” Mount Pleasant Street.



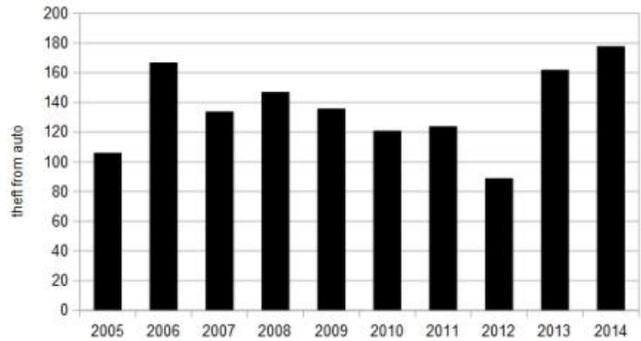
The DGS representatives were surprised to encounter a lot of opposition to that particular aspect of the plan. No one disputes the desirability of school modernization. But putting the soccer field there threatens the nearby residents with noise, traffic, and lights. On the west side of the school, the existing soccer field is well isolated from the street, minimizing any disruptions for the 18th Street neighbors. On the east side of the school, there's nothing but the narrow street between the field and the adjacent residents.

I'll keep close track of these plans. The designers seem to have been wholly unaware of the problem of disruptions imposed on the Mount Pleasant Street neighbors. Now that they're aware of it, let's see what they propose to do about it.

Mount Pleasant is not a high-crime neighborhood, though people accustomed to distant suburbia are sometimes upset at what crime does occur. (I recall one unhappy neighbor complaining bitterly that the realtor who sold him their house hadn't “warned him about this” – two street homicides adjacent to Mount Pleasant Street in the fall of 2003.)

Fortunately that kind of violence has decreased here. There has been just one homicide in the past three years, and robberies, as I noted recently, have decreased by half in the past decade. Most troublesome here is perhaps **theft from auto**. Leave anything of value visible in your car, and you're all too likely to discover a car window smashed and your property gone.

Emily and I have both been victims. The theft-from-auto thieves no longer target nice car radios – little resale value, I guess – and now prefer GPS navigation systems. Even those are in decline, I hear, perhaps because so many cellphones now perform that task, decreasing the value of GPS devices to people willing to purchase shady goods. Still, the overall number of thefts from auto has, in contrast to robberies, remained constant through recent years, or increased a bit:



The guys who do this know that they are practically certain to get away with it. The rate at which thefts are “closed by arrest” is a pitiful 8%. The MPD doesn't have the resources to invest much effort in attempting to solve small property crimes, and a theft from auto doesn't leave many clues. Police patrols accomplish little, because the guys who do these crimes just wait until there's no one in sight. It's really up to us residents to be careful about what's left visible in our cars parked on the street.

In 2011, MPD Chief Lanier moved Mount Pleasant out of the Third District (Columbia Heights, Adams Morgan) and into the Fourth (16th Street Heights, Petworth). We objected at the time to this **making our neighborhood a remote corner of 4D**, when our natural connections to – and our crime problems stem from – the adjacent 3D neighborhoods. Lanier ignored our protests, and so we are now what Jim Graham described as “a bump on the rump” of 4D.

At the most recent PSA meeting, a complaint was made about the behavior of the MPD officers who like to hang out at the 7-11 on Mount Pleasant Street. Lieutenant Pate noted that most of those officers were from 3D headquarters, a short distance away in Adams Morgan, so he didn't know them, and has no authority over them. Our MPD officers come from 4D headquarters, far out on Georgia Avenue, or the MPD substation on Park Road, adjacent to Georgia Avenue.

Forcing Mount Pleasant into 4D was a bad idea in 2011, and it remains a bad idea today. Cross 16th Street into Columbia Heights, going to the DCUSA shops or the Metro Station, and you're in 3D. Go south, to U Street or Adams Morgan, and you're in 3D. Why are we in 4D, when our connections are so clearly to our 3D neighbors, not to the distant neighborhoods of 4D? We need maximum coordination of police patrols with our nearby neighbors, not with distant Georgia Avenue.

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