

Jack's July report

At the June 18 meeting, the ANC:

- Asked the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) to postpone any review of the Oakwood Terrace development until September (4 to 0 vote);
- Advised ABRA to approve the application by Radius Pizza for termination of its “voluntary agreement” with the MPNA (4 to 0 vote).

Back in February, 2012, I wrote of the project to convert the **Meridian Hill Baptist Church**, on 16th Street, into condominiums. This great building has stood vacant and neglected since being damaged by the Deauville fire in 2008. The ANC endorsed the developer's application for a rather minor zoning variance, allowing a rear “yard” smaller than the 26 feet required by the zoning regulations. The BZA granted that variance in March, 2012. The developer had also gotten HPRB approval, in 2011. So all seemed to be in order to see this fine building restored to productive use.

For reasons I don't know, that developer, Bozzuto Homes, transferred the property to another developer, Valor Development. This developer has come to the ANC to test the waters for some changes to the design, most significantly, eliminating the parking garage that was to be built into the rear of the building. That would require another zoning variance, because the current regulations require one off-street parking space for every three dwelling units. The 32 parking spots planned, for 57 condos, were more than sufficient to meet the zoning requirement.

Building such a parking garage would be costly, of course, and the new developer is hoping to build more condos, 73, instead of this parking garage. There's considerable support from the DC Government these days for reducing off-street parking requirements, specifically in locations where there is good bus service and a Metro station nearby. This is partly to reduce the cost of urban condominiums, and partly to encourage a transition to a city with fewer cars.

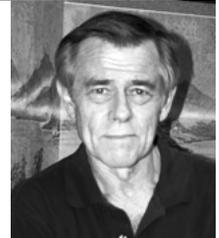
But would the residents of this building be content to live without owning cars? Surely not all would, and car-owning residents of this building would no doubt be looking for curbside parking back on our neighborhood streets, where there's already not enough parking to meet demand. So the developer proposed that parking spaces be reserved at the DCUSA garage, a bit over a block away, for use by these condo owners. A nice idea, I think, but I'm afraid that walk from Hiatt Place to 16th Street, especially late at night, would be a serious deterrent to the use of that garage. People would rather walk from our neighborhood streets back to 16th, than take that hike from Columbia Heights, along Irving Street, which tends to be rather dark and lonely late at night.

I've advised the developer that this concept isn't going to be acceptable here. Much as we agree that reducing car ownership is a desirable goal for this traffic-congested city, the reality is that residents will have cars, and will compete for curbside parking along our neighborhood streets. One off-street parking space for every three condos is already a small number.

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The Oakwood Terrace development

battle continues. As one resident posted, “They want to tear down dozens of

trees and build a heinous looking condo development!!”

Well, I don't know about “heinous looking”, but the proposed design has won support from Historic Mount Pleasant, and from the Historic Preservation Review Board. As for “condo development”, the project will comprise just four row houses. But such has been the inflamed level of discourse about this proposal.

At the May 23 HPRB hearing, the Board “renewed the conceptual approval of the proposed site plan, height, massing of the new construction, including the 17th Street wall, but with the applicant to return to the Board with further development of the design”. The topic may be on the HPRB agenda for July 25. The ANC passed a resolution asking that this be postponed until September (there being no August HPRB meeting), to permit residents to attend this meeting, many perhaps being out of town for summer vacations.

ANC Commissioner Adam Hoey sponsored a meeting at the Library on June 27 for a more temperate discussion of the proposal, including changes made by the owner/architect/-developer, Carmel Greer. She is making changes to try to please neighbors, but it remains the case that a fair chunk of currently green, vegetated land would be replaced by houses. While we may not like that, it's her property, and if what she wants to build is compliant with zoning regulations, then she has the right to build it. The chairperson of the HPRB said as much, at the May 23 meeting.

The most dangerous of all robbers is the teenager with a gun. Of the 22 robberies in Mount Pleasant so far this year, this was the first to employ a gun: “While walking in the area of 18th Street NW and Newton Street NW [at 1 AM on June 30], the victim was approached by a suspect displaying a dark colored handgun. . . . The victim handed his property over to suspect two and suspect three. The suspects fled the scene. Suspect 1-3 are described as . . . 14-17 years of age.”

A similar incident (but without a gun) occurred at 17th and Monroe shortly before midnight on July 2: “3300 block of 17th Street, N.W. – Complainant reported that he was walking when he was approached by several suspects that punched him about his body. The suspects obtained the complainant's wallet then fled the scene. Minor injuries. The suspects were Juveniles”. (Again, teenagers!) The victim was a Newton Street resident, who reports that he was beaten up when he tried to tell them that he had no cash.

Here's some brutal advice for residents who must frequent the blocks near 16th Street at night: *carry some cash*, enough to hand over and persuade the attackers that you're not holding out on them. It's been said that \$60 is sufficient. Less than that, and the threatened violence may become real violence.

This is bitter advice, to be sure, and there are those who will assert that this is surrendering to the criminals. But one must face the realities of life in the inner city. When confronted by a robber, cooperate, don't try to be a Clint Eastwood. Losing a bit of money is one thing. Being assaulted and potentially seriously injured, even crippled for life, is far worse.

The robbery count here is half what it was just ten years ago: roughly 40 robberies per year, versus 80 in 2003. And there are fewer robberies per resident here than in any other neighborhood east of Rock Creek Park. But it's not zero. Virtually all robberies here occur within two blocks of 16th Street, so if that's where you must spend your time, be prepared.

The June ANC meeting was preceded, by the way, by a 45-minute dialog with Lieutenant Pate, responding to concerns about robberies on and near Brown Street. He's well aware of the robbery problem on the "east end" of Mount Pleasant.

As of July 1, **Bancroft Elementary has a new principal**, Alison Auerbach. I think Bancroft is beginning to become truly our neighborhood's school, as more Mount Pleasant parents send their children there, instead of trucking them off every morning to fancier west-of-the-Park schools. There's considerable out-of-boundary demand for Bancroft, as it gains increasing recognition as a fine bilingual school, one of the best elementary schools on this side of Rock Creek Park.

On July 2 a groundbreaking ceremony was held for the **Monseñor Romero apartments**, to be built as a replacement for the old Deauville. Mayor Gray came, and Mount Pleasant Street was closed throughout that morning, confounding local traffic. Construction is expected to be complete in about 15 months.

Key to this development, led by the National Housing Trust, is that these apartments will be "affordable" rentals, and all the people who resided in the Deauville and were displaced by the fire of March, 2008 will be able to return.

All 200 residents of the Deauville escaped the fire that night, even though no fire alarm sounded. The first residents who noticed the smoke raced up and down the corridors, banging on doors, sounding the warning, getting their neighbors out before saving themselves. And a block away, Alberto Ferrufino opened up Don Juan's Restaurant as an all-night refuge for the Deauville residents, on that cold March night.

A Newton Street resident writes that **his dog was attacked and seriously injured by a pit bull** on Newton, while both dogs were being walked on leash. I think I know that aggressive dog; that's one home where I don't dare push my newsletter through the mail slot, because that snarling dog on the other side of the door is threatening to bite off my fingers if I do.

I don't believe that pit bulls are an inherently dangerous breed; Emily and I are fans of "Pit bulls and Parolees", a

television show about a pit bull rescue operation. Some pit bulls are shown to be safe, loving pets. Others, however, are incorrigibly aggressive, especially dog-aggressive.

Is this Newton Street pit bull such a dog? I don't know, but this resident wants neighbors to be aware of the danger. The dog's owner has taken full responsibility for the harm done by his dog.

I'm exploring the possibility of **putting the audio of our monthly meetings** (already posted on-line as recordings) onto the internet, so that residents could listen to our proceedings during the meeting. The question is, how many residents would actually listen to our meetings on line? One possibility is a Skype call-in. If you think you would, or you would at least like to have this available, please shoot me an e-mail about it.

The historic preservation law prohibits "**demolition by neglect**", that is, allowing a "historic" property to be ruined by the owner's failure to, say, repair a leaking roof. The Historic Preservation Office has recently published proposed regulations intended to enforce this law, regulations that would allow inspectors to cite homeowners for any visible maintenance shortcomings. Example: "Defective or insufficient weather protection for exterior wall covering, including lack of paint or weathering due to lack of paint or other protective covering". Any such "determination" by an HPO inspector "may not be appealed". And if the homeowner doesn't do as he's instructed, "the Director may enter the Property and make the Repairs".

Mount Pleasant became a historic district in 1986 in an effort to fend off "incongruous" development, exemplified by the garage-front homes on 18th Street at Park Road. Were we warned that we were turning over control over our own homes to the District Government, allowing inspectors to demand that we paint this, repair that, whatever our own notions of what is really needed, and regardless of our own finances? We're supposed to preserve our houses as if they're priceless historic relics, not homes in which people live.

In my June newsletter, I protested **the dreadful ANC meeting of May 21**, which didn't end until half past 11 PM. There's no need to make our business meetings into public hearings, not when we've got a full month between these meetings to engage in dialog with the neighborhood. Commissioner Phil Greiner arranged a community meeting on June 25 at the Library to discuss the Meridian Hill Baptist matter, and Adam Hoey led a June 27 meeting to talk about the Oakwood Terrace development. Such meetings are vastly superior to our ANC meetings for neighborhood dialog, because the entire meeting can deal with a single topic, and nobody has to sit through boring discussions of other issues.

Every legislature works this way: hold hearings, at which the public is heard from; then assemble in formal sessions, where the elected representatives decide on the pertinent laws (in our case, resolutions). There's no need to combine these two activities into grueling, hours-long meetings.

The next meeting of the ANC will be on Tuesday, July 16, 2013, 7:00 pm.
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