

HISTORIC MOUNT PLEASANT, INC.

Annual Activities Report

February 24, 2007

During 2006, Historic Mount Pleasant undertook a combination of activities aimed at bringing neighbors together while celebrating and protecting features of the built environment that attracted many of us to the neighborhood in the first place. These activities included: maintaining an interactive website and responding to public inquiries; working with the Historic Preservation Office (HPO) in the DC Office of Planning and the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) on permit applications; participating in the City-wide Historic Districts Coalition; serving as fiscal agent for the recently inaugurated Mount Pleasant Heritage Trail; and organizing potlucks in members' homes and an annual holiday party and yard sale. We also provided interim reports to our members in the form of electronic bulletins in April and October.

As reflected in those bulletins, a major change has occurred in our **relationship with the HPO** over the years. While some years back, we were consulted on permit applications for most exterior renovations, that is no longer the case. With 41 historic districts in the District, in addition to numerous individual historic designations, the HPO now processes approximately 4000 permit requests each year. We become involved in cases that are brought to us voluntarily by neighbors (and HPO urges neighbors to consult us) and those cases – approximately 4% of the total – that the HPO staff sends to the HPRB for decision. In those relatively few cases, the HPO staff notifies and seeks input from the appropriate group(s) in the affected neighborhood, and develops a “recommendation” (generally, either to approve the application as is, or with some modification, or to deny the application and, in some cases, request a “redesign”).

HPO staff directly handle the vast majority of permit applications under procedures for “expedited review.” While we recognize the need for such procedures given the volume of work and the repetitive nature of much of it (e.g., window and door replacements, additions not visible from the street), we share the concerns of neighborhood groups in other historic districts about (1) the lack of ready access to information about permit applications and approvals and (2) the consequent inability to challenge staff decisions. This lack of information also makes it impossible for neighborhood groups such as HMP to ensure that builders or homeowners carry out only what has been approved—because we don't know what has been approved. Further, other members of the Historic District Coalition have raised a concern that the HPO itself may not maintain records sufficient for enforcement. HMP has joined a new Coalition committee to develop recommendations to HPO for improvements in the permitting process. We need your suggestions as well as information about specific cases that you feel have not been well-handled.

Given the process used by the HPO, it is perhaps not surprising that during 2006, the HPRB itself—as contrasted with the HPO staff—considered only a handful of cases in the Mount Pleasant Historic District : 1855 Lamont, three-story rear addition; 3131

Mount Pleasant Street, Bank of America, signage; 1725 Harvard, two-story rear addition; 3109 18th Street, third-story addition and roof deck; 3178 Mount Pleasant Street, Bestway, trash enclosures on 17th Street; 3228 Walbridge, front basement entrance; 1821 Newton, large rear addition; 3308 19th Street, freestanding garage with loft; 1705 Irving, front basement entrance; 1865 Newton, three-story rear addition and front basement entrance; and 1663 Newton, front porch reconstruction and small rear addition. The HPRB approved all but four of these projects (most with modifications); those it did not approve were the front basement entrances at 3228 Walbridge and 1705 Irving and the projects at 3109 18th and 1821 Newton, for which redesigns were requested. We supported the HPO staff recommendations in all of these cases except Bestway.

We reported on **Bestway** in both the April and October Membership Bulletins. In January 2006, the Public Space Committee at the District Department of Transportation (DDOT) denied Bestway a permit for the storage of trash on public space. Nevertheless, in August we received notice that the HPRB would consider the design aspects of the project proposed in the permit application that was denied in January. Looking into the situation, we learned that an e-mail had been sent from DDOT to both HPRB and the District's Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA) seemingly giving a green light to consideration of the project. We opposed the project before the HPRB and later wrote to DDOT, with copies to the other agencies, asking that no public space permit be issued without a further public hearing on the application. Our letter was acknowledged by DDOT on December 20, with an answer promised within 30 days. We are still awaiting that reply.

The **Walbridge** case, which the HPRB heard in September, resurfaced in December with press coverage asserting that historic preservation standards were incompatible with the needs of the elderly. HPO wrote an op-ed for the Washington Post, laying out a fuller factual record of the case, which was printed during the last week of December. Further, the HPRB Chairman provided a lengthy e-mail explaining how the existing law and regulations have been able to accommodate needed access for the elderly or persons with disabilities. HMP attempted to respond to inaccuracies circulating in the neighborhood through the on-line Mount Pleasant Forum. Unfortunately, the Forum has not appeared since then. We appeared at the regularly scheduled ANC meeting in January to appeal for cooperation and full analysis of the situation, including the legal framework, before reaching any conclusions on action that may be needed. At a second meeting in January, however, the ANC adopted a resolution calling for an amendment to the Historic Preservation Act. On January 25, we wrote the ANC asking for rescission of the resolution. The resolution was "tabled" at the February meeting, and members of the ANC are in conversation with HPRB Chairman Boasberg to organize a forum on historic preservation in the neighborhood, to be held in late March. We are in touch with the ANC Committee organizing the event. Depending on the final scope and outcome, we may wish to organize further discussions on specific issues, as it is clear that the diverse benefits of living in an historic district are not well understood in the neighborhood.

Our appeal of the denial of a hearing before the Board of Zoning Adjustment (BZA) for **1636 Irving** remains pending. This case concerns the June 2005 issuance, admitted by DCRA to have been in error, of a certificate of occupancy authorizing a change in use from a three- to a seven-unit apartment building. Two separate issues of noncompliance are at issue: (1) lot coverage in excess of the 40% allowed for “apartment buildings” in an R-4 zone and (2) a number of units in excess of the three allowed under the formula of 1 per 900 square feet of total lot size. On May 23, 2005, the ANC had adopted a resolution requesting that DCRA not issue the certificate of occupancy due to zoning violations. An appeal to the BZA in 2005 was dismissed for lack of timeliness. Our appeal to the U.S. Court of Appeals – if successful, and we feel we have a very strong case – will reopen these issues and allow all parties with an interest to be heard at the BZA. We expect our appeal to be heard later this spring. Legal costs have been financed to date by a combination of regular and special funds, but we will require more contributions specifically for this purpose to see the case to conclusion. Given development pressures in the neighborhood today, the case is central to our mission of preserving the historic fabric against financial opportunists seeking to profit from what the broader neighborhood has to offer. Contributions for the 1636 Irving case should be sent to Jim Barnett at 1841 Park Road and marked for “Special Expenses.”

In our October bulletin, we mentioned the possibility of financial assistance to businesses on **Mount Pleasant Street** to improve **signage**. After discussion with the Latino Economic Development Corporation (LEDC) and Mount Pleasant Main Street, we have decided to approach businesses that participated in the LEDC project but did not include a new sign in the final package and offer to split the cost of a new sign 50/50 with a maximum of \$1000/business. As all businesses had been invited to apply to LEDC, this seemed to offer a fair way of limiting our financial exposure while exploring the possibility of working directly with businesses on projects of mutual interest. Of the nine businesses that participated in the LEDC project, five are not getting new signs (Golden Scissors, Yoly’s, Sprint/Western Union, Pfeiffer’s, Banagricola). We will approach these five businesses as soon as we can agree with LEDC on a mutually convenient time.

We have also agreed to cooperate with Mount Pleasant Main Street on activities to be funded by DDOT aimed at developing a “landscape design concept” for Mount Pleasant Street. This is a follow-on to the charrette sponsored by the Main Street program in September 2005 that focused largely on Lamont Park. We are awaiting more information as to what this will entail.

As in prior years, our primary fundraiser was the **yard sale** in June. However, we do need to make some changes in its management to be able to continue this tradition. Handling the large donations of shoes and clothing has proven particularly burdensome – and is not that profitable. Items remaining at the end of the day must be transferred to other charities, a large task in and of itself. As a result, our current thinking is to hold a yard sale this coming June only if restrictions are placed on the items accepted – specifically, no clothing, large appliances, or electronics. We welcome new volunteers to manage the donation process, as it has been handled by the same person for a number of years.

We had good attendance at the **Holiday Party** at the Stoddard Baptist Home but are glad for an early invitation from Linda and Rob Low to host the party at their home this year. We also had five potlucks at members' homes throughout the year which provided opportunities to socialize and discuss HMP activities. Members willing to host such an event are encouraged to contact Jim Barnett or one of the other Board members. We would like to spread these activities throughout the neighborhood.

During the course of the year, we also wrote separate letters to the DC Council (1) urging enactment of the amendments to the Historic Preservation Act that were adopted last summer, and (2) seeking extension of the time to comment on the city's draft Comprehensive Plan. (Notwithstanding the many groups urging delay in adoption of the Comprehensive Plan until the new mayoral administration took office, the Council adopted the revised Comprehensive Plan in December 2006 and forwarded it to the National Capital Planning Commission and to the District Committee of the US House of Representatives for their review. The revised plan will become effective upon completion of federal review.) In addition, we acted as fiscal agent for the development of the heritage trail in our neighborhood. We volunteered to join the Steering Committee of the Historic Districts Coalition when it becomes operational. We also have continuing responsibility for the call box sculptures installed by Michael Ross, so members are urged to contact a Board member to report any that are damaged.

As this report makes evident, Historic Mount Pleasant is being increasingly drawn into discussions of policy issues that affect historic districts throughout the City. To participate effectively, we need to be able to represent the views of our members and issues within the neighborhood. The Board needs help to follow all these issues and manage HMP events. All members are encouraged to volunteer their time and help expand HMP's programs and positive impact on life in Mount Pleasant.