



HISTORIC MOUNT PLEASANT

Annual Report Of the Board of Directors Fiscal Year 2011

Presented at the Annual Meeting
March 3, 2012

Incorporated in 1985, Historic Mount Pleasant (HMP) aims to bring neighbors together to celebrate and protect features of the Mount Pleasant Historic District that give the neighborhood its special character. Our website (www.historicmountpleasant.org) provides basic information about historic district requirements and links to a variety of other resources on historic preservation. We regularly field inquiries from residents about individual properties and work with the Historic Preservation Office in the D.C. Office of Planning and other official entities to resolve issues affecting the historic district. We participate in the D.C. Historic Districts Coalition and sponsor social and educational activities in Mount Pleasant.

Advice and Assistance on Exterior Renovations

Our principal ongoing responsibilities relate to exterior renovations in Mount Pleasant – advising and assisting neighbors on permit requirements, reviewing designs with architects, and providing input on cases going before the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB). Given the broad scope of authority delegated by the Board to the staff of the Historic Preservation Office (HPO), the cases actually going to the Board for decision are relatively few in number. HPO advises all applicants whose cases must go to the Board to share their plans with both HMP and the Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC), and the HPRB invariably asks for our views during the hearing. If we cannot attend the hearing, we provide comments in writing to the staff beforehand. In all cases going to the Board, we invite the applicant to discuss his or her plans with us and also invite the views of neighbors who have expressed particular concerns about the project.

During Fiscal Year 2011 (December 2010–November 2011), HPRB reviewed and approved four projects in Mount Pleasant – at 17th and Oakwood, 1709 Harvard, 3146 16th, and 1620 Lamont. In December 2010, it approved in concept the design for three townhouses to be built on the vacant lot at the corner of 17th and Oakwood. The houses would face Oakwood Terrace and have a shared garage/storage area below, to be entered from 17th Street. However, we are aware of no steps toward actual construction being taken at this time. In March, HPRB approved a small rear addition at 1709 Harvard. In July, it reviewed for the first time a proposal to transform Meridian Hill Baptist Church into a 45-unit condominium. The project entails razing the rear portion of the church – the original brick structure heavily damaged in the March 2008 fire – and building new wings behind and to the south of the limestone part of the church. HPRB approved the proposed demolition but asked for further development of the new design, in particular to preserve the existing openings in the limestone. Revised plans were presented in December and final approval has been delegated to staff. In November, HPRB rejected a proposal to build a brick wall to separate the front yard of 1620 Lamont from the driveway alongside owned by the Mount Pleasant Condo. HPO staff approved in December the plan for the open 36-inch iron railing now in place at that location.

In March 2011, HPRB approved illustrated Preservation and Design Guidelines for Basement Entrances and Windows for historic properties throughout the city, available at www.planning.dc.gov/historic-preservation. These guidelines expand upon the front basement entrance guidelines adopted specifically for Mount Pleasant in 2008. The earlier guidelines

(available on our website) were the result of HMP's advocacy on behalf of several homeowners who wanted to install such entrances and whose houses were situated so as to allow the addition of front basement entrances without major changes to the way the houses were seen from the street. Under the guidelines, new entrances should retain original topography, entrance stairs and stoops as well as character-defining features of front porches. They should not include the excavation of front yards to construct at-grade access walkways from the sidewalk or new entrances in front of projecting bays. Members are urged to help "spread the word" about these and other guidelines, and to encourage those who are contemplating a change of this kind to consult HMP and/or the guidelines.

Smaller projects have continued to appear, some without building permits posted. While repairs involving replacement of original materials in kind generally do not require permits, larger projects – including the replacement of windows or exterior doors in historic districts – do, and the permits must be displayed where they are visible to the street. The D.C. Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA) issues all building permits. The Office of Historic Preservation in the Office of Planning must clear on all permits in historic districts. Work in public space, such as excavations in front yards that are part of the right of way for our streets, requires a permit from the District Department of Transportation. If you are concerned about work proceeding without the proper permits posted, you may report it to Toni Cherry, chief inspector for HPO (toni.cherry@dc.gov), the DCRA illegal construction hotline at 442-STOP (7867), or the Mayor's call center (311). We try to answer all questions from neighbors about possible illegal construction but cannot always do so in a timely manner. The best time to stop such activity is when it is in process.

The Library

On August 17, 2010, DCRA issued a building permit for the renovation and expansion of the Mount Pleasant Branch Library. The decision was based on input from, among others, the Commission of Fine Arts, the Historic Preservation Review Board, and the Zoning Administrator, who had ruled that the project complied with the rear yard setback requirements of the zoning code. The code requires a minimum rear lot setback of 15 feet. During discussions with HMP, project architects said that – given the library's location on a corner lot – they could elect to treat either side yard as the rear yard and, to maximize the size of the addition, they would treat the south side as the rear and build out to the lot line on the west. (This decision proved highly controversial in the wake of the Deauville fire, with some residents asserting the need for access from Lamont Street to the rear of apartment buildings south of the library.) However, contrary to the Library's assertions, the applicant does not choose where the rear yard is but must be guided by the building itself. The rear yard, logically enough, is at the rear of the building, not off to one side. If the required setback is not to be met, a variance is required, and the Zoning Administrator does not have the discretion to rule otherwise, as he had done in this case.

It was only after the building permit issued that members of the Adams Morgan and Mount Pleasant ANCs became aware of the Zoning Administrator's decision and appealed it to the Board of Zoning Adjustment (BZA). On June 21, 2011, after numerous procedural rulings and two deadlocked votes due to a vacancy on the Board, the BZA reversed the Zoning

Administrator. The tie-breaking vote was cast by new BZA member Lloyd Jordan, a former DCRA Director who had supervised the Office of Zoning and made a strong statement regarding the Zoning Administrator's lack of discretion to deviate from the plain meaning of the zoning code. The Library immediately applied for a zoning variance, and the hearing was scheduled for July 19.

To obtain a variance, an applicant must show that it is faced with (1) an "exceptional situation" that poses (2) "practical difficulties" for it as a property owner and that (3) the zoning relief requested would not result in substantial detriment to the public good or impair the zone plan. The Library argued that the unusual shape and small size of the lot, "ambiguity" concerning the location of the rear yard, historic nature of the building, public use of the property and the "required" building program combined to meet the first two tests, and that there were no light and air or fire safety problems that required a different approach, thus meeting the third test. The Office of Planning supported the Library.

With only a few days to react to these submissions, the HMP President prepared a brief statement opposing the variance on the grounds that the Library had not met its burden of proof with regard to the first two tests. She also disputed the Library's and OP's characterization of the CFA and HPRB decisions as having left them with no alternative to the design presented, pointing out that the CFA had requested other options that were not developed and the HPRB merely approved the design presented. A zoning expert from Adams Morgan identified numerous flaws in the Library's arguments on the first two variance tests. For procedural reasons, however, it fell to the representatives of the two ANCs to carry the case against the Library, and they failed to do so. As a result, the BZA granted the Library's request for full relief from the rear yard setback requirement, allowing the construction of an addition that is simply too large for the site.

In contrast to homeowners who are denied the right to build an addition of any size simply because they want the interior space that would be created, the Library was allowed to do just that in Mount Pleasant. It is indeed unfortunate that no one following the case learned of the Zoning Administrator's decision in a more timely fashion, when its legal ramifications could have been analyzed and effective pressure brought to improve the design of the addition and the new accessible entrance to the building. The renovated library is expected to open this spring.

All Mount Pleasant Website

Following up on the discussion at last year's annual meeting, in late March 2011 we invited representatives of other neighborhood groups to discuss the possibility of creating a new single website for the neighborhood through which existing websites could be accessed. The goal would be to make it easier to find information about events, businesses and resources that already exists on line but is spread over a number of websites maintained (but not necessarily kept up to date) by different organizations in Mount Pleasant. We found ready agreement that a new single portal of this kind would be desirable. This initiative was followed by conversations within the Mount Pleasant Business Association, including a presentation by a web consulting firm. Phil Lepanto, co-owner of Old School Hardware, has offered to donate free hosting and some Mount Pleasant specific domain names to this cause for two years, as well as his services

in developing the website. He has prepared a development skeleton for it and is seeking a designer to translate this information into a visually effective and user-friendly website. If you have such skills or know anyone who does and would be interested in assisting this project, please contact Phil (phil@oldschoolhardware.com). HMP is a member of the working group supporting this effort and looks forward to the launch of the new website, which should help all organizations in the neighborhood get their information out to people who need it and also help businesses on Mount Pleasant Street attract more customers.

Annual Meeting

In accordance with our by-laws (and longstanding practice), HMP held the 2011 Annual Membership Meeting on March 2, 2011, at Stoddard Baptist Home. The President briefly recapped the highlights of 2010, distributed copies of the Board's Annual Report for Fiscal Year 2010, and outlined potential activities for 2011. The members present unanimously approved the proposed slate of Board members and Officers for 2011. Gabriela Mossi of the Mount Pleasant Business Association briefly summarized the results of efforts funded by the Neighborhood Investment Fund grant awarded jointly to the Association and HMP in 2010. Steve Dryden of the Friends of Peirce Mill outlined the status of the mill's restoration and its plans for reopening in October. The featured speaker was Eric Madison of the National Capital Trolley Museum, who presented a brief illustrated history of the Mount Pleasant streetcar line and showed a video of one of the last such vehicles traveling its entire route from Lamont Park to Capitol Hill.

Historic Homeowners Program

In June, the DC Preservation League proposed partnering with HMP to bring technical preservation information directly to homeowners in our part of the city. The result was the first Historic Homeowners Toolkit program at All Souls Church on Saturday, October 8, cosponsored by HMP. Approximately 15 technical specialists – including roofers, ironworkers, home performance experts and window repair people – were invited to set up display tables and answer homeowners questions. HMP Board member Andrea Foss was among them. There were also presentations on improving energy efficiency and researching property history. Approximately 40 people attended the program and learned ways to improve their property while maintaining its historical integrity. We recommended the All Souls location for ease of access from Metro and were pleased to help DCPL inaugurate this new outreach program.

Historic Districts Coalition

HMP continues to participate on a regular basis in the Historic Districts Coalition, an informal network of neighborhood preservation groups in the city. The Coalition serves as a central source of information on legislative and other local initiatives affecting historic preservation and provides and coordinates testimony before the D.C. Council as necessary. Coalition representatives appear on a regular basis at budget and oversight hearings for the Office of Planning, which includes HPO. In October 2011, the Coalition quickly prepared testimony in support of a bill requiring the DC Government to provide homeowners in historic districts yearly notices of legal requirements related to property improvements – a long-time goal of preservation groups that had previously been opposed by the Office of Tax and Revenue

(OTR). The Coalition had the information about the earlier efforts and spoke readily about the technical issues raised by the proposed legislation. This time – with the support of the Mayor and OTR – the legislation was approved. All property owners in historic districts including Mount Pleasant will receive the first of these information letters with the 2012 assessment notice.

Two years ago, long-time HDC coordinator Nancy Metzger of Capitol Hill announced her desire to step down. With no logical successor in sight, she sought guidance from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which led a strategic planning exercise for the Coalition last year. The Trust’s report outlining three possible transition scenarios was presented July 29, 2011. Nancy is now a member of the HPRB, and HMP is working with other key HDC players to determine the organizational structure, breadth and manner of future Coalition activities. An effective HDC is essential to ensure that neighborhood groups such as ours know when an issue affecting their interests is coming before the DC Council and to help them coordinate their response to it.

ANC Redistricting

In late September, we learned that the Ward One Redistricting Task Force was considering a proposal to remove the Mount Pleasant commercial corridor from the jurisdiction of the Mount Pleasant ANC. In general, the proposal would have divided the neighborhood along 17th Street and reassigned the portion to the east to the Columbia Heights ANC, reducing the Mount Pleasant ANC to a three-member body representing primarily rowhouse dwellers west of 17th Street. The effect would have been to deny the latter an effective voice in the future of Mount Pleasant Street. The proposal was being advanced by the President of the Mount Pleasant ANC, the only representative of Mount Pleasant on the Task Force, and was thus being given serious consideration by other Task Force members.

The final meeting of the Task Force, at which recommendations to the D.C. Council would be adopted, was scheduled for October 3 and was not open for public comment. As a result, two HMP Board members sent letters to the Task Force before the meeting opposing this proposal. The letters recounted the historical development of the commercial corridor alongside the Mount Pleasant community and HMP’s efforts over 25 years to improve the condition of Mount Pleasant Street. HMP representatives attended the October 3 Task Force meeting, where the proposal was defeated by one vote. The Ward One Task Force recommended that the Mount Pleasant ANC boundaries remain unchanged, but that the number of single member districts be reduced from six to five, reflecting the drop in population. The Council has yet to vote on ANC redistricting.

Promoting Broader Membership and Involvement

The restoration this past year of 1724 Park Road – long a neighborhood eyesore – as a four-unit LEED-certified condominium was cause for celebration. In recognition of HMP’s advocacy for restoration of the property before the HPRB, DCRA and the Condemnation Board, Dana Keeney and Paul Young of 1726 Park (the “tricycle house”) hosted a garden party on September 18 to publicize our work and invite others to join HMP. It was a lovely afternoon.

New neighbors mingled with old and exchanged information about themselves and the neighborhood. We look forward to repeating events of this kind in the future.

The annual Holiday Party, held on the first Friday in December, has long been our main membership drive. We want to express our sincere appreciation to Leslie Blakey and Joe Wohlmuth for hosting the party this year at 1770 Park Road. In the past, we have mailed invitations to the entire neighborhood – at great expense and with few visible results in terms of new members. In 2010, we decided instead to post invitations on websites and in the neighborhood and to send e-mail invitations to everyone on our active membership list. If we missed anyone who should have received a direct invitation, please contact us to make sure we have your correct e-mail address.

At the end of November 2011, HMP had 87 members (13 life, 45 family, and 29 individual), down from the approximately 140 that we had in the early 2000s. Some of this drop is undoubtedly due to our failure to send reminders to prior year members who do not attend the holiday party or the annual meeting, but we intend to mend our ways. We also aim to improve regular communication with members through brief monthly bulletins based on Board meetings. However, we cannot meaningfully increase the number or variety of activities without more participation by members.

For many years, there were active standing committees for membership, communications, education and design review, among other things. Only the Design Review Committee remains today. We need volunteers to chair and/or participate in new committees to conduct specific activities throughout the year. Website management and communications are the critical needs at the present time, but we also need assistance to organize more workshops and continue historical research activities. Please give us your ideas and be willing to share your time. We also urge you to help us reach out to neighbors, particularly new ones, to tell them about Historic Mount Pleasant and elicit their support and participation. HMP can only be as effective as it is representative of its membership at large. You may contact any member of the Board of Directors or send your suggestions to our website at any time (www.historicmountpleasant.org).

Financial statements for the last two fiscal years follow. Last year's report contained only a preliminary statement for 2010, and there are likely to be corrections to both. The 2011 statement shows the \$500 contribution toward new signage at Pupuseria San Miguel described in last year's report, as well as contributions of \$500 to the Mount Pleasant Elm Fund (for periodic treatment of the trees on Adams Mill Road) and \$250 to the Friends of Peirce Mill (to help defray the costs of its reopening celebration in October 2010). To ensure follow-through by Alex's Unisex Salon on the façade improvement plan developed with the Neighborhood Investment Fund (NIF) grant received in 2010, we required that the owners make a \$1000 deposit toward the cost of those improvements, and we returned that deposit in 2011 after the agreed work went forward. We have agreed in principle to help Alex's with the cost of a new blade sign but have not yet received the design or further particulars.