



Mount Vernon Belvedere Clarion

February 2006

Volume 21, Number 2

Our guest speakers for the Tuesday, February 21 general meeting will be Mr. Johns Hopkins of Baltimore Heritage, and Mr. Tyler Gearhart, the new Chair of the CHAP Commissioners. Mr. Hopkins will discuss issues surrounding the ever controversial Urban Renewal Plan and will also discuss issues surrounding the planned and controversial renovations by Baltimore City's Parks and Recreation Department. In particular, Mr. Hopkins will provide details of an alternate solution for access to the three squares. Mr. Gearhart will discuss the future of CHAP in his new role as Chair. See related articles in this edition of the Clarion. Please join us for what promises to be an engaging evening. As always, non-members are welcome to attend. The meeting starts promptly at 7:30 pm at the Belvedere Hotel, lobby level.

Surprise Change to the Urban Renewal Plan:

In a surprise move, City Council Urban Affairs Committee Chair, Paula Brach is now considering allowing heights of over 300ft in the Mount Vernon Urban Renewal Plan. This would wipe out six years of work on heights from the URP "in favor of allowing CHAP to determine height on a case-by-case basis". This is a false premise, and thinly veiled excuse to justify tall buildings. CHAP already has that power and has exercised it here in Mt. Vernon as recently as two years ago when it forced the proposed Maryland Plaza project down to 105 feet (zoning and existing URP allows >300 ft).

It is national standard that preservation commissions have the ultimate power to rule on heights in accordance with context and scale language of their guidelines (within legislated maximums). Unlike other historic jurisdictions, there is a HUGE gap here between reasonable "context and scale" heights and underlying legislated maximums (currently 300

feet). The fact that CHAP recommends a maximum of 90 feet at the Read Street lot should be a clue. This ad hoc CHAP power is why all parties have been working for so long to increase development predictability through legislated height limits, though obviously with different height goals in mind. Now that supporters of skyscrapers realize they are losing this height battle, they would rather leave height like it is, and someone seems to have bought it.

Rodney Little of MHT says "While the Commission on Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP's) review of new construction in Mt. Vernon will offer some protection for the historic scale of the neighborhood, limiting building height to appropriate levels through the renewal plan will strengthen, streamline, and bring enhanced predictability to the design review process" Reverting to the underlying zoning allowance of 300 ft will only serve to reduce developer predictability, re-create this fight over each development, and ensure that the fight doesn't even happen for many of our key vacant parcels for decades. The developer will logically wait until the economy can support 300ft development and hire a team of lawyers and lobbyist to push it past CHAP in a city that is already riddled with CHAP concessions. No height limits is bad government, and a failure to

lead.

Based on the outcry immediately after we learned of this change, it was announced that there will be yet another public hearing (the 6th!), scheduled for March 2nd, 2:00 pm at City Council. Please call Council President Shiela Dixon's office TODAY at: (410) 396-4804 (sdixon@baltimorecitycouncil.com) and urge her not to allow the heights issue to be averted in this poorly disguised end-run. Tell her we have been working for years to reduce the 300 foot zoning allowance to reflect the scale and history of this premiere community. Both CHAP and the Planning Commission agree. This is not the time for City Council to back down. If City Council wants CHAP to have authority, then legislate to the heights that CHAP has recommended to them. Please leave a detailed message if you can't get through.

Mt. Vernon North Square to return to CHAP for approval

For two years now a quiet struggle has been underway regarding the work that the Department of Recreation and Parks (R&P) has planned for Mount Vernon Place (MVP). MVP is a National Historic Landmark District, the highest historical designation bestowed by the National Park Service, a rare honor for our beloved front yard, and one that comes with tremendous responsibility. The MVP squares and surroundings are in pretty poor condition and are estimated to need \$3-5 million to restore them and to reestablish them as Baltimore's glorious centerpiece. MVP can and should rival any urban square in the United States, and many throughout the world.

R&P is pursuing a plan that bypasses national preservation guidelines in a redesign of the North Square. Their \$200,000 plan will re-grade a significant portion of the square to add accessibility ramps and will include upgrades to planting areas and the addition of an underground watering system.

Up until just a few weeks ago, R&P was refusing even to get final CHAP approval for their plan. Thanks to Wanda Watts in Council President Sheila Dixon's office, that is back on track with R&P scheduled to appear before CHAP on March 14. Also,

thanks to a recent meeting facilitated by Councilman Keiffer Mitchell, we better understand R&P's funding and its restrictions. Their money (\$200,000) derives from state revenue which the city calls "Gateway Money." R&P informs us that this money is restricted for use in actual roadway work on major streets such as Charles Street. R&P reported that they believe they can justify using it because the great bulk of the money will be spent to create accessibility ramps from the street into the square. It can't be used for general restoration or marble repair, etc. They do feel they can add the sprinklers and improve the planting beds as "ancillary items" since they will be tearing up so much of the center of the square. So, without the accessibility justification, they can't build the ramps, and without the ramps, they can't put in the sprinklers and flowerbeds that the Friends of Mount Vernon Place would like.

Fortunately, the region's major disability advocacy organization, Making Choices for Independent Living (MCIL), saw this as a boondoggle. In a recent letter to Connie Brown, they observed: "It is our fear that the preservationists are correct in their claim that the city has raised the accessibility issue simply as a cover to push their plan through," and "As reported by the media and elsewhere we understand that you have a budget for only the North Square which is already one of the most accessible parks in the city. The city's failure to provide even temporary access for the recent Monument Lighting in the West Square and the decision to focus these plans on the North Square would indicate that priorities are confused."

The proposed reconfiguration is extremely destructive to the historic integrity of the square, and this failure to follow national preservation standards seriously jeopardizes the community's ability to obtain the major grants and other funding necessary to truly restore MVP.

MCIL, Baltimore Heritage, and MVBA have joined in a coalition to stop the R&P plan and have submitted alternate accessibility recommendations based on a Project for Public Spaces report that was rejected by R&P two years ago. It includes perimeter walks as an option and focuses on the West Square where the major programming is, yet there are no accessibility options. In the meantime we are trying to expedite an interim plan to get temporary accessibility for the West Square before

Midtown Community Benefits District's Spring Town Hall Meeting

Wednesday, March 22, 2006 - 7:00pm

University of Baltimore's Student Center Auditorium

Mount Royal and Maryland Avenues

Our agenda will include presentation of the proposed FY2007 budget.

summer. This first-of-its-kind coalition between preservation and disability advocates is possible because all are confident that both preservation and accessibility standards can be met in MVP, but not under the wasteful and destructive R&P plan.

Unfortunately, this at present puts us at odds with our friends at the Friends of Mount Vernon Place who have voted twice to support the R&P plan. It seems their priority is to see actual work progress, regardless of the long-term implications. We will continue to work with them and R&P, encouraging them to see that a much, much bigger view and plan are required, and to keep this from escalating to the first lawsuit against the city where preservation and disability advocates are co-plaintiffs.

Please contact Councilman Mitchell and Wanda Watts to thank them for their assistance with this issue important to our city, and put March 14, 6 pm on your calendar for the CHAP hearing.

Development Committee

1209 N Charles Plans to Start in March. Struever Bros (SBER), presented updated information to our Architectural Review Committee in late January and plan to be under full construction in March for what will be approximately 80 condominiums and about a dozen market-rate apartments. The project will include first-floor retail, inner-core parking and will be limited to 5 floors. Work will start in restoration of the existing buildings, and the project is already being marketed in local magazines.

101 W. Read Moves Forward. With an endorsement of the MVBA Zoning/Development Committee, Somerset Development received a zoning variance for 101 W Read Street (the Medical Arts Building). They hope to

close on the sale of the property by mid-February, and start renovations sometime this fall.

Comprehensive Master Plan. The draft CMP has just put online and lays out a detailed vision for all development in Baltimore from 2007 – 2012. I encourage every Mount Vernon resident to go online and download the plan (www.liveearnplaylearn.com), and I would appreciate your thoughts (vicepresident@mvba.org). Pages 80, 81 lay out some great goals for strengthening preservation, and a new zoning type is created “Corner Store District” that might be good for us.

AT LAST MONTH'S MEETING...

Henry Hagen, President of Monumental Life and Chair of the Charles Street Development Corporation, gave a brief introduction—*cont on page 5*

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- City Paper, 2005

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Walking Tours of Mount Vernon

The Mount Vernon Cultural District (MVCD) inaugurates its *Walking Tours of Mount Vernon Churches* on Sunday, February 5, 2006 at 1:00pm. Beginning on February 5th, and continuing throughout the year, *Walking Tours of Mount Vernon Churches* will be offered every Sunday. All tours begin at 1:00p.m. and are free and open to the public. Four different tours will be offered, with locations rotating weekly. Participants will rotate among the churches on their own, and will be met at each church by trained docents who will give a guided tour of each church. Please click onto <http://www.mvcd.org/pdf/2005_CHURCHTOURBROCHURE.pdf> to open the brochure with the schedule, map and information about churches on the tour.

MVBA Looking for Volunteers to fill Committee Positions

Bored and looking for something to do in your spare time?

Consider participating in one of MVBA's standing committees. While there is work involved, effecting change in your community can be gratifying through working with fellow citizens and City staff. This month, we highlight two important committees. If you are interested, please contact President Jason Curtis at president@mvba.org.

Public Safety Chair

Goal: To create strong, ongoing communication with police officials and to resolve crime issues in Mount Vernon.

Suggested tasks to accomplish this:

Advise Peter Merles at Midtown of Mount Vernon's crime problems as they occur.

Attend police/community task force meetings.

Track police statistics and provide alerts to community as needed.

Establish regular meeting schedule with police to review their activities in the community, track how they are resolving serious criminal incidents and ridding the neighborhood of ongoing chronic problems such as drug dealing and prostitution, car break-ins, thefts, and business hold-ups.

Sanitation Chair

Goal: To resolve chronic trash dumping problems in Mount Vernon.

Suggested tasks to accomplish this:

Provide sanitation enforcement with weekly list of illegal dumping locations. Register these locations on 311 systems, and coordinate with Peter Merles Executive Director of the Midtown Community Benefits District.

Determining origin of dumped trash and writing letters directly to dumpers and their landlords advising them of the Sanitation rules.

Push for full enforcement of all buildings lacking trash cans.

Periodically posting sanitation regulation flyers in multi-unit buildings.



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of the proposed trolley car circulator that would run from Pratt to Johns Hopkins via Charles street. Mr. Hagen introduced both Mr. David Funk, chair of the Trolley Committee of CSDC, and Mr. Ed Meyers, a hired consultant from Kittelson and Associates.

Mr. Funk explained that three years ago, the concept of a trolley car based circulator was born at the Charles Street Development Corporation by Henry Hagen, President of Monumental Life Corporation. A feasibility study was commissioned that was broken down into three phases. From the outset, the trolley car study was to include as much community input as possible from both businesses and residents.

Phase one was to determine the route, which presently proposes that the route runs up Charles Street to Johns Hopkins University on University Parkway, return south down St. Paul Street, turning west on Mt. Royal Avenue to Maryland Avenue, and down Maryland Avenue to Cathedral Street. Phase two involved the economic study, which is almost complete, with a report due out soon. Phase three, dependent on finding sufficient funding of approximately 1.6m, is the preliminary engineering study to determine if the trolley could actually be constructed.

Ed Meyers, hired as a consultant from Kittelson & Associates, explained the possible benefits

of the circulator project. The project is intended to restore the status of Charles Street, improve desirability and liveability along Charles Street, encourage re-development, improve circulation of individuals up and down Charles Street, and hopefully reduce the need for autos and parking requirements. Mr. Meyers continued by describing the type of equipment that could be used, either a modern and sleek trolley car, or the more historic version. The former has certain benefits, particularly its low floor height and its relatively small size that allows the car to navigate tight spots. It was noted that a fixed rail trolley car is more desirable than rubber tire vehicles, although the former has higher installation costs due to the need for overhead wiring. A simulated video presentation of a modern version of the street car traveling up Charles Street from Baltimore Street to Read Street was shown to the membership present. Proposed service is weekdays from 6am until 12 midnight and weekends and operating approximately every 10 minutes using nine trolley cars. Mr. Meyers showed trolley car installations in both Tampa, Florida and Portland, Oregon, showing their relative sizes, construction costs, and resulting development dollars spent along each line.

Following the presentation was a short question and answer session where chief concerns seem to be overhead wires, traveling through Mt. Vernon Square, conflict with construction of other forms of transportation systems, and parking, and double parking for deliveries to businesses. Both Mr. Meyers and Mr. Funk stressed that there is still plenty of time for community input and that these issues have not been

resolved, but noted that the final design of the system would be based on the broad desires of the system. They also note that they are continuing to gather overall support for the project, particularly as it relates to additional dollars to complete the study, but also monies for installation.


Following the presentation, Paul Warren provided brief updates of the following: The Midtown Urban Renewal Plan and the long running height issue, may come out of the City Council Urban Land Use Committee chaired by Councilwoman Paula Branch by the end of January. Paul also noted that the Medical Arts Building is slated for rehab for residential use, but concessions on parking requirements was agreed to along with lowering the number of units in the building. There is also a proposed amendment to re-include properties that had to be removed from the MURP so that these properties can be developed.

President Jason Curtis noted that a two day Flower Mart has been approved. Jason continued to note that the first meeting of the new year at the Midtown Benefits District went quite well and noted that the representatives from Mt. Vernon are Bill Elke from the Walters Art Museum, and a representative from Struever Brothers.

An individual remarked that the Seven Eleven on Calvert Street has changed hands recently and this would be a good time to revisit issues such as sanitation and operating hours of the store. There was also a brief discussion on the recent spate of graffiti in the neighborhood, and it

was noted that the city's graffiti unit has been very responsive to 311 calls.


New Chair of CHAP - Tyler Gearhart, Executive Director of Preservation Maryland has been nominated by Mayor Martin O'Malley as the new Chair of the Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP), which is responsible for design review of Baltimore City's 30 local historic districts and 120 individual historic landmarks. The nomination was passed by the Executive Appointments committee on January 24, 2006 and is scheduled to be voted on by the full City Council on February 6, 2006. "I am honored to be the Mayor's nominee and look forward to working with Planning Director Otis Rolley toward his goal of having the best city preservation program in the nation," says Tyler Gearhart. "To be successful, we need to preserve Baltimore's unique architectural heritage while creating a framework that attracts compatible new development of the highest quality design." Tyler's primary goals for the Commission include updating its design guidelines for rehabilitation and new construction, implementing an effective interim protection mechanism, and expanding the number of CHAP districts and landmarks. —The Historic Charles Street Association



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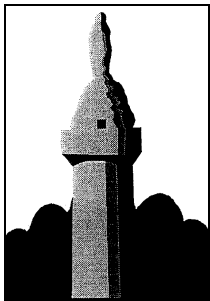
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Mt. Vernon ~ Belvedere Clarion

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Historic Mt. Vernon/Belvedere

Heights of buildings and the Urban Renewal Plan, renovations to Mt. Vernon square parks, and the future of CHAP are the featured topics at the next general membership meeting on Tuesday, February 21, 2006, at the Belvedere Hotel beginning at 7:30 pm.

