

Woodley Park residents question work at Garfield Street development site

By IAN THOMS
Current Staff Writer

Woodley Park residents thought the city had halted work at a Garfield Street house that a developer plans to demolish and replace with two larger houses, so when workers arrived at the site on Friday, several concerned neighbors raised the alarm.

But apparently the D.C. Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs never issued a stop-work order for the property at 2910 Garfield St. "And we can't get to the

bottom of why I was sent an e-mail from DCRA saying a stop-work order was put on the property on May 4," said 29th Place resident Paul DiVito.

A spokesperson for the regulatory agency could not be reached. And calls to the developer, Zuckerman Partners, were not returned.

According to neighbors, the workers who came out on Friday were mapping tree roots on the wooded, hilly property.

Neighbors wanted work stopped on the project because they plan to appeal the zoning administrator's decision to permit the proper-

ty's subdivision. Though the lot was not quite large enough to accommodate two parcels as a matter of right, it was close enough that the city could approve the subdivision administratively as a "minor deviation."

While neighbors are preparing to appeal, Ward 3 Council member Mary Cheh believes a better approach would be to ask zoning administrator Matthew LeGrant to reconsider.

"In an appeal, there's an enormous hurdle to jump over. You have to say he abused his discretion, which means he made a colossally huge mistake," Cheh said. "So I think if the

neighborhood is to have a chance, they really need to have that decision reconsidered."

And Cheh believes LeGrant has reason to reassess his decision. "[LeGrant] considered it a slight deviation and therefore he used his discretion," said Cheh. "However, you don't consider it a minor deviation just because of the amount of property involved. You have to consider the effects of allowing that deviation. And I think the effects are major — two houses that are larger than any other houses in the neighborhood on that tiny lot. It seems so incongruous."

D.C. agencies need greater transparency, speakers say

By JESSICA GOULD
Current Staff Writer

Organizers of the fledgling D.C. Open Government Coalition see hopeful signs for reporters, whistleblowers and everyday citizens as they try to obtain crucial government information.

The coalition emerged about a year ago with two missions in mind: to enhance access to government information and increase government transparency. Specifically, the group seeks to improve the city's open-meetings law and encourage enforcement of the local Freedom of Information Act.

And, after a year of strategizing, coalition president Thomas Sussman said members have reason to feel optimistic. This spring, he noted, two council members introduced bills that would make strides toward accomplishing the group's twin goals.

In March, Ward 4 council member Muriel Bowser introduced the Open Government Is Good Government Act of 2010.

Under current D.C. law, all meetings of any government department, agency, board or commission must be open to the public if any official action is to be taken. But the statute does not define what constitutes official action.

As a result, Bowser said at the forum, the law contains a hole so big "you could drive a truck through it." For example, she said, legislators decided during closed-door budget sessions last year to abolish the Office of the Ombudsman for D.C. Public Schools.

While Bowser voted for the move and thinks it was a good decision, she said the process behind it was flawed. "I know if that meeting had been in the public, there would have been a lot more options discussed," she said. "That interaction,

I think, should have been on the dais."

Under her new bill, such a discussion would be held in public.

The legislation Bowser introduced this spring defines public meetings as any gathering where a quorum of members of a public body is present. The D.C. Council — as well as any task forces, boards, commissions, committees, subcommittees and advisory committees — would be considered public bodies under the law. But the bill excludes chance meetings and social encounters "unless such occurrences are held to evade the letter or spirit of the law," a news release says.

"I don't think people outside the government realize the extent to which these decisions are being made behind closed doors," Bowser said at last week's meeting. And while Bowser said that introducing the open meetings bill this spring "did not make me a popular person in the Wilson Building," she vowed to keep pushing. "We still have work to do," she said.

Ward 3 Council Member Mary Cheh agrees.

"Information is both power and powerful in its ability to embarrass," she said at last week's meeting. And accessing that information, she said, "is the lifeblood of democracy."

In April, Cheh introduced the Open Government Act of 2010, which calls for the creation of a D.C. Open Government Office — an independent agency that would monitor compliance with the Freedom of Information Act.

Enacted in 1976, the Freedom of Information Act states that any person has the right to request access to public records, and public bodies are required to disclose them — with a few exceptions. The exemptions include documents outlining law enforcement activities, papers protecting individuals' privacy, and records that fall under attorney-client privilege.

And yet, Cheh said, even with the Freedom of Information Act in place, "getting information can be hard. ... The whole thing is kind of stacked against you if you have a recalcitrant executive branch."

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Janney modernization due to start in June

By BRADY HOLT
Current Correspondent

The expansion of Janney Elementary School in Tenleytown is scheduled to begin next month, adding construction traffic and decreasing available parking in the area, according to city officials.

The school will be remodeled and expanded in a multiphase project that will eventually offer upgraded facilities, additional classroom space, underground parking and more restrooms, representatives from the Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization said at the Tenleytown-Friendship Heights advisory neighborhood commission's May 13 meeting.

The first phase of the project — building an addition to the existing school facility — is scheduled to start in mid-June and take eight or nine months, according to Chuck Guntner, the project's general contractor.

As that portion is being completed next spring, work will begin on the second phase: construction of the underground parking garage with a new soccer field above it.

The third phase, renovation of the existing school building, will take place mostly next summer and will not impact students, said Tony Robinson, a spokesperson for the school modernization office.

Throughout the work, the curb lane of 42nd Street from the school to Albemarle Street will likely be taken for construction vehicle parking. Construction vehicles will also enter and exit the work site along that stretch, and residents will hear some construction noise, Guntner said.

Construction workers will be taking steps throughout the process to minimize the impact on residents, Guntner and Robinson said, by parking primarily on the non-residential section of 42nd Street and by scheduling the noisiest work at the times it would be least disruptive.

Advisory neighborhood commission chair Matthew Frumin said he appreciated their efforts and Guntner's "complete candor" in saying that there will be some disruptions. Frumin said he was glad officials could come to Thursday's meeting so residents could "be forewarned about the inevitable challenges that will come with the construction."

Frumin said that 42nd Street is a challenge today and will be an even bigger challenge during the construction. "We're going to lose a whole bunch of [parking] spaces it sounds like, and those cars are going to have to find other places to park — and there aren't that many other places to park in the area," he said.

"I think it's a small price to pay to get a great school," he added. "But it's going to be a challenge."



Bowser



Cheh

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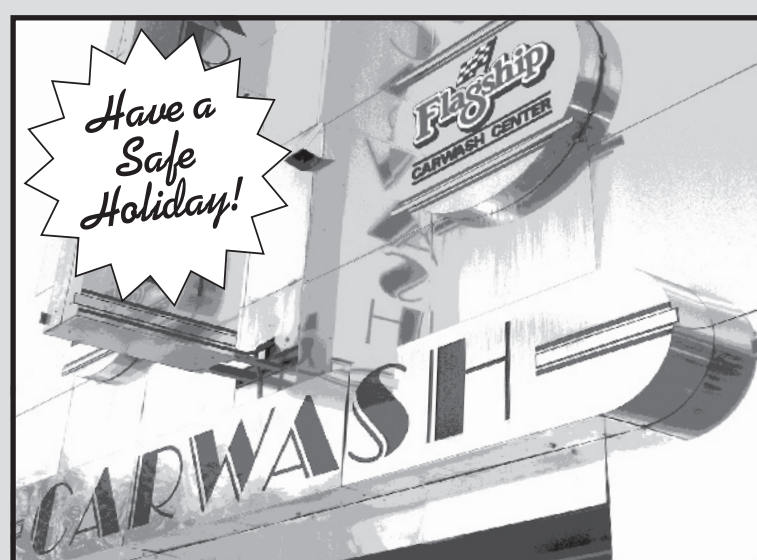
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