

Empowering the Neighborhood



A Working Paper on Improving Neighborhood Advocacy, Constituent Service, On-line Presence, and Operations of the Dupont Circle Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC 2B)

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*ANC 2B Reform Working Paper
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This working paper suggests a series of reforms for the Dupont Circle ANC (ANC 2B) – with the twin goals of better empowering constituents to address issues of neighborhood and city concern and improving the commission’s ability to advocate for the community. The discussions and recommendations in this paper are not intended to imply that the Dupont Circle ANC has poor management or is otherwise dysfunctional in some way – rather, quite the opposite. Only because of the Dupont Circle ANC’s proven record of positive engagement with the community and effective neighborhood advocacy are many of the recommendations in this paper possible, with the recognition that there is always room for additional improvement. In addition, the development over the last several years of near-universal high-speed internet access in our neighborhood presents the opportunity for many of the improvements and recommendations set forth in this paper.

The process for finalizing this working paper is a collaborative one, including time for review and comment by the Dupont Circle ANC and the public. In addition, this paper is based on a review of some best practices of ANCs around the District, as well as discussions with fellow commissioners from other parts of the City.

Parts I and II of this paper include a discussion of recommendations based on the following areas of improvement or concern:

- (1) Neighborhood constituents could be better informed of our role and better empowered to provide feedback and comment on our actions or to take up issues of concern to them.
- (2) It is difficult for every commissioner to be expert in each area of the commission’s competence – including zoning, historic preservation, environmental issues, transportation, parks, and others.
- (3) The commission is most often in a reactive role – reacting to regulatory applications, Council legislation, and other issues that may arise – rather than a proactive role.
- (4) New commissioners often have a steep learning curve.
- (5) The commission does not have a process to regularly communicate with surrounding ANCs about issues of cross-border or Ward-wide concern.
- (6) The commission may not always address general e-mails sent to the entire group.
- (7) Turnover in commissioner positions in between the regular, two-year election cycle can cause certain items or issues to fall through the cracks – for example, missed hearings on issues related to the SMD of the vacant seat.

- (8) Commissioner turnover also creates gaps in institutional memory.
- (9) The commission's regular monthly meetings frequently run past the 10:00 p.m. closing time of the J.C.C. meeting space, often causing some agenda items to be rushed or skipped at the end of the agenda.
- (10) Due to the length of meetings, the commission frequently does not have an opportunity to prioritize the review and approval of commission meeting minutes.
- (11) The commission, while successfully leveraging its resources to provide benefits to the community in other ways, has not offered grants to community groups for many years.

Part III of this paper suggests specific resolutions and by-law amendments to address the items discussed in Parts I and II.

PART I: EMPOWERING CONSTITUENTS

Area of improvement of concern: *Neighborhood constituents could be better informed of our role as representatives of the neighborhood. Constituents could also be better empowered to provide feedback and comment on our actions, and better empowered to take up issues of concern on their own. In particular, the public often does not have an opportunity to review the underlying documents that are the subject of our agenda, either before or during meetings. For example, these documents may be liquor license or zoning variance applications, a library improvement plan, or a piece of proposed D.C. Council legislation. Without the ability to review these materials, constituents – and sometimes fellow commissioners – do not have necessary information to provide the commission with comments and suggestions for action. In addition, the public’s only opportunity to review our proposed actions is during the regular commission meetings, when proposed resolutions may (or may not) be handed out in hard copy or read aloud.*

Proposed actions:

(1) Expand online information

The chief method of improving the dissemination of information and empowering the public should be through updates to the commission’s website, through which members of the community can arm themselves with information. In particular, the following items should be included to the commission website (in addition to the minutes and agendas that are already posted):

- All resolutions passed by the commission (to be posted within a week of the meeting);
- All formal letters related to resolutions passed by the commission (to be posted within a week of sending);
- All ANC 2B financial information – including budgets, required financial reports, audit results, monthly expenditures, etc. in a timely manner;
- All Voluntary Agreements with liquor establishments in ANC 2B (to be posted in a timely manner after approval by the ABC board);
- All liquor-related moratoria in force in ANC 2B (to be posted in a timely manner after approval by the ABC board);
- Additional pages for information on community projects, such as streetscapes, road resurfacing or reconstruction projects, park renovations, etc.;
- A description of the position of Executive Director and any other employee or intern positions; and
- Public “comment” capabilities (as on blog pages) for certain web page items, such as the agendas, resolutions, and letters.

(2) Create agenda hyperlinks

In order to provide the public – as well as fellow commissioners – access to the documents underlying our agenda items and discussions, our e-mailed agenda should include hyperlinks to those documents. In this way, community members would be able to view, for example, a restaurant’s application for expanded use of public space, by clicking on the link next to the item on our e-mailed agenda. This helps to make the process more transparent and allows community members to better inform themselves.

In addition to the underlying documents, the e-mailed agenda should also include hyperlinks to proposed resolutions for each agenda item. Thus, for example, community members would be able to review a proposed resolution supporting a certain piece of Council legislation by clicking on the link next to the item on our agenda. To this end, draft resolutions would need to be completed and submitted in advance of agenda circulation – at least one week ahead of the meeting. (The draft resolutions included in the hyperlink would, of course, be subject to change at the meeting, depending on the presentations to the commission and the discussions that take place.) By including hyperlinks to draft resolutions, we will help community members and fellow commissioners understand ahead of time what the proposed action will likely be, so that appropriate preparations can be made in advance of the meeting.

(3) Utilize projector for meetings

In order to allow community members – and commissioners – to better follow the actions that the commission is considering, the commission should obtain a digital projector which can project the agenda and the motions under consideration on to a screen during public meetings. Other ANCs in the District have begun using projectors in this fashion and report an improvement in the operation of their meetings. Projecting the agenda and motions would serve to reduce confusion among the public or commissioners on the items being discussed and the motions being considered – particularly in the case of proposed amendments or other complications that may arise. Correspondingly, all motions should be either read aloud or projected, in full, before final passage by the commission.

As an additional benefit, the projector would already be available and running for any presentations that guests may wish to make to the commission – such as those made from time to time by architects of development projects or by the District Department of Transportation, for example, saving setup time.

(4) Publish and distribute annual report

In order to better inform the community on the wide range of issues, projects, and activities that the commission deals with each year, the commission should publish and widely distribute its annual report – including a discussion of major actions taken, key issues that arose over the course of the year, and the commission’s successes and continuing work. A financial

summary from the year should also be included in the published annual report. The annual report would be published and made available both on the commission's website and distributed in hard copy and via e-mail. A key area of discussion for the 2009 annual report would be the implementation of the reforms set forth in this paper. Article II, Section 5 of the commission's by-laws already call for a report to be submitted to the council and the mayor. The annual report envisaged by this proposal would be prepared with the community as a key audience, as well.

(5) Regular newsletters

Individual commissioners should be encouraged to distribute regular (e.g. monthly or bi-monthly) newsletters to their SMDs. Regular newsletters keep constituents informed about issues and opportunities in the neighborhood. Based on anecdotal accounts, SMD newsletters are very well-received by residents. The commission can encourage newsletters and assist in making them available to constituents by allowing commissioners to post links to their newsletters on their commissioner pages on the main Dupont Circle ANC website. In order to save paper and lessen the total cost of distribution, electronic distribution should be encouraged. However, for hard copy distribution, the commission may wish to support newsletters by obtaining a more up-to-date photocopy machine and allowing commissioners to use it for this purpose.

(6) Interactive electronic mailing list management

Important to empowering constituents is making sure that they can be contacted effectively and efficiently. The commission already uses a neighborhood-wide electronic mailing list to distribute meeting notices and agendas to the community. Contact database and mailing list programs exist which allow users to enter information online – including fields such as the recipient's SMD, whether the recipient is a business or an individual, or other potentially useful categories such as phone and address information or areas or topical interest. The commission may wish to consider updating its mailing list management to take advantage of these advances in interactive technology, in order to more effectively communicate via e-mail with constituents.

(7) Include interactive "Question of the Month" with agenda

The monthly agenda that is circulated via e-mail and hung in public notice areas should include at the end a "Question of the Month" on a topic of interest to the neighborhood. The question would be posted on a page of the commission's website, in the form of a blog page, providing opportunity for public comment and discussion on the page. The purpose of the "Question of the Month" and corresponding blog page would be twofold: to draw people to the commission's website and to further stimulate neighborhood discussion on topics of interest or concern.

PART II: COMMISSION MANAGEMENT & OPERATIONS

Area of improvement or concern: *It is difficult for every commissioner to be expert in each area of the commission's competence – including zoning, historic preservation, environmental issues, transportation, parks, and others.*

Proposed actions:

(1) Establish committees

The commission should establish committees for key issues, so that commissioners can gain expertise in, and keep track of, issues and projects related to a particular topic. Article IV, Section 8 of the commission's by-laws authorizes the commission to establish standing and ad hoc committees. The committees may be made up of commissioners and non-ANC community members alike. The commission should require that each committee have at least two commissioners, in order to maintain institutional knowledge in the case of commission vacancies.

The sheer size of the Dupont Circle ANC makes a committee structure more appealing, as well. With nine members, our commission can establish several key committees without burdening any one member unduly. The following is a list of key topic areas for which a committee would make sense, along with some key functions those committees would serve:

- Zoning, Development & Historic Preservation
 - *Key functions:* review applications related to zoning and historic preservation; communicate with developers; and track zoning policy.
- Transportation & Infrastructure
 - *Key functions:* liaise with DDOT, WMATA, WASA, and other utilities and agencies on sidewalk, road, streetscape, transit, water, and utility projects and planning.
- Liquor Licensing & Permitting
 - *Key functions:* liaise with ABRA and liquor-serving establishments on changes related to liquor licensing – such as special events (e.g. inaugural exceptions), new legislation, or court rulings; craft and maintain up-to-date model Voluntary Agreement. (Note: Responsibility for tracking applications by liquor license establishments and VA negotiations would remain with the individual commissioners.)

There may also be other topic areas which warrant either a standing or an ad hoc committee, at the discretion of the commission. For example, as elections or special elections approach:

- Elections
 - *Key functions:* assist with special elections for ANC vacancies; organize debates and other fora for local candidates; and liaise with local candidates on issues related to elections.

The manner in which committee assignments would be divvied up amongst the commissioners should be carefully considered – in order to make sure that commissioners are working on topic areas of their interest to the maximum extent feasible, as well as to ensure that each committee has at least two commissioners.

(2) Topic area training

The commission should commit to regular meeting, training, and discussion sessions with agency leaders and experts in the fields of the commission’s competence – such as liquor-licensing, zoning, historic preservation, public space permitting, transportation planning, and others. These sessions are particularly helpful for new commissioners or when new rules are passed – either through legislation, new regulation, or as a result of court decisions. The commission should commit to a certain number of these informational discussions per year.

If the commission also wished the community to benefit from these information discussions, the commission could either invite these agency leaders or experts to brief presentations at the commission’s public meetings, invite interested members of the community to the private sessions, or use committee meeting times for these discussions.

Area of improvement or concern: *The commission is most often in a reactive role – reacting to regulatory applications, Council legislation, and other issues that may arise – rather than a proactive role.*

Proposed actions:

(1) Establish committees (see above)

The committee structure described above would likely have a strong effect on the activity level of the commission. Regular committee meetings, committee reports, and the increased knowledge base of committee members on specific topic areas will result in a greater level of awareness and allow commissioners to focus.

(2) Engage a public policy intern

The commission should consider engaging a college student pursuing coursework in local government at one of the District’s many colleges to act as a public policy intern. This could be a part-time commitment or a full-time, semester-long internship – preferably the latter. The intern could assist the commission in tracking pending Council legislation, Congressional

legislation affecting the District, proposed regulations, and other matters of public policy in order to report on these items to the commission, along with recommendations for action. Because of the interesting and substantive nature of the proposed work, the commission would likely be able to offer this as an unpaid internship position, or one with a small stipend.

(3) Re-order model agenda

To complement the establishment of committees and a revitalized focus on long-term improvements to the operation of the commission, the commission should also review its model agenda for the purpose of re-ordering certain items. For example, “Old Business” may make sense to move up on the agenda. In this way, items that may require sustained engagement over the course of several months would not be at risk of bumping into meeting adjournment times. Similarly, committee reports could be a more prominent and prioritized item on the agenda.

Area of improvement or concern: *New commissioners often have a steep learning curve. This can have a strong effect on the work of the commission in periods where turnover is high, such as in the last few years. In fact, a majority of the Dupont Circle ANC was elected for the first time within the last two years (i.e. since 2007).*

Proposed actions:

(1) Establish committees (see above)

The committee structure will allow new commissioners to become deeply involved and knowledgeable in certain topics. In addition, the requirement of two commissioners per committee will provide an opportunity for new commissioners to learn about the details of issues from veteran commissioners.

(2) Topic area training (see above)

The regular topic area training and discussions described above would be an essential part of increasing the knowledge base of new commissioners on a wide range of relevant topics.

(3) Orientation packet

While the ANC training provided by the Council’s Office of ANCs provides a good overview of service on the ANC generally, the commission should create an orientation packet for incoming commissioners which lays out our standard ANC 2B practices and gives a brief overview of our areas of competence. This orientation packet could also be made available on the commission’s website, for viewing by the public or by residents interested in becoming ANC candidates in the future.

Area of improvement or concern: *The commission does not have a process to regularly communicate with surrounding ANCs about issues of cross-border or Ward-wide concern. Some*

issues affect the entirety of Ward 2, such as the recent legislation to ban singles sales. Other issues or projects lie on or near borders with our sister ANC's in neighborhoods like Adams Morgan, Foggy Bottom, Sheridan-Kalorama, or Shaw – such as the planned U Street and 18th Street reconstruction projects, the Hilton Hotel redevelopment, or the West End Library. It is important that the commission never treat the artificially-drawn ANC boundaries as issue boundaries.

Proposed actions:

(1) Establish regular Ward-wide meetings

The Commission should work to organize regular (e.g. quarterly) meetings with representatives from the other ANC's of Ward 2 – in order to discuss Ward-wide issues of concern and to inform each other of relevant projects, issues, and policies that may arise. This would ideally be a meeting of ANC Chairpersons, or perhaps alternate delegates. From time to time, it may make sense to also invite the Ward 2 Council Member to join in those Ward-wide meetings, in order for all parties to keep abreast of relevant issues and projects in Ward 2.

(2) Encourage commissioners to join lists, attend meetings, and report on cross-border ANC issues

Similar meetings should be organized, perhaps on a more informal basis, with directly adjacent ANC's – such as ANC 1C or ANC 2F. Dupont Circle ANC commissioners should be encouraged to join the electronic mailing lists for these adjacent jurisdictions and to keep in touch with adjacent commissioners in those jurisdictions. An item should be added to the Dupont Circle ANC's monthly agenda, alongside committee reports, for reports on any relevant issues in neighboring jurisdictions. The ANC 2B commissioners bordering on other ANC's would be responsible for providing any such information to the commission during this agenda item.

Area of improvement or concern: *The commission may not always address or respond to e-mails sent to the whole commission.*

Proposed actions:

(1) Establish committees (see above)

The committee structure discussed above may assist in this area. When general messages are circulated to the group, commissioners will know who the point people are for a particular topic area. Those commissioners serving on a committee will also be on the lookout for messages that fall under that particular topic. Therefore, the likelihood that general messages will remain unaddressed will be greatly lessened.

Area of improvement or concern: *Turnover in commissioner positions in between the regular, two-year election cycle can cause certain items or issues to fall through the cracks – for example, missed hearings on issues related to the SMD of the vacant seat.*

Proposed actions:

(1) Establish committees (see above)

The committee structure – particularly the requirement that at least two commissioners serve on each committee – will help to eliminate the potential for particular issues or projects to fall by the wayside during transition periods.

(2) Establish “backup” or “substitute” commissioner roles

For items related directly to the SMD of the vacant commission seat (such as liquor license issues), the commission should designate a temporary “backup” or “substitute” commissioner whenever a vacancy is expected. It may make sense for the commission to choose to have the Chairperson assume this role in all or most instances, or a commissioner from an adjacent SMD.

Area of improvement or concern: *Commissioner turnover also creates gaps in institutional memory. Due to the difficulty of accessing commission files archived at the official D.C. government archives, and the sparse nature of the commission’s files at the commission office, it is sometimes difficult for new commissioners to be aware of issues that may have arisen in the past or that resulted in past commission action.*

Proposed actions:

(1) Expand website information (see above)

Going forward, the expansion of commission information available on the commission’s website – including resolutions, letters, financial information, annual reports, Voluntary Agreements, moratoria, and other information – will not only serve to better inform the public about the commission’s actions, but will also serve as a useful archive of commission actions for current and future commissioners.

(2) Review file materials and electronically archive key documents

For historical items (i.e. prior to 2009), the commission should review the hard-copy files at the commission’s office and designate key documents, resolutions, or letters for an online archive – as PDF files or in an analogous format. Once the system is in place to upload all new resolutions, letters, and other documents as described above, the commission may wish to also go back and begin systematically uploading resolutions and letters from past years, where possible.

Area of improvement or concern: *The commission's regular monthly meetings frequently run past the 10:00 p.m. closing time of the commission's meeting space at the JCC, often causing some agenda items to be rushed or skipped at the end of the agenda. Often, the items rushed or skipped are operational and management items.*

Proposed actions:

(1) Establish committees (see above)

The committee structure discussed above may assist in shortening the time period necessary for full commission meetings, because some presentations and discussions can take place during committee meetings, with the committee providing a summary and recommendation to the full commission at the monthly public meeting.

(2) Seek alternate space

The commission may wish to seek alternative space to accommodate meetings that may, from time to time, require the discussion to extend past 10:00 p.m. Any alternate space should be handicap-accessible and work within the commission's budgetary constraints.

Area of improvement or concern: *Due to the length of ANC meetings, the commission often is not able to place priority on the review and approval of minutes. Consequently, the minutes of our regular meetings are often circulated several weeks after the meeting and are often finally approved months after the meeting. Commissioners could use timely-circulated minutes in order to follow through on tasks, draft letters, etc. It is also difficult to review minutes for errors or corrections after too much time has elapsed.*

Proposed actions:

(1) Establish time limitations in the by-laws – for circulation, approval, and posting

The commission should pass by-law amendments requiring the Secretary (or a designee) to circulate the minutes for review within seven days of a commission meeting. The by-laws should also require that the minutes be considered for approval during the next regularly-scheduled meeting – and may be tabled only once, to the following meeting. Like resolutions, approved minutes should be posted on the website within seven days, as well.

(2) Re-order model agenda

Many organizations discuss or approve minutes as the first (or at least one of the first) agenda items of the next meeting. The commission's model agenda places approval of minutes with other administrative matters at the end of the meeting, resulting in very little time available

for discussion or attention in most months. The minutes item should be moved to the top of the commission's standard agenda, after the call to order and announcements.

Area of improvement or concern: *The commission, while successfully leveraging its resources to provide benefits to the community in other ways, does not regularly provide grants to community organizations or groups, which it is authorized to do under D.C. law. Grants may provide community groups with startup capital necessary to register themselves or seek matching funds from larger grantors. However, ANCs must also take care that all expenses are tracked on any grants provided.*

Proposed actions:

(1) Survey ANC grant-making

The commission should conduct a survey of ANC grant-making in the City and determine the pros, cons, and the best practices of our sister ANCs – in order to make a recommendation on *whether* and *how* the Dupont Circle ANC could offer some limited grants to worthy community causes.

PART III: RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

A. By-Law Amendments:

In accordance with the above discussion, the following by-law amendments are recommended. As a note, Article IX of the By-Laws require two weeks notice to each commissioner and to the public, and require two-thirds majority of the commission (i.e. 6 votes) for any amendments to be adopted.

- (1) **Annual report.** Article II, Section 5 of the By-Laws shall be amended by inserting at the end the following: “The annual report shall be posted on the Commission’s website within thirty (30) calendar days of filing with the Council and Mayor and distributed to the community through such other means as the Commission shall designate.”
- (2) **E-mail proxy vote notice.** Article III, Section 3 of the By-Laws shall be amended by inserting at the end the following: “For the purpose of this section, electronic mail to the Secretary shall constitute a signed letter.”¹
- (3) **Minutes.** Article IV, Section 5 of the By-Laws shall be amended by inserting at the end the following: “The Secretary or a designee shall circulate draft minutes to the Commission for review no later than seven (7) calendar days after the public meeting. The minutes shall be considered by the Commission at the following regularly-scheduled public meeting and may be tabled for no more than one additional month. Upon approval, the minutes shall be posted on the Commission’s website within seven (7) calendar days. Any audio or video files of public meetings shall be made available on the Commission’s website for download within seven (7) calendar days after the meeting.”
- (4) **Committees.** Article IV, Section 8 of the By-Laws shall be amended by inserting at the end the following: “Each committee shall be comprised of at least two (2) Commissioners – the committee Chairperson and a second commissioner – in addition to such other members as the Commission shall designate in accordance with this section. Committees shall provide reports to the Commission at public meetings. Committee reports shall be posted on the Commission’s website within seven (7) calendar days of approval or acceptance by the Commission.”
- (5) **Resolutions and Letters.** Article V of the By-Laws shall be amended by adding Section 7 as follows: “Section 7 – All proposed resolutions of the Commission shall be read aloud, projected on to a screen, distributed in hard copy, or otherwise made

¹ This proposed by-law amendment is not discussed above, but would affirm that an e-mail to the Secretary is equivalent to a “signed letter” for the purposes of proxy voting on a certain issue *in abstentia*.

available for review by the Commissioners and public in attendance, in full, before final vote.”

(6) **Resolutions and Letters.** Article V of the By-Laws shall be amended by adding Section 8 as follows: “Section 8 – All resolutions passed by the Commission shall be posted on the Commission’s website within seven (7) calendar days after the meeting at which the resolution was passed. All formal letters pertaining to resolutions passed by the Commission shall be posted on the Commission’s website within seven (7) calendar days after submittal of the letter.”

(7) **On-line Financial Disclosures.** Article VI of the By-Laws shall be amended as follows:

- i. At the end of Section 2, insert the following: “The budget, as amended, shall be posted on the Commission’s website within thirty (30) calendar days of Commission approval or amendment in accordance with this section.”
- ii. At the end of Section 3, insert the following: “The quarterly reports shall be posted on the Commission’s website within thirty (30) calendar days of approval by the Commission.”
- iii. At the end of Section 5, insert the following: “The resulting final report of any such audit or investigation shall be posted on the Commission’s website within thirty (30) calendar days of receipt of the report.”
- iv. Section 6 shall be added as follows: “Section 6 – The Treasurer shall post on the Commission’s website any other Commission financial information as may be appropriate, at the Treasurer’s discretion or by resolution of the Commission.”

(8) **Employee Description.** Article VIII of the By-Laws shall be amended by inserting at the end the following: “All Commission employee descriptions shall be posted on the Commission’s website.”

B. Other Resolution Recommendations:

[To be drafted, after comment period]