

FOGCUTTER

Greater West Portal Neighborhood Association Newsletter - Since 1974

ANNUAL GREATER WEST PORTAL AVENUE ASSN. CHRISTMAS EVENT

DATE: December 2, 2008., **TIME:** 7:30 p.m.

PLACE: St Brendan Community Hall, 211 Ulloa Street, south side of Ulloa Street

A Message From the President

Another Holiday Season is upon us and again Greater West Portal Neighborhood Association (GWPNA) Steering Committee (SC) will be hosting a Christmas celebration for the West Portal community. Please join us.

The SC's commitment for the next year is to find ways to gain wider neighborhood consensus on neighborhood issues. We encourage our neighbors to join us, attend steering committee meetings, comment, learn more about these concerns, and let us hear your opinions and ideas. On Page 5, there are instructions on how to get e-mail information.

The most recent issue we've addressed is the proposal to convert 99 West Portal Avenue, formerly *Diamond Video*, to dental offices. The owner proposes to expand his dental practice to include the entire first floor.

His plans will require a Conditional Use (CU) Permit. The SC voted to oppose the granting of a CU Permit. In addition, St. Francis Home Association voted to oppose the CU Permit. The West of Twin Peaks Central Council, an umbrella organization of seventeen West of Twin Peaks neighborhoods, joined these two member organizations in opposing the CU Permit (see article on Page 3 & 4 for the pros and cons of this issue).

Our primary focus, however, is on issues involving the residential neighborhood. By coincidence or by design, it seems that a flurry of Planning Department meetings are scheduled during the Holiday Season this year. Two series of meetings this year will have profound effects on our neighborhood. The first series have been scoping sessions regarding the 2009 Housing Element and the second have been meetings regarding reforming the Discretionary Review (DR) process (See articles on Pages 4 & 5 for reports on these meetings).

I hope to see many new faces on December 2. Let me hear your ideas either at the SC meetings or by sending me email at info@gwpna.org.

Please support our neighborhood small businesses on West Portal this Christmas season by shopping locally. The variety of services and products they offer is diverse and high quality.

Happy Holiday!

Avrum Shepard

WHAT'S NEW AT ARDEN WOOD

The only noise from Arden Wood at this time, is from the sounds of seven homes being built at 15th Ave. and Wawona Street. There's been no communication or news regarding the proposed condominium development on the western 4.6 acres of the Arden Wood Christian Science property.



Given the current financial market and difficulty in getting financing, many developments have been put on hold, even some that have already been started. To see if there has been 'quiet movement', I checked the San Francisco Planning Department web site and Supervisor Sean Elsbernd; neither source yielded submissions or communication. I have also sent an e-mail to Robert Mendelsohn of Republic Urban Properties, LLC and as of this writing, no response.

A visit to the Arden Wood Christian Science web site stated that "After many site surveys and studies, the option to develop a piece of Arden Wood's property along 19th Avenue has been made available to national and local developers." This piece of information was updated October 30, 2008.

Given that Republic Urban Properties' recorded option to purchase the portion of the property for the proposed development expires in July of 2009, it is unknown whether Republic Urban is continuing in their quest to develop the property, or whether it's open to other 'national and local developers.'

The Neighbors of Arden Wood (NOA) have been using this 'quiet time' to organize and update their web site; www.NeighborsOfArdenwood.org This slick, updated site has been made much more user friendly. News and project history have been updated, events and notices are regularly updated to reflect current happenings, and 'calls to action' are streamlined for ease of use. With the web changes, e-mail blasts and 'calls to action' will be much quicker and easier when the proposed Arden Wood project becomes 'noisy' again.

In other major news, Supervisor Sean Elsbernd introduced legislation for a cumulative impact study and interim controls in the greater West Portal and Parkside areas in order to best take into account the various developments occurring in the area, such as the proposed 150 units at Arden Wood, 6000 units at Park Merced and Stonestown/SF State projects that will have a traffic, transit and infrastructure impact on the area overall. NOA and the West of Twin Peaks Central Council (WTPCC) have worked closely with Supervisor Sean Elsbernd on the legislation which was passed by the Board of Supervisors with several amendments proposed by both organizations.

Eric Castongia



NEW on the AVENUE

All Fridays in December until Christmas will be Festive Fridays with music and entertainment provided by the West Portal Avenue Association and special promotions offered by participating merchants. A tree lighting ceremony in the courtyard between Washington Mutual Bank and the BookShop West Portal will be on December 5 at 6:30 pm. Santa will come to West Portal Avenue on Saturday December 13 from Noon to 2:00 in front of the *Just Because* card and gift shop. West Portal stores will be open until 8:00 p.m. on every Festive Friday. And look for the Holiday stars that festooned store windows last year. They will appear again this year.

A West Portal Treasure – The BookShop West Portal

Neal and Anna Sofman opened the doors of the *BookShop West Portal* at 80 West Portal Avenue in May 2006 after a behind-the-scenes battle waged by the GWPNA SC to retain the store as retail space. Community support was helpful to the couple, but their retail expertise has been responsible in the creation of a vibrant addition to the West Portal commercial district. It has provided book signing events for local and nationally known authors. The Bookshop has an excellent children's book section and has had Lemony Snicket (Daniel Handler), who has ties in the community, on hand to sign his books.

When Neal was asked why he chose a career in retail book sales, he quickly replied, "Books are the ideal gift. They are affordable, classy and come in all shapes and sizes. Most importantly, a book can change your life."

Selling books was not the career for which he trained. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1971 with a degree in Economics and an advanced degree in Education.

At that time, universities countrywide were roiling with student protest against the Vietnam War. Because of the perception that big business was complicit in the war, he didn't take the career his degree in Economics should have led him, into a corporate job. He also opted to not pursue a career in teaching. He declared, "I didn't have the talent."

At Neal's graduation, one-third of the class walked out to protest the Vietnam War. In this climate of uncertainty, Neal decided to pull away from his deep roots in New Jersey, and go west. He eventually arrived in San Francisco where he took a job in a book store and began his on-the-job training in retail sales. After a few years, he opened his own bookstore in Cupertino with two partners. By 1998, they had expanded to three stores, one of which was a *Clean Well Lighted Place for Books*. But that store, along with the two other stores, folded, and about that time one of Neal's friends told him about a store at 80 West Portal Avenue with a "For Lease" sign.

The owner had made a commitment to rent the space to *Guaranty Mortgage*, but they had to obtain a Conditional Use (CU) Permit before they could occupy a first floor retail space. The Planning Department approved the CU permit. Ken Kruszka, then President of GWPNA, on behalf of the organization, appealed the Planning Commission's decision to the Board of Supervisors and *Guaranty Savings* withdrew. According to the Sofmans, the space was ideal for them with lots of light, proximity to many restaurants and a neighborhood with many children.

Neal attributes the success of *The BookShop West Portal* to his staff that he selected and trained carefully. "I have known one member of my staff since he was 12 years old." He said that working in a book store is different from other types of retail, and it takes time to learn the skills necessary for a bookseller. He also attributes the success of the *BookShop West Portal* to the community support they enjoy. Most customers appreciate that he and Anna participate directly in the operation of the store and live in San Francisco. And the community prefers independent businesses because forty percent more of the revenue from locally owned businesses goes back into the community than the revenue of chain stores headquartered in other cities.

The BookShop offers more than books. One of its regular customers was skilled knitter, and accepted Neal's offer for her to teach knitting in the store. And the Sofman's never stop investigating ways to serve the needs of the community.

Sheila Bost and Rae Doyle

OPEN WIDER, PLEASE!

West Portal Dentist Proposes Expanding to First Floor Retail Site

At the October 7 Greater West Portal Neighborhood Association (GWPNA) Steering Committee (SC) meeting, the property owner of 99 West Portal Avenue presented plans to expand his dental offices to the first floor, formerly occupied by *Diamond Video*. In order to do that, the property owner must obtain a Conditional Use (CU) Permit from the Planning Commission.

West Portal Avenue zoning code requires that first floor sites be occupied with retail; however, a business other than retail is allowable with a CU Permit if the applicant can make the case that the exception from the code will be of benefit to the community. The property owner was seeking support from GWPNA SC as a step in this process.

A minority of the SC expressed concerns that a vacant store front invites graffiti and degrades a neighborhood commercial district, citing the vacant *Waldenbooks* site. They also felt that a property owner is entitled to ownership rights. Another reason, they argued, was that the needs of the community are changing and the changes begs the question: "Can West Portal continue to support neighborhood-serving goods and service establishments or should more non-retail enterprises be permitted to move into first floor site?"

In the 1980's when the city's neighborhood-serving commercial districts were threatened by the incursion of banks and chain stores, a citywide effort was launched to establish restrictive codes with the objective of maintaining retail small businesses. Small store fronts stocked with merchandise invite shoppers. Banks and parking lots do not stimulate the shopping impulse. Professional offices were discouraged from occupying first floors for the same reason. For many years, the GWPNA SC has been involved in maintaining the village-like character of West Portal Avenue. From 1985 to 1987 members of GWPNA met with nearby neighborhood groups, West Portal Avenue merchants, and Planning Department staff to hammer out zoning restrictions that would sustain a balance of neighborhood-serving services and goods and protect the interest of small business enterprises.



Property owners are continually challenging the code restrictions because they argue that there is a high rate of turn over in independently owned retail establishments. Many property owners would prefer to rent to chain stores and financial institutions. Historically, GWPNA has supported code enforcement because at stake is the vibrancy and village-like atmosphere of West Portal Avenue that in turns affects the residential property values.

As far as the argument that vacant store fronts invite blight; apparently, the property owner has not attempted to find a retail tenant because there is no “For Lease” signs at the site. Concerning property owners’ rights, the San Francisco City Charter states that “interested parties” not just “property owners” can participate in the decision of the use of land and buildings.

The GWPNA SC voted on November 2 not to support the property owner’s request of a CU permit because there appears to be benefit to the property owner, but not the community. St. Francis Homeowners Association also voted not to support the CU permit. Both organizations were major participators in writing the neighborhood commercial codes. The members of the West of Twin Peaks Central Council, an umbrella organization of 17 neighborhood groups, also voted unanimously to oppose the CU.

The 2009 Housing Element of the City General Plan

The Planning Department has asked for limited public input regarding the 2009 Housing Element (HE). The HE is part of the City’s General Plan that contains policies regarding land use, transportation, noise, safety, etc. The General Plan is the supreme planning law in the city. In 1990 the City prepared a HE that included an Environmental Impact Report (EIR). Another HE was prepared in 2004, without an EIR, even though it had changed requirements for building heights and relaxed the one parking space to one residential unit requirement. These changes were made in the 2004 HE to increase residential density to comply with California State’s order to accommodate population increases. A group of neighborhood organizations, including GWPNA, appealed the Planning Department’s decision to approve the 2004 HE without an EIR. Because of this action and other input from neighborhood organizations, the Planning Department staff has acknowledged that the 2004 HE’s did not consider the diversity of the City’s neighborhoods. In other words having “one size fits all” citywide codes was a mistake. On the other hand, the eastern neighborhoods with denser housing at present, object to being targeted for most of the future housing density in the City. The Planning Department created a Citizen Advisory Board that consisted of “Stakeholders”, non-profit and for-profit developers, the Bike Coalition and neighborhood organization members, and SPUR and invited input from them to be incorporated in the 2009 HE.

The participants expressed the following concerns: **Parking:** It should be adequate so that people don’t clog streets and pollute the air by searching for a space. **Transportation:** Muni needs to improve its service. **Schools:** the Planning Department needs to communicate with SFUSD to be sure schools will be increased as population increases. **Capacity of Infrastructure:** The Planning Department needs to consider if resources such as water, sewage, and disaster assistance are in place to accommodate a larger population

Discretionary Review (DR) Reform

Presently, in San Francisco, a citizen has the right to request that the Planning Commission hold a public hearing on a construction project proposed by a developer which might be in violation of the Planning Code or the city Master Plan (Proposition M). Two decades ago, there was no charge for a Discretionary Review (DR) request because it was determined that the cost should be covered by the fees charged developers for filing building permit applications. As the number of DR’s increased, DR requesters were asked to shoulder some of the cost. The DR fee increased until it reached \$300, and the Planning Department claimed that the fee still did not cover the cost of processing a DR request. It asked the Board of Supervisors to increase the fee to \$500, but last July the BOS refused the request

The Planning Department asked for an independent review of the DR process and determined that: “Discretionary Review process is not codified, does not produce consistent or fair results for the general public, neighbors and project sponsors, makes the development process more costly and takes time away from the Commission to address larger planning issues.”

The Planning Department is now in the process of reforming the DR process. Community outreach meetings were held in October and November in which tentative plans were discussed and input from Stakeholders



were noted. An informational hearing will be held at the Planning Commission on December 11. A proposal to the Commission for Action will occur in January 2009.

The Southwest neighborhoods file more DR request than any other city quadrant and are watching closely what reforms are being proposed by the Planning Department. So far, the reforms will reduce the ability of individuals to control development in their neighborhoods. Their objection is that a project may comply with city code, but not be in character with the neighborhood. Developers are in favor of the reforms because it would make the permit process easier for them. . Developers appreciate that the DR reform would make the permit process easier.

GWPNA Members organize hero dogs in Veteran’s Day Parade

GWPNA members, June and Bud Wilson, brought together a group of hero dogs to participate in the 2008 Veteran’s Day Parade on Sunday November 9. *Atos* from Travis Airforce Base, with his handler Shawn Dube, made his third appearance at San Francisco’s Veteran’s Day Parade. He is a German Shepard who has served in Iraq.

Three search and rescue dogs from the National Search Foundation in Ojai, California marched proudly. *Scout*, a German shepard, accompanied by Chantal Rose, held an American flag in his mouth, delighting the onlookers. His companions were *Gypsy*, a border collie, accompanied by Tom Carney of the South San Francisco Fire Department and *Sweep*, a border collie, accompanied by Lynn Engelbert of San Jose.


All of the search and rescue dogs are taken from animal shelters by the National Search Foundation. They are not suitable as family pets because of their hyperactivity. The dogs are spayed or neutered and trained to take advantage of their special qualities that make them marvelous search and rescue animals. When they are not on assignment in disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina, they serve as fire rescue dogs.

The Wilson family dog, *Rambo*, a German shepard/collie mix was left home because he is too sociable and friendly. The participating dogs are all business and serious minded.

Bud, a WWII fighter pilot is past President of the City and county of San Francisco Veterans Affairs Commission and a past president of GWPNA. June is a long-time animal rights advocate and former member of the San Francisco Animal Control and Welfare Commission.

Recycle Bandits!

Neighbors have reported that early morning marauders have rummaged through their garbage cans on garbage pickup day. It’s best to put your black, blue, and green cans out early in the morning rather than the night before. Be sure to shred any thing that has your name, address, or personal identifying information



GWPNA Meetings for Spring 2009
 7:30 pm to 9:00 pm
 January 6, February 3, March 3, April 7, May 5
 June 2 (Annual Meeting)
 at St. Brendan’s Community Hall
 211 Ulloa Street (south side)

Get Informed!
To receive e-mail information about important neighborhood issues, notice of GWPNA meetings and reports on City Planning developments, get on the e-mail GWPNA Announce list, e-mailing:
info@gwpna.org



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Families working to improve their neighborhood

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