

**Statement of Fay Armstrong
President, Historic Mount Pleasant, Inc.
Before the
Committee on Libraries, Parks and Recreation
Council of the District of Columbia
March 16, 2009**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee on Libraries, Parks and Recreation. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the proposed renovation and expansion of the Mount Pleasant Branch Library. My name is Fay Armstrong. I am President of Historic Mount Pleasant, a nonprofit organization formed in 1985 to preserve and protect the architectural heritage of our neighborhood. Mount Pleasant was recognized as a historic district in 1986 and appears on both the D.C. Inventory and National Register of Historic Places. One of our organization's functions over the last twenty years has been to review proposed alterations and additions to structures in the neighborhood to ensure that changes are compatible with the character of the historic district.

It is in this connection that I appear before you today. The Mount Pleasant Branch Library is generally recognized as the most significant architectural structure in our historic district. We were thus surprised and distressed to learn in October of last year that the D.C. Public Library had developed plans for an extensive interior and exterior renovation of the building, including construction of a large addition, without any contact whatsoever with our organization. In contrast, when DCPL had embarked three years earlier on the exterior restoration of the building, we had received copies of their plans well in advance and had provided favorable comments in response. We could not understand why we were left out of the process this time – particularly when what was being proposed would substantially change the exterior of the building and would require careful review for compliance with historic district requirements.

We asked to meet with DCPL and their architects as soon as we became aware of what was being proposed, but they did not actually sit down with us until January 29. We then learned that the “design phase” of their contract had been completed months before and that they could not take any of our fundamental design concerns into account. As a result, we immediately contacted other neighborhood groups dissatisfied with the process by which plans for the renovation had been developed. We sent a joint letter to Chief Librarian Cooper on February 5 asking for further public consultation to inform the design process and noting that strong opposition had emerged to the proposed addition to the library for aesthetic, historic and functional reasons. For example, while it is customary in historic districts that additions be placed at the rear of a building where visibility from the street is minimized, the addition proposed – a large glass-fronted cube – would sit alongside the historic building on Lamont Street. It would significantly change the way the building relates to its site and to surrounding apartment buildings. Questions have also been raised about the materials proposed for the addition, specifically the featureless glass façade, use of rusted metal on the ramp, and the

elimination of the existing accessible entrance in favor of a 155-foot-long ramp that requires all users to enter at the top of the monumental staircase.

Notwithstanding our objections, DCPL filed its plans for the Mount Pleasant Library renovation with the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts on February 5, hoping to receive conceptual approval at the February 19 hearing. We countered with a memorandum critiquing the major features of the exterior design and were pleased that the CFA echoed some of our concerns at the hearing and have asked to see further designs before giving conceptual approval. The Mount Pleasant library is now tentatively scheduled to go back to the CFA and also to the DC Historic Preservation Review Board in April.

After having discussed this issue very widely within the neighborhood and with others who follow library issues, we have come to realize that the fundamental problem here is that DCPL has proceeded to develop plans for the renovation of this and other branch libraries without first having undertaken meaningful needs assessments or developing a strategic plan for library development throughout the District of Columbia. We understand they will soon begin work on a strategic plan – after investing some \$55 million to renovate and rebuild branch libraries throughout the city. That analysis should have preceded their current work.

In Mount Pleasant, we have an irreplaceable historic structure that has served for 83 years as the sole library within Ward One. It is a beautiful building, in sore need of mechanical and other improvements, but also one with very real physical constraints. According to the architects, the proposed addition is required primarily by the desire of DCPL to have a 100-person meeting room in the building. Many of us question the need for such a feature – particularly when the library already has a serviceable meeting room that can accommodate 80 and the new school directly across the street has an auditorium for 200. We also question whether this site can or should continue to be the sole site for library services within Ward One. What is the cost/benefit analysis for adding onto this building versus the cost and potential long-term benefits of building or adapting a more modern and/or flexible space elsewhere in Ward One? And more fundamentally, given current budget projections, does it make sense to incur the costs of expanding this building when service hours are being cut? These are the kinds of questions that are beyond the purview of Historic Mount Pleasant but very much on our mind as we grapple with the exterior design challenges posed by the proposed addition to the Mount Pleasant Branch Library building.

On February 20, Councilmember Graham joined with a number of neighborhood groups to ask Mayor Fenty that he “pause the process pertaining to the current library renovations plans and engage the community in real, community discussion and input into the library’s design process.” As a result, we are currently engaged with other neighborhood organizations, residents, businesses, and Ward One ANCs in a discussion of current library services and DCPL plans for our part of the city. We ask for your support in seeing this process to a successful conclusion and ensuring that DCPL listens to and respects the will of the community regarding protection of the historic aspects of

the Mount Pleasant Branch Library during the proposed renovation and expansion of the library.

Thank you for your attention.