

Bloomingtondale Business

BY AMANDA ABRAMS

An Alternative to the Status Quo Files for Candidacy

Bloomingtondale residents and other Ward 5 citizens who feel your voices aren't being heard at the city council level, your time has come! No, not an insurgency – an alternative. There's a new brave soul who declared his candidacy earlier this month and is preparing to challenge the Ward 5 incumbent councilmember, Harry "Tommy" Thomas Jr. Meet Kenyan McDuffie, a lifelong Ward 5 resident, former US Department of Justice employee, and council aspirant.

I was excited to learn about McDuffie – not that I'm especially clued in about Ward 5 politics, but I've heard that certain councilmembers aren't so highly regarded by some of their constituents, particularly lately.

So I called McDuffie, and we agreed to meet at Big Bear Café and talk a little. He's a surprisingly young guy – only 34, with two children, ages 3 and 2 months – but was wearing an immaculate suit and seemed duly serious about the task ahead. It turns out he's raising his family in the same house he grew up in, on North Capitol Street just south of Michigan Avenue, so he's genuinely invested in the area.



Kenyan McDuffie. Photo: Amanda Abrams

"I'm passionate about public service," he said, explaining that he's president of his neighborhood civic association and used to work as a lawyer for the DOJ's Civil Rights Division. "But I had to travel through my own community to get to work, and services aren't being delivered – the kids have nowhere to play."

I asked him what his vision is for the ward, and he was ready for my question. Of course, he said, he's in favor of the old political standbys like job creation, economic development and reduced crime. But there are a few other things he's supporting, too.

Such as? "First, universal financial literacy for the future – which means focusing on kids," he explained. "With all these people filing for bankruptcy, I think there's no reason a kid age 13 or 14 doesn't know what a FICO score is."

So far, so good. Second is his plan to establish partnerships with local universities for neighborhood kids. "We have three nationally-known universities in Ward 5 – why not partner with them to bring kids into academia?" After all, he said, the process of exposing kids to college needs to start early.

Finally, McDuffie wants to see better access to healthy food in the area. "People don't have transportation, so they wind up turning to liquor stores and fast food" for their food needs, he said.

I asked what he thought about the closing of the Safeway on Rhode Island Avenue in Northeast, which seems to have gotten a lot of traction recently in neighborhood blogs and listservs. "I think it's been a failure of leadership not to anticipate that," he said. "There are incentives we can give – we need to start focusing on healthy eating options."

McDuffie was reluctant to criticize current representation on the council, but he did allow that the leadership seems to be absent on a number of things that directly impact residents' daily lives. And obviously he thinks he's got something better to offer – you don't quit a promising job with two young mouths to feed unless you think you have a good shot at winning. But it's a long time between Feb. 17, when McDuffie filed as a candidate, and the primary on Sept. 14. What'll he be up to between now and then?

"I'm just reaching out to folks, trying to figure out how I can help," he said. "I think Ward 5 is a jewel, a beautiful place to live. So I'll refine my ideas as the campaign goes on – I want to tackle issues that are near and dear to people."



The McMillan Sand Filtration Site, looking southeast from First Street. Photo: Amanda Abrams

What? A Debate About Potentially Developable Space in DC?

One of the issues near and dear to at least some Bloomingtondale residents is the McMillan Sand Filtration Site, a 25-acre area just west of North Capitol Street. Pass by it – as I did on my bike the other day – and you might wonder what the heck's going on there. There's a bunch of round silo-type structures, a vast green space, and not a whole lot else.

Turns out it's a historic area that residents and the city have been fighting over for decades. From the early 1900s until the '80s, the space was used to filter drinking water for the city. Eventually, the city switched over to a less-space-intensive method, and a debate about what to do with the land ensued. It's still not settled.

The city has enlisted developers to build a mix of housing and retail that some residents say is too dense – they'd rather see some public amenities, particularly green space, which is in short supply in the area.

It's not a new story. What is new is that Our McMillan, the grassroots group supporting greater community input in the decision, is revving up again and taking its message to community meetings. For more info on the group or the issue, visit www.our-mcmillan.com.

The Power of Art

Finally, anyone notice a steep drop in crime in the neighborhood lately – specifically, in the last 10 months? According to artist Lisa Marie Thalhammer, who painted the controversial "Boxer Girl" mural on the side of a house near the corner of First and W streets NW, "In October, the DC police reported that 'there has been a 55 percent decrease' in crime since Boxer Girl was installed in DC's Bloomingtondale neighborhood in May 2009!"

Let's hear it for art! Neighbors complained about the huge painting sponsored by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, but it looks like the mural is having the final word.

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Boxer Girl mural, near the corner of First and W streets. Photo: Amanda Abrams