

The People's House Should be Accessible

As a licensed DC tourist guide for the past four years, I was optimistic when the U.S. Capitol Visitors Center (CVC) finally opened last December. In fact, the CVC recently welcomed its two-millionth visitor. According to the CVC, the waiting time for entering the Capitol has been reduced from as long as two hours to five or six minutes depending on security.

Yet entering the sprawling CVC seems like going through airport security: I had to take off my shoes on a recent visit, causing my group of eighth graders to miss our scheduled 10 a.m. tour of the Capitol led by CVC guides. (A sympathetic CVC staffer got us enough tickets for the next tour 10 minutes later.) And access to Capitol Hill still remains a glaring problem for tourist guides who are among the CVC's most frequent visitors.

We thought access would be improved for the busloads of disabled and/or senior citizens who wish to visit America's most important shrine. Because the impressive new CVC faces east, it would make sense for tour buses to drop off visitors on the east side of the Capitol (on First Street, NE/SE) rather than a half-mile away on the opposite side. Unfortunately, tour buses are still forced to off-load passengers at the foot of the Hill's steep west side near the James A. Garfield memorial statue on First Street SW. Tour buses have been banned from the east side since 2007—six years after 9/11. No specific incident sparked this ban.

Tourist guides and some members of Congress—led by Rep Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.)—are concerned that elderly/disabled visi-



photo: Andrew Lightman

tors, including World War II veterans with walkers, must struggle to make this uphill trek. One visitor to the Capitol grounds described it as “the second Mount Suribachi,” referring to the Marines’ flag-raising on Iwo Jima’s highest peak during World War II.

“What was once called ‘Jenkins

Hill’ and is now known as ‘Capitol Hill’ may one day be called ‘Heart Attack’ Hill,” said Shirley Timashev, president of the 450-member Guild of Professional Tour Guides of Washington, DC.

Not only do disabled and senior visitors face obstacles, but regular congressional constituents and local

citizens are thwarted as well. One Capitol Hill worker refuses to go into the CVC because the security process makes her feel like a potential terrorist. “I don’t feel like I’m in America anymore,” said Hill resident/worker Ellen Murphy. “We’re losing too many civil liberties in the name of 100-percent safety that will never exist. Taking off your coat and being subjected to undignified treatment is un-American. There has to be a better way of ensuring our liberties while retaining our actual freedom.”

“The CVC is not a welcoming experience for many senior groups,” explained master guide Carol Bessette. Procedures for senior citizen visits are “unwieldy and impractical,” she added.

In response to long-standing criticism about seniors’ struggles and Capitol access, the CVC recently launched a fleet of six electric shuttle carts to transport visitors from the kiosk on the Hill’s west side to the CVC elevators on the east side; previously, the CVC operated only two shuttle carts. However, the Guild is not convinced this pilot six-cart system will work adequately. Guides are concerned about long waits for the golf-cart-like vehicles, especially if more than one tour bus arrives at the same time. The CVC plans to have only two carts in service at any time, and they would be filled on a first-come, first-served basis.

Some tour groups are foregoing the opportunity to visit the Capitol in view of current access limitations and other barriers. Bessette noted that at least four tour companies now refuse to bring seniors to the Hill.

The three main sites of Capitol Hill (the CVC, Supreme Court and Library of Congress) are being made effectively off limits to senior citizens,” said Bessette. “Remember

these are the people who pay for these buildings and who pay the salaries of the staff members. And these are the people who deeply care about the laws passed by Congress and the decisions of the Supreme Court. These are your C-Span fanatics. They care! If I could summarize the feelings of these people—the American taxpayers—in one sentence, it might be, “The terrorists have won.”

How can we solve the access problem

Tourist guides would like Congress to lift the ban on tour busses on the Capitol’s east side so that all Americans (and others) can access “their House” where the CVC architects intended. However, access to “America’s House” seems to be a low priority for those responsible for transportation policies around the Capitol grounds. The powerful, omnipresent U.S. Capitol Police (USCP) still call the shots about where visitors can go. It seems their paramount concerns (or duties) are security restrictions to better protect Congress, not better access to a visitor-friendly Capitol.

The USCP remains adamant in keeping tour buses from the east side of the CVC. Yet, they allow local Metro and Circulator buses, Tourmobiles, Old Town Trolleys and even the same local buses used for some tours to ascend the Hill via Independence or Constitution avenues. Why not tour buses? Apparently, the police don’t want to be bothered by inspecting the luggage compartments of tour buses. Or maybe they don’t have the resources—or want to take the time—to screen so many buses.

Some tourist guides say it is “bad bus vs. good bus.” Are tour buses so bad or dangerous, while local buses are good and safe? Does the USCP really believe that patriotic World War II veterans or well-chaperoned eighth graders, who travel together and know each other, actually pose a greater security threat than passengers of local motor coaches who’ve never met?

Unfortunately, we don’t believe the tour-bus ban will be lifted anytime soon—any more than that pedestrian part of Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House will be reverted to vehicular traffic. Yet, we wish the USCP would at least allow those buses with prior permission from members of Congress to drop off on the Capitol’s east side without

undue hassle. A motor coach operator might tell (or show) a police officer that the group has permission from a congressman to drop off on the east side (near the Library of Congress or Supreme Court), but that officer might say he/she has no record of that permission and then sends the bus away (back to the bottom of the Hill). And more disgruntled visitors are turned away from their Capitol.

Despite CVC efforts to engender a visitor-friendly experience, DC guides have still experienced “horror stories” over the past year. In April, tourist guide Ruth Croan’s group of 40 seniors from Michigan arrived at the Garfield statue drop-off at 11:45 for a scheduled Capitol tour at 1 p.m. By noon, five members boarded the shuttle to the CVC. But the shuttle did not return for the remaining visitors. At 12:15, the tour group leader decided to climb the Hill to pick up the tour tickets inside the CVC. At 12:30, the remainder of seniors started struggling up the Hill, arriving at the CVC security check point shortly before 1 p.m. The group leader advised security personnel their group was holding tickets for the one o’clock tour. The USCP guard directed the group to the end of a long security-check line. The group was finally admitted and able to tour the Capitol.

Although the seniors arrived in plenty of time, they ended up experiencing significant hassle. Why must our citizens be subjected to the whims of the Capitol Police? Bus luggage compartment inspections at the bottom of the Hill and allowing the bus to proceed up the Hill would have eliminated citizen harassment.

“With busloads of seniors, guides must reconsider visiting the Capitol at all,” said Friedmann. “People want to go, but they can’t believe how taxing and time-consuming the visit really is. With kids a walk up the Hill is no big deal, but with seniors it is humiliating.”\

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Bruce Robey Remembered

Bruce Robey was a quiet man with a forward looking imagination and a determination to make Capitol Hill a more varied and exciting place. A life is more than a list of accomplishments but Bruce’s list serves as an incentive to all of us.

In addition to founding the

Voice of the Hill and the H Street Playhouse (along with his wife, Adele), Bruce served as President of CHAMPS and a member of the H Street Main Street Board as well as the CHAW Board. On the lighter side, he entertained us as a member of the Not-So-Playne-Jayne Trio and his photography captured the changing moods of Capitol Hill.

Bruce was a man for his time... and ours. His contributions to this community will have a long and profound effect. In 2003 those contributions were recognized when Bruce received a Capitol Hill Community Achievement Award.

On behalf of the Capitol Hill Community Foundation, we offer our deepest condolences to Adele and Julia. Bruce will be missed by all of us.

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Don’t Trade Quality of Life for Liquor Store Donations

Despite the well intended motive of our Councilmember, the Ward 6 ban on the single sales of beer and alcohol, as reported in your September 2009 article, “Exceptions Are the Rule,” has not had a positive effect in my Southwest Waterfront neighborhood.

The primary reason is that ANC 6D, which overwhelmingly supported the exception for all stores that applied, deliberately ignored important criteria when it came to Cap Liquor Store, located at 1301 South Capitol St. SW.

The so-called “live and let live” attitude of ANC 6D, as noted by ANC 6D ABC Committee Chairperson Coralie Farlee in this article, apparently did not include the many law-abiding residents who want to enjoy their homes, raise their children, and walk their dogs without having to wade through the piles of beer bottles and cans, the overpowering stench of urine and human waste, the gangster rap music, the obscenities and threats, and not so subtle harassment by aggressive panhandlers who are daily fixtures in and around this store.

Despite more than 70 disorderly conduct calls to police in 2008, and several well-documented arrests and complaints of public drinking, and other quality of life violations, my ANC ignored the protest petition,

signed by more than 20 residents who live near this store, to accept the testimony of two other residents who proclaimed that the liquor store was a “community benefit” because the owner had contributed a few hundred dollars to the boys’ football team and a senior holiday dinner.

I recognize that there are residents who think that being able to walk to the corner store to purchase a single can of beer or half pint is a convenience. Some actually believe that it is their right. But I certainly don’t expect to have our elected ANC officials defend the illegal acts that occur in and around this store almost daily and then attempt to justify their support by calling it a “community benefit.” Saying that it is a benefit because the owner contributes a few dollars to a few residents in exchange for the support is a sad reminder of how little value is placed on the quality of life of decent, law-abiding and working residents.

Given that we cannot hold ANC 6D immediately accountable for its poor decision, there should be some provision in the Ward 6 ban to allow residents who are adversely impacted by the ANC’s decision to appeal to the Alcohol Beverage Regulation Administration (ABRA). Under the current law, residents must endure the nuisance store for an entire year.

Fortunately, the store’s liquor license came up for renewal in May. So we will have an opportunity to challenge the store’s license during a hearing on Sept. 30 before the Alcohol Beverage Regulation Administration (ABRA).

Still, even the renewal protest process demands a lot of our time, enormous resources, including the gathering of evidence, and some legal skills. Few working people can devote so much time and energy to correcting neighborhood nuisances. That’s the job of regulatory agencies.

ABRA needs to step up to enforce these single-sale exceptions and the law should include a way to rescind this privilege immediately upon a violation.

Finally, the agency’s actions should not be guided by a vote of an obviously conflicted and ill-advised ANC, but the store’s record of operation as a good neighbor, and its history of compliance, as required by existing law.

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