



Construction of Shaw Library Finally Begins

BY AMANDA ABRAMS

Shaw is one step closer to finally having a brand new library. On December 9, city officials, library leaders, community members and a bevy of fourth graders in yellow hard hats celebrated the ground-breaking of the new Watha T. Daniel Library, at the site of the old library at 8th Street and Rhode Island Avenue.

"It's been a long time in coming, and we're not going to rest until we get it open and well-staffed with all the books and services necessary," said John Hill, chairman of the Board of Library Trustees.

Speakers at the ceremony included Mayor Adrian Fenty, Councilman Jack Evans, Chief Librarian Ginny Cooper, Chairman Hill, and ANC commissioner Alex Padro. Many highlighted the neighborhood's long-standing need for a new library.

"I've been waiting seven years for this," said Padro, the neighborhood's ANC representative, who was credited by Councilman Evans for helping make the new library a reality.

Shaw has been without a permanent library since 2004, when the original Watha T. Daniel Library closed. The old building had been criticized for its Brutalist architectural style, which some residents likened to a prison.

The start of construction on the new library was delayed by design disagreements over the summer between DC Public Library officials and community members; the latter were worried that the new building would lack the airy quality that had initially been promised by architects.

At the event, speakers were flanked by an architect's drawing of a modern wedge-shaped building with windows lining its sides. Library officials asserted that the final design—which will be energy efficient, though it won't have the vegetative roof that had been in the initial plans—had been approved by all key parties.

"We had about five community meetings and worked through concerns that the building won't be translucent," said Jeff Bonvechio, head of capital projects for DCPL. "It'll be a great building."

The new library is slated to have 80,000 books and 32 public computers. It will be four times the size of the interim library, which opened a few blocks away in October 2007 and is extremely well used, with variety of programs designed to serve patrons.

Library officials say the new library building should be complete by December 31, 2009, and will reopen in March 2010. Nonetheless, a spokesperson for the library said that the work order to begin construction on the building had not been submitted to the City Council for approval until December 18. The late date guarantees that work won't begin for at least another few weeks. ★

Ward 5 Leaders Plan Inaugural Events

Themes Include DC Statehood

BY JENNY JOHNSON

Leaders in Ward 5 are planning events for the historic inauguration of Barack Obama as president of the United States.

Advisory Neighborhood Commission 5C Chair Anita Bonds -- who is also chair of the D.C. Democratic State Committee -- is spearheading plans for a lavish gala celebration in the Department of Transportation building by the new stadium on Jan. 19, scheduled so it will not conflict with the president's official ceremony in the District. The celebration will highlight the District's lack of federal representation. "We want to be the 51st state, and 'voting rights' is on the tip of our tongue," Bonds said of the message the event is aiming to send. She cited a commitment from candidate Obama to support voting rights in the District, adding that the advocates are "hoping to push that forward to statehood."

Bonds is also hoping to attract top talent to headline the show, and said the planning committee is encouraging Obama himself to put in an appearance, given the family's previous statements that they want to become an active part of the local DC community. Bonds says about 2000 tickets will be available at a price of \$244.51.

Ward 5 Councilmember Harry Thomas is meanwhile planning another event to call attention to the District's lack of representation. Thomas is planning the District's 51st State Inaugural Ball, which will take place Jan. 20 at 8 pm at the John A. Wilson Building.

Thomas is also planning a series of events for inauguration day to ensure his constituents can take part in the historic occasion. Inaugural viewing spots will be set up at various recreation centers and senior centers, because the city will be difficult to navigate during the event.

The public transportation system will be clogged because it will be the only way to access downtown, as many roads will be blocked off and parking will be nearly nonexistent. During the ceremony only official vehicles will be allowed on the roads in certain parts of the city, Thomas said.

For young people, plans are in the works for a youth ball, to be possibly held at McKinley, Thomas said.

In addition, the National Network for Youth chose Ward 5 as the place for their inaugural party. The family-friendly HOPE Inaugural Ball will take place Jan. 17 at Trinity Center at Trinity University. ★

Girard Street Playground Reopens

BY NATASHA ABBAS

Community members came together to celebrate the opening of Girard Street Playground on Monday, Dec. 8. Mayor Adrian Fenty, Ward 1 Councilmember Jim Graham, and DC Department of Parks and Recreation Director Clark E. Ray joined city leaders and Ward 1 residents for a ribbon-cutting ceremony to reopen the playground, located next to the year-old Columbia Heights Community Center at 1480 Girard Street, NW.

“We are immensely pleased to reopen the Girard Street Playground,” said Mayor Fenty. “This open space has been improved to serve and represent the interests of the diverse multi-cultural communities which call Columbia Heights home.”

The Project, which cost an estimated \$333,000, replaced a grass play surface in the center of the Girard Street Playground with a new 9,500 square foot multi-colored rubber play surface prominently displaying the word “Welcome” throughout the design in six languages, representative of the languages spoken throughout the Columbia Heights community. At the center of the design is the outline of a map of the District of Columbia in red, blue, green and yellow. The new rubber play surface is composed of recycled materials and is permeable, sitting atop 32 inches of gravel, designed to allow rainwater to drain through it and minimize run-off. A new gate was also installed at the Fuller and Fairmont Street entrances to the park.

“DPR is excited to complete another capital improvement project and reopen this playground today, providing an even better playground for our residents,” said DPR Director Clark E. Ray. “I would like to thank the Columbia Heights community for their continuing involvement and support in making this project possible, and I know that this space will help foster the sense of community that is so vibrant here.”

The new amenities include a youth community garden and swings at the 6-12 year old playground. A number of repairs were made, including revamped benches, replacement of broken handles and repairs to the pergolas at the tot playground, and painting of the walls inside the ellipse and children’s playground. The park is also ADA accessible.

Improvements at the park are expected to continue in the coming months, and a fountain, game tables, outdoor bathrooms and a new basketball court are anticipated in time for spring. The neighborhood group City Blossoms will be working with residents to plant additional gardens throughout the playground to create an even greener space. Youth from a number of Ward 1 community programs, such as Community of Hope, Centronia, and the Columbia Heights Youth Center, will be caring for the garden spaces.

“For this park we brought together longtime and newly arrived residents to design a space that serves everyone. I am happy to see these groups come together to transform the park into a vibrant urban green space,” said Councilmember Graham on his blog.

★



Community members celebrated the ribbon cutting for the new Girard Street Park play surface area on December 8.

Recession Worries at SOME Donations Shrink as need increases

BY AMANDA ABRAMS

An economic recession affects a wide swath of society. But for organizations that assist low-income people, a downturn can cut doubly hard: the demand for assistance increases, while charitable donations shrink.

At So Others Might Eat (SOME), one of the city’s largest service providers for poor and homeless Washingtonians, employees are bracing for what they think could be very bad times ahead.

On a recent weekday in a small stone house just off of North Capitol, volunteers and staff members were busy coordinating thousands of ‘shoebox gifts,’ a regular holiday feature contributed by businesses, churches and individuals. The wrapped shoeboxes contain toiletries, gloves, scarves, and maybe a small treat, and are given out in the dining room during the week before Christmas.

“It’s pretty incredible, the day they give them out,” said Tracy Monson, manager of marketing and special events. “You get the sense that for a lot of people, this is it for them—the only gift they’ll get.”

SOME staff say that the number of shoebox gifts donated this year was about average, but the dining room is serving about 100 more people per day than usual.

“At least three or four times a week, we’ll hit 1000 people [in the dining room]; last year, we were only getting up to 800 people,” said Tony Smith, the dining room manager. “We’re seeing more of the working poor, people who have to make a choice between eating and paying rent,” he added, pointing out that more people in uniforms or wearing badges were coming in for the daily breakfasts and lunches provided by the organization.

SOME was started in 1970 by Father Horace McKenna, who moved the organization to the stone building a few years later. But SOME is constantly expanding, and has added a bigger brick building across the street, which houses a medical and dental clinic, as well as meeting rooms and offices for social workers and mental health professionals.

All of SOME’s services are in high demand.

“With medical and dental, the need is already tremendous; it’s always been so great that we’ve never been able to meet it,” said Mary Ann Sack, SOME’s assistant executive director. But she added that there’s also been an increased demand for services the organization doesn’t provide, like emergency food relief. “It’s been a dramatic change since October,” she said.

Sack and the staff are worried about what’s to come. “We’re all a little nervous,” she said. “I think we’re at the very beginning of this.”

As for whether the organization’s income will be affected by the downturn, it’s hard to tell at this point. Almost 50 percent of SOME’s funding comes from individual donations, and most of that comes at the very end of the year.

“I have no sense about donations right now, not till the middle or end of January,” said Sack. “Our donations are what we live on for the rest of the year, so we’re holding our breath and trying not to panic. We do have a little buffer, so we’ll be OK for a period of time, but we’re hoping it turns around.”

To donate to SOME, go to www.some.org. ★

McMillan Developers Strive to Accommodate Community Input

BY JENNY JOHNSON

The developers of the McMillan sand filtration site, Vision McMillan Partners, is stressing that they intend to come up with a final plan that is in line with the desires of the community to the greatest extent possible. The 25-acre site is located is bounded by North Capitol Street (E), Michigan Avenue (N), First Street (W) and Channing Street (S).

The group is led by EYA and includes Jair Lynch Companies and Smoot Construction along with three other firms. They are holding regular private meetings with community leaders and conducted a second open community forum to solicit feedback in December.

Tania Jackson of Jair Lynch said the draft plans that have been presented to the community so far “will be readjusted” in line with community members’ suggestions. “We are having a public and transparent process,” she said. “There were not concerns raised that we think can’t be addressed.”

The developers are also creating a new seat on the McMillan advisory committee in response to a request from a resident of nearby Park Place, according to Jackson.

Jackson added that the proposed plan now includes eight acres of public green space, as opposed to the six acres in older versions of the plan.

As part of the effort to seek and incorporate public comment into the plan, the developers are creating a Web site where the community can see the current development and submit comments online. “We want as many people as possible to see it and comment on it,” Jackson said.

Nearby residents to the site have generally expressed concern about increases in the level of traffic in the already congested area, and the potentially dense construction that will eliminate much needed park spaces in Ward 5.

The site is a former water filtration site that is considered to have historic value for its role in ridding the young city of diseases such as typhoid. The current draft plan includes “preservation of all the key historic elements on the site,” according to the developers. The eight acres of green public space include a central three-acre park with a public amphitheater. Indoor space for a recreation center will be included along with up to 1,200 units of mixed-income housing, up to 400,000 square feet of office space, and 100,000 square feet of retail. The plan also might include a “boutique” hotel and a nursing home. ★

The Singles Sales Ban Ethics and Exemptions

BY AMANDA ABRAMS

Residents of some Ward 2 and Ward 6 neighborhoods are finding that enacting fair and effective public policies can be tricky.

This October, in an effort to cut down on public drunkenness and affiliated nuisances, the DC City Council passed emergency legislation banning the sale of individual containers of alcohol in neighborhoods 2C, 2F, and 6C09. The ban went into effect November 22, and, given Congressional approval, will be followed in early 2009 by a permanent ward-wide ‘singles’ ban in Wards 2 and 6.

The ban is already in place in Mt. Pleasant and parts of Ward 4, and has been successful at targeting the purchasers of single cans of malt liquor and small bottles of alcohol, who are seen as the most likely to loiter, litter, urinate in public, and trample tree boxes.

But the legislation has a loophole: community members can recommend to DC’s Alcoholic Beverage Regulation Administration that certain stores be exempt from the ban. And therein lies the difficulty: which stores should be exempt? Not all singles are malt liquor; some may be microbrews sold in 22 ounce bottles, for instance—not the type of beverage purchased by the average loiterer. And not all stores that sell malt liquor have a problem with drinkers gathering and making nuisances of themselves.

“My view is that there may be plenty of people buying it for legitimate purposes, but there’s an adverse impact by others,” said Cary Silverman, president of the Mount Vernon Square Neighborhood Association. “We judge on a case by case basis,” he said, acknowledging that there was a diversity of opinions within the group.

The association recently weighed whether Good Libations, a liquor store at the corner of 5th and M Street and within ANC 2C, should be exempt from the ban. While the shop looks like a typical liquor store from outside, its owner, Ron Greene, has gradually transformed it in the three years he’s owned the business. Frequented by some MVSNA members, the store offers a range of microbrews and a small but quality wine selection.

But Greene also used to stock malt liquor and half pints of vodka and gin, though he stopped because

of the ban. On December 16, he went to a MVSNA meeting to plead his case for an exemption to the law.

“I care about this community, so I was kind of shocked and taken aback at the opposition against me getting an exemption,” said Greene, who lives nearby. “What was getting to me was that I’m not the typical liquor store.” Greene holds wine tastings on the third Thursdays of each month, and has held parties every summer to thank the community for its support.

In the end, MVSNA voted to support Good Libations, but some members felt that supporting one business would open the door for others.

“You have to be objective,” said Rob Amos, treasurer of MVSNA, who voted against granting Greene’s business an exemption. “If Good Libations is exempt, then why shouldn’t it apply to B&M liquors?”

Brenda Keys, owner of B&M Food Store on the 200 block of New York Avenue, would certainly agree. While her neighborhood doesn’t currently fall under the ban, it will when the legislation becomes permanent in 2009.

Keys’ business is distinctly less upscale than Greene’s, but it has a folksy touch, with notes taped to the wall and knickknacks lining the shelves—and everything’s behind bulletproof glass. Keys, who’s been in business for 29 years, knows her customers and maintains that she’s never had any problems with loitering or crime.

“My customers love me and I love my customers. I’ve never had to call the police: everybody looks at me as a mother,” she said. She feels the singles ban isn’t fair to anyone. “Singles are a big part of my business, and we’re in a recession. All of my life, people have gotten off work to get a cold beer—there’s nothing wrong with that.”

A few blocks away, shoppers at Subway Liquor II, a store that has been specifically labeled a problem by neighbors, were waiting in line to buy their post-work beers. None knew about the ban that would come into force in a few months.

Tony Bay, a nearby resident, had strong feelings after hearing about the looming legislation. “People are low income, can’t afford six packs. Maybe they don’t even want a six pack,” he said. “I think it’s wrong.” ★

Audio Documentary on Youth Organizing in DC Debuts

BY NATASHA ABBAS

Area youth shared the impressive outcome of a summer long project creating a radio documentary on youth organizing in DC at All Soul's Unitarian Church at 1500 Harvard St. NW on December 15. The event, entitled Revolution Rewind, was organized by the youth organizers Radio Rootz DC and the Youth Education Alliance.

For nine weeks this past summer, Radio Rootz DC, the Youth Education Alliance (YEA), and the Youth Action Research Group (YARG) partnered with the District's summer employment program to teach young people radio production, media literacy, and organizing. The goal for the summer was to produce a 30 minute audio documentary featuring the stories of young people tackling difficult issues post the MLK assassination.

YEA and YARG staff introduced youth summer employees to organizing by offering them leadership trainings and other skill building exercises. Radio Rootz and YARG introduced the kids to the basics of radio production, including writing, editing, recording and interviewing—while also addressing media messaging's impact on youth and portrayals of youth in the media which can often be negative, said Radio Rootz staff at the event.

"If young people are not depicted as criminals or victims, they are presented in the entertainment media as constant consumers," said a Radio Rootz staffmember.

To counter those messages, the youth in the program produced three stories about youth empowerment and organizing over the last forty years. The first piece on the audio documentary is a story about the DC youth dance show from the 1960's "Teenarama." This show was a creative outlet for young people that was born out of their desire to portray themselves more accurately in the media. Present at the event was Beverly Lindsay-Johnson, the director of the documentary, "The Dance Party: The Teenarama Story" who the youth producers interviewed for their own documentary.

"The experience I had with the young people was absolutely incredible," said Lindsay Johnson, describing the excited interest the youth had in learning about the experience of young people of color growing up in DC during the 1950's and 1960s.

The next portion of the documentary features a story about the Mount Pleasant riots of 1991 and what it was like for many immigrant youth at the time of the riots. Smithsonian folklorist Olivia Cadaval, who was interviewed for the piece, was also present at the event to share some of the background of the riots which ensued after a police officer shot a Salvadoran man during a Cinco de Mayo celebration. As Cadaval, who was involved with a Latino youth arts program at the time of the riots, described, in the midst of the tensions between the immigrant community and the police and city leaders, there were also many positive steps taken by youth to build relationships between different community members in Mt. Pleasant and Columbia Heights.

"It was not just us pitted against the establishment. We worked within the system to forge relationships between Latino youth and black young people," said Cadaval.

The final portion of the audio documentary shares the history of youth organizing in DC over the last 10-15 years, with groups such as Young Women's Project or the youth led Youth Action Research Group.

One of the the youth producers, Anita Guzeh, shared her experiences in the program and as a youth organizer.

"I had a great time this summer," said Guzeh. "It was mind blowing. I learned how to edit, record, and properly conduct an interview." Guzeh said she is able to apply her skills to current organizing she is working on with YEA, including a new campaign to try to get better support from school guidance counsellors, especially when applying to colleges.

YEA is a youth-led organization that identifies problems in the District's schools and works to solve them collectively through direct action and community education.

Radio Rootz is a youth radio program that teaches classes in radio production and media literacy in DC public high schools including Bell Multicultural High School and Calvin Coolidge High School.

For more information about the summer project, or to request a copy of the radio documentary contact Radio Rootz's Leigh Ann Caldwell at 202-621-9137 or by email leighann@peoplesproduction-house.org. ★

The Dupree House on Colorado Avenue provides services to young men in the juvenile justice system.



Easing Group Homes into Neighborhoods

While Generally Good Neighbors, a High Concentration of Group Homes Can Cause Friction

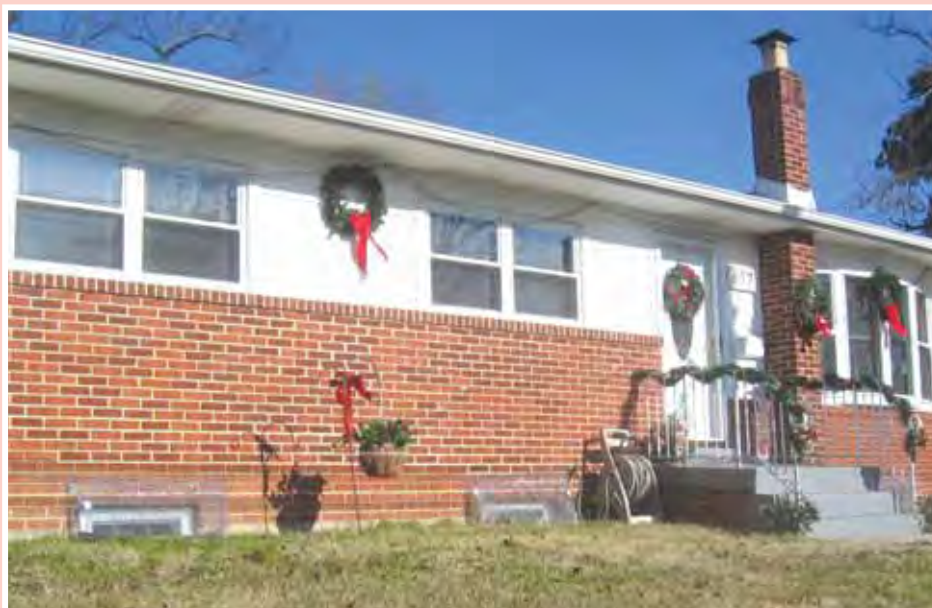
BY TANYA SNYDER

Group homes have long been a major issue on the radar of Ward Four neighborhood groups. And it's no surprise, given that there are more of them there than anywhere else in the city. The City refuses to release the addresses of licensed group homes, but as of a few years ago, Ward Four was home to a quarter of the city's group homes for the mentally ill and a third of the group homes for the mentally retarded. Other kinds of group homes serve young people in the child welfare system or with special needs.

For the most part, group homes are inconspicuous elements in the community. For example, the Dupree House, on Colorado Avenue near where Colorado Kitchen used to be, houses eight adolescent boys referred by the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services. They receive life skills training, group therapy, clinical assessments, employment training, and parenting skills for the young men with children. They also participate in recreational and leisure activities.

A representative of the Dupree House says the group home maintains good relations with community. The kids help out with community service work. They mow the neighbors' lawns, shovel their snow, and rake their leaves. They run errands for senior citizens in the area.

But the presence of group homes is not always so positive. In December, a woman was killed in a group home for people with mental disabilities, located in the 5400 block of Blair Road. Another resident has been taken into custody as a suspect. A contractor for D.C.'s Department of Mental Health runs the home, which housed five people. Neighbors say the house was always quiet, and there doesn't seem to be



A woman was killed by another resident in a group home on the 5400 block of Blair Road NE in December.

ANC Commissioner Sara Green says the group home on Dahlia Street has been a good neighbor.

any history of complaints.

Following the homicide, Ward Four Councilmember Muriel Bowser called for a full review of group homes in the ward, including a thorough investigation of the one where the incident took place. She may address the issue of excessive concentration too, as she has demanded a review of “procedures related to placement and supervision.

Concentration Leads to Controversy

Although they provide crucial services for vulnerable populations and care for people the rest of us don’t know how to handle, group homes can find themselves a target for neighbors’ complaints.

ANC 4B-01 Commissioner Sara Green says her single member district has one of the highest concentrations of group homes in the whole city. She says there are at least nine or ten group homes on one block of Fern Place between Georgia and 8th Street.

Green says that the group homes are often good neighbors. The one next door to her, at 617 Dahlia St., is quiet and well maintained. But the concentration can create a problem – like on Fern Place, where there were four homes run by the same operator. The bus would roll in a six in the morning to pick up residents to take them to various activities, and instead of getting out of the bus and walking up to four different doors, the driver leaned on the horn until everyone came out -- at six in the morning.

Mentally ill and developmentally challenged people in Washington used to endure life at institutions like St. Elizabeth’s in Ward Eight, which today operates at a tiny fraction of its former capacity. Huge facilities like that fell out of fashion starting in the 1950s, and group houses emerged as a solution. The idea was to take people out of institutions and re-integrate them in neighborhoods.

But Sara Green says the concentration of several group houses on a block defeats that purpose. “When you have four group homes on the same block, you’re not integrating people,” she says. “You’re institutionalizing the street.”

Businesses vs Residences

In 2004, a California court found that restricting group homes’ operation was a violation of the Fair Housing Act. They said that trying to reduce concentrations of mentally disabled people in a residential area amounted to housing discrimination, as it would against any other class of people. And so the DC government has been unwilling to address the situation.

But the homes are not simply residences – they are businesses in areas not zoned for commercial use. The ANCs say that regular housing law doesn’t apply, since the group homes are not regular houses, but for-profit businesses. They are concentrated in certain neighborhoods for the convenience of the owners and operators, not by the wishes of the residents.

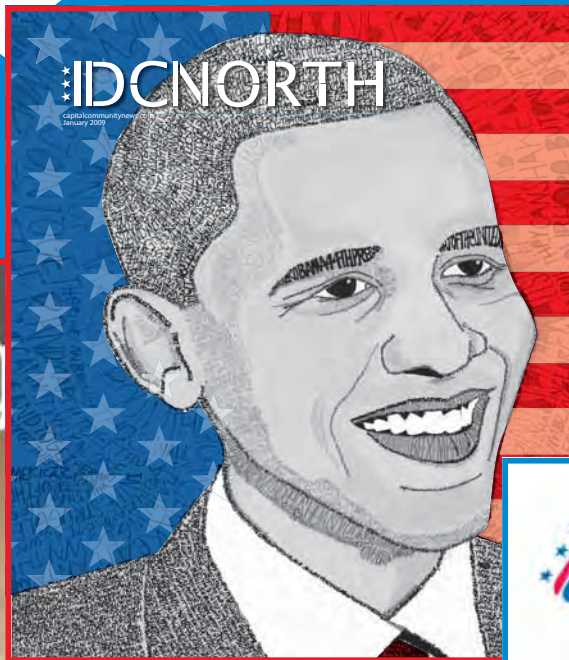
Among other problems, this creates parking difficulties when group home employees drive to work, but aren’t zoned to park on the street all day. They sometimes end up parking in alleys and driveways. And since they’re not connected to the neighborhood, they aren’t always considerate of the neighbors. Neighbors have complained about loud chatter between employees during late-night shift switches, for example.

Councilmember Bowser’s review of Ward 4 group homes should at the least provide data on which future policy decisions can be made that will balance the needs of the community with the needs of the residents of the homes as well as their operators. ★

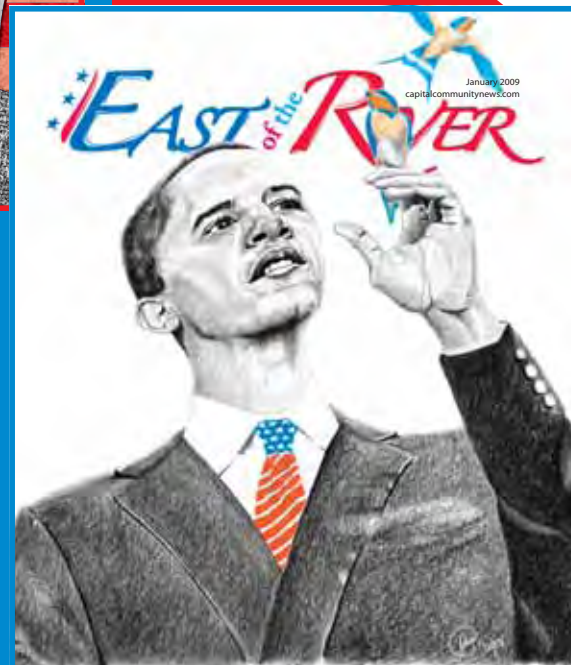


If you would like a pdf of any or all of these images, please email Julie at julie@hillrag.com

Jason Yen



Jason Nickens



Giancarlo Fagon



Capital Community News salutes the

44th President, Barack Obama