

St. Johns Neighborhood Association
General Meeting Minutes
Monday, Oct 12th 7:00 p.m. St. Johns Community Center
Minutes by Denis C. Theriault, Secretary

Board members present: Shamus Lynsky, Emilie Saks-Webb, Denis Theriault, Josh Leslie, Justin Sundling, Ben Poe, Jennifer Levy

About 30 other community members were present.

The meeting was called to order at 7 pm by Shamus, the night's presiding officer.

Howard motions to approve the minutes from August as written, seconded by Josh. The minutes are approved.

THE TREASURY

Adam, the treasurer, was absent. No numbers are presented. Emilie, board co-chair, says the St. Johns Fred Meyer can facilitate donations to SJNA — for every hundred dollars you spend, they'll give SJNA a buck. It's very easy to set up online. Jen, another board co-chair, says we should have about \$5,000 in the main account and \$1,200 in the art fund. Most of SJNA's budget is spent on communications — as in, our online newsletter. It's also spent on equipment for volunteer events, sponsorships or seeding fundraisers.

SAFETY AND LIVABILITY

The team, also known as the SALT team, meets at 7 pm the first Tuesday of the month at the Main Street office, 8250 N Lombard, right across N Charleston from Signal Station Pizza. Agendas are posted on NextDoor and Facebook.

Ben, the board's SALT liaison, says the most recent meeting was a follow-up on August's walkability event. There were a few issues and a few sidebars that came up. People talked about wanting more crosswalks. There was an underlying concern from many participants about problems on both ends of the Lombard corridor: speeding, red-light-running and commercial freight traffic. People report a lot of near-miss incidents.

There was talk of asking police for increased enforcement and asking the city for more crosswalks. One thought mentioned: Revisiting the St. Johns trucks strategy to get pass-through freight traffic out of St. Johns altogether.

Shamus explains the "truck strategy." At the end of the 1990s, citizens met with the city to devise something called the St. Johns Truck Strategy. The idea? Route freight traffic round the core of St. Johns, make pedestrian improvements where the trucks used to run — but also improve conditions for trucks on their new route. The trucks

received funding for their changes in the first wave. Four years ago, Phase 2 of the strategy led to approval — and committed funding — for improvements to St. Louis, Fessenden, Columbia Way and a stretch of Lombard north of St. Louis. It's going to be built next year and look "radically different."

Ben says the other spinoff from August's discussion involved Trimet and what might improve service on Peninsula. One idea received universal interest: An express bus to the Lombard/Interstate MAX station, looping along St. Louis, Fessenden, Wall and Lombard. People want SJNA to advocate for that. Ben suggests further polling of neighborhood.

Shamus said Trimet attended a regular meeting of local groups' board chairs and discussed its draft for pending service changes in N/NE Portland.

One plan had initially called for Line 16 routing through the Pearl. Trimet came to the meeting to say they're going re-think that change. They'll also provide contact information so people can continue to give direct feedback on plans. Ben said during this meeting that he wasn't going to bring up the 16. He said he's not hearing consensus on keeping the route the same. Right now, it provides an express link to downtown, but routing the line through the Pearl would restore service to Northwest Portland, a la the old Line 17. Many people still lament the end of the old Line 17.

Meanwhile, AARP and St. Johns Main Street were planning a 90-minute walk along Lombard the day after this meeting, with lunch planned.

Ben also reintroduces the concept of the team for the many newcomers in the crowd. It's an opportunity to share concerns on any issues that affect safety and livability, including public safety, traffic, property crime, environmental issues, and gentrification concerns. It's an open forum.

Shamus says the team is important for SJNA because of SJNA's role as official interlocutor with the city. The city may not decide to mess with issues that aren't raised or championed by SJNA.

LAND USE

Josh, SJNA's land use chair, describes the committee as such.

When new development is proposed in St. Johns, SJNA is notified. We have a chance to respond to those notices if we think a proposal is against the interests of the neighborhood. But our response is limited: SJNA has little recourse if an undesirable or dubious project is allowed by zoning rules and city code. Our leverage comes once a developer seeks a concession or exception, also known as a "variance."

Josh mentions that Portland is closer to finishing its 30-year plan for development and growth, called the Comprehensive Plan. There's a map app that allows comments and lets you examine proposed changes. St. Johns, which is in line for added density, is an area of focus.

He says the most recent land use team meeting included representatives from housing organizations in hopes of developing a community plan for attracting new affordable housing. St. Johns Main Street is planning on posting video of the meeting.

Josh says the Huk Lab development on Charleston and Lombard — also known as the Union project — will be presented in briefings to Portland city commissioners this week. They'll be considering a plan to vacate the S-curve turn lane and some defunct city-owned right of way below the Colony. The plan will head first to the Planning and Sustainability Commission, which will provide a non-binding recommendation. It will then return to the Portland City Council for a formal, binding vote. The planning commission hearing had not been scheduled as of this meeting.

Jen adds that the the My Car Care building on Lombard, long a blight, has been sold and is being "transitioned" to some non-moribund use. It's across from the St. Johns Deli at Mohawk and Lombard.

THE OCTOBER ELECTIONS

All eleven of the board's positions, each with a one-year term, are up for vote next year. Roughly four of the are expected to be open. Interested candidates do not have to run for a specific board position. The board selects its officers once a new board is seated. The board meets the fourth Monday of the month in addition to the general meeting on the second Monday of the month. (Some months have neither board nor general meetings.) Some board members may have additional obligations if they serve on special committees, such as land use or SALT.

WILLAMETTE COVE CLEANUP UPDATE

Dwight Leisle, environmental programs manager for the Port of Portland, presents on the cleanup project. It involves a 24-acre site along the Willamette River, next to the Superfund site near the B&N railroad. Its soil is contaminated, and it's closed for public access. Metro put up something like 30 signs to warn interlopers about the risks — with worst areas fenced off.

The project, which may some day open access to the site, involves removing 5,000 cubic yards of contaminated soil. Trucks bearing that dirty soil will pass through the neighborhood on the way to a landfill in Eastern Oregon. Other work will follow the soil removal. Workers would like to preserve existing vegetation, such as native trees.

Permitting is underway, Dwight says, with October 5 looming as the target date to start work. “Six weeks will take us into November.” The Port wants feedback on the truck haul route. Their goal is to use existing truck routes — like Columbia Blvd, Lombard, etc. — to quickly move the dirt to the highway system.

Workers will access the site at N Edgewater off N Willamette, which is narrow — meaning parking restrictions will be required. They’ll turn west on Willamette, head to Richmond, then take Ivanhoe to St. Louis and traverse the truck route. Other options included the St. Johns Bridge, which had traffic and access concerns. Other options involved Lombard and possible N Ida, heading to Columbia Way.

Someone mentions it’s a dump truck not a freight truck. Dwight says they’ll be lined and covered and inspected as they leave, with wheel washes to keep contaminated dirt from spreading.

A woman asks how workers will keep the Superfund site from bleeding into the cleaned site. Dwight says the contaminants are in the surface soil. The hope is to prevent the contaminants from working their way to the river. A state Department of Environmental Quality official says the Superfund site has already been “rigorously” capped; its contaminants won’t make it to the Cove property. There may be some further capping and soil removal at the Cove.

Dwight is asked if the Port does this kind of work often. He says it has. The Port also plans to backfill fresh, clean. Shamus says Metro had hoped to open the Cove as a natural area. They didn’t realize the site, formerly home to industry, was so polluted when it obtained the land.

A man with self-professed expertise in freight asks about truck capacity. It’s 20 trucks a day, Dwight says, running from 9 am to 3 pm.

Someone else says you can just plant mushrooms to suck up all the toxins. The scientist who devised this “bioremediation” approach is on YouTube, he points out.

JOHN TEPLY, SUPPORTER OF IVY ISLAND, COUNTERS THE UNION ON CHARLESTON PROPOSAL

Before the presentation, audience members make clear that they were mostly here tonight to hear this presentation.

John is circulating a petition to the mayor and city council asking them not to vacate the road and not to vacate Ivy Island. John has also got a petition to SJNA and St. Johns Boosters asking them to write against the vacation.

What’s Ivy Island? It’s a traffic island that separates southbound traffic on Lombard headed to Richmond from the curved through-lane that shoots northbound traffic toward Charleston. The city has asked the Union’s developer to remove the slip lane

in favor of a traditional intersection at Lombard and Richmond. Ivy Island would go away. Some of the former Ivy Island would be given to a new northbound lane on Lombard. That open space would shift to the footprint of the slip lane. The developer has planned a public plaza atop that new open space. The developer also will use the project's expanded footprint to provide more underground parking spaces than initially planned.

John says the justification for this proposal is the St. Johns/Lombard Plan, which he calls "marvelous." But he says it's "quite different" from what's contemplated here. (What's that plan? A community-driven effort, dating back to the early 2000s, to shape development in downtown St. Johns and its immediate environs.) He says the plan aims to emphasize human scale development and fit the character of St. Johns' core.

John says buildings contemplated in the plan should be no taller than three stories and 50 feet wide. Then he cites a map from the plan showing a reconfigured Richmond-Lombard-Charleston intersection similar to the what the Union's developer has agreed to provide. He says that plan is beautiful, because it keeps a pedestrian corridor on the slip lane. It moves the island north. He contrasts that with the current proposal, which would see the project's footprint fill that open space with a plaza and other features.

He presented a Photoshopped version of how the street plan would look without the building occupying some of that land. He makes it a green space in another image.

He complains that a smaller buffer in the current plan might expose people to traffic.

He mentions how people think this will improve the intersection at Charleston and Lombard, near James John Elementary and the library. The intersection tends to feel unsafe because it's difficult to see vehicles coming from the slip lane. John says there's a history of crafting solutions in St. Johns and he says it's not okay to destroy what we have to do that here.

John said people didn't realize the existing buildings would be demolished when they mulled over the reconfiguration in the St. Johns/Lombard Plan. He says the slip lane could even stay if someone, say, moved back the old Weir's building to create more visibility. That would make the Charleston crossing safe. And why not put in a pedestrian stoplight? Or a speed reader? Or a stop sign?

He argues the St. Johns/Lombard Plan was supposed to prevent this kind of project — a denser huddle of apartments and storefronts and work spaces than currently exists on the land — but now is used as an excuse to justify it.

John presents more Photoshopped pictures showing the space he says would be lost if Ivy Island went away.

Denis asks John a question, given that pictures are imprecise: Has he measured the space planned by the Union's developer in his public plaza vs. the space currently allotted in Ivy Island. Shamus answers. The building and its plaza would have a 24 foot setback from the street. That's a foot shorter than the 25 feet at Ivy Island's widest point. Shamus says we'll still see a large buffer from the street.

Another woman reminds John that the city's transportation bureau requested the street change.

John answers that only the city council, in the end, can actually give the land away.

Jen says the developer can always do the project without the vacation, as he originally proposed before the city asked him to alter his plans. John quibbles with the developer's statements in past meetings that the city reached out first. But when asked if he thinks the developer is lying, as his statements about the developer's past comments implies, John won't go that far.

If the street vacation doesn't happen, Shamus says we'll still have a dense development. And a slip lane many see as dangerous. But we'll also have Ivy Island, John says.

Shamus says drivers would see a plaza with green space as they approach Richmond north on Lombard. And a smaller building with plantings atop it, where the current Hookah Lounge sits.

A woman says she asked for stats on safety at the Charleston and Lombard crossing. She says the only fatality nearby was at Ivanhoe and Richmond. John allows that he's always happy when he safely crosses at Charleston and Lombard but hadn't seen the numbers.

Shamus says neighborhood leaders have met with with the city and the developer to talk about cut-through traffic related to the reconfiguration, a separate issue from Ivy Island's demise. Business groups are working with developer to deal with business impacts.

Shamus also says the developer is exceeding city standards for parking by providing spaces for 80 percent of the building's units. City standards require just 30 percent. Shamus says he'd rather talk about traffic calming on Charleston, where development's garage will go, and how to avoid cut through traffic.

A GANG OFFICER PRESENTS

Charles Asheim, a member of the Portland Police Bureau's gang enforcement team, answers questions and gives a presentation in the wake of community concerns over recent gang shootings in St. Johns.

“That’s going to be a tough act to follow,” he says of John Tepy. “I’m super impressed at how many people are here.”

Charles grew up near Irving Park. He’s been a cop for 10 years and on the gang team for the past five. He worked in St. Johns during his first five years with the police bureau.

He says gang crimes have been a growing problem all across Portland: “We’re in a record year, unfortunately.”

Gang team callouts hit 118 in all of 2012, the last record outburst. They were at 90 at this point in 2014. Callouts were already at 126 as of the night’s meeting, on Sept. 15.

Why? “I wish there was a simple answer.”

He mentions tension over police accountability movements. “There’s never been a time in my career with so much static and the bulk of the public and the police.” He said that makes it more difficult for officers to get people to come forward with information that might help officers solve crimes. In the gang world, he says, it’s even worse: because murders happen to those people.

Jen asks what’s happening with gangs to cause this rise.

He says he’ll get to that. He continues to stress the importance of persuading citizens to inform on gang members. “We can’t police our way out of this.” Then he pivots to the answer. He says the gang world has seen several changes with gangs established in the late 1980s and early 1990s now welcoming in their second and third generations, kids who were born into the life and don’t know a world without it. Kids born knowing not to walk down certain streets and in certain colors and in certain neighborhoods.

Gentrification has changed that... but it hasn’t. He says many gang members no longer reside in their historic territories. Some of the younger members have never resided in traditional gang neighborhoods. But they still claim dominion over them.

“They’re shooting and dying in neighborhoods they don’t even live in anymore,” Charlie says. “They feel they have to belong to that by family pressure or peer pressure.”

Many older gang members imprisoned years ago have returned to the street to influence the younger generation. Also, more younger kids are carrying guns. More shooters are younger — some 13 and 14 years old. One kid shot a rival “in broad daylight.” Charlie said those young offenders can be back on the street in six to 12 months because of their age.

A man asks where gang neighborhoods are moving. Charlie says gang crimes used to happen mostly in the old Columbia Villa and inner North and Northeast Portland. Before gentrification, that made them “somebody else’s problems,” without a lot of out-cry to the city to stop the violence.

Gentrification means gang members now might have just a relative or two in those traditional gang neighborhoods. They might do violence there. But they’ll do it in other neighborhoods, too — the places where lower-income Portlanders have been displaced

“We’re just as likely to have a shooting on Charleston and Swenson [one of the more notorious shootings this summer that prompted this discussion] as 162nd and Stark,” Charlie says. “It’s a citywide issue. And that’s how we need to look at it.”

What can we do? Be aware of the company your kids are keeping. Be aware of what’s going on in your neighborhood. Call the police, even for smaller-seeming crimes and suspicious behavior. “Until your house gets hit with a stray bullet,” he says, “it’s easy to say you don’t want to get involved in it.”

A man asks what motivates gang members to join up. Charlie says some OGs and some young guys want notoriety. They think they don’t have much to live for in the long-term. The way to get that is to do violence. Most beefs have nothing to do with territory. It’s ego and respect. “That’s literally how they think,” he said. “They’ll look like a punk to their friends if they don’t” maintain their reputations.

A woman asks about programs for prevention at a young age. He says there are programs with life skills in schools. The gang team tries to get kids into those programs. “If we can’t get these kids to accept help, it’s hard to intervene,” he says.

What about the shootings on Swenson, someone asks.

Charlie calls one of the shootings, at Iris and Swenson, “classic.” A guy was driving with three kids under 8 and his wife in the car. An unknown suspect, believed to be a gang member, shot the car while standing in the middle of the street. He maybe targeted the car by a mistake. Or maybe it was a beef.

The driver had been previously targeted for gang violence and moved from Portland. He had just returned.

“Don’t feel bad about calling us,” Charlie says, if you see a crime in progress, like a fight or some other disturbance. Civilian witnesses speaking out en masse have helped convict violent gang criminal even when their victims, keeping silent as part of their world’s code, keep silent.

“The squeaky wheel gets the oil.”

THE MOTION TO CONTINUE

Josh motions to continue the meeting past its regular agenda, to continue discussing the Union/Ivy Island proposal for a few more minutes — until the community center kicks SJNA out of the room. It's seconded and approved. After much chaos, with people leaving and chattering and putting away chairs, the meeting resumes.

Joe Adamski mentions an overlooked component. The St. Johns/Lombard Plan describes the Charleston/Richmond/Lombard area as a "community corner." Certain intersections have that designation. The building, as far as Joe understands, is pretty much what the plan's drafters (he was among them) sought in the plan. With the island/plaza is he wants to make sure whatever treatment emerges there receives sufficient attention. Fred Meyer, at Lombard and Ida, is another of those "community corners" except that it's awful. "We live with that result today," Joe says.

A woman who moved here in 1937 says we had stores here already and they worked fine and doesn't see the need for apartments downtown. "They're trying to take away our city. Why can't they have it in the residential district?"

Jen says the developer has every right to build this structure — noting that the presentation and conversation were as much about the proposal writ large as Ivy Island in particular. "We are no match for the city on this level. The city has said any developer can build a structure like this, on this lot, like they're planning. We don't have the power to say we don't want that."

Shamus doesn't want downtown St. Johns to become a condo canyon. But he says the larger question is how do we preserve the Portland we know and love. That's bigger longer and harder work. The city has a commission on home demolitions, for example, taking up how to slow that process down.

A man asks about the infrastructure around the development. He'd like the developer to do that before the development. He worries about safety and ingress and egress conflicts.

Shamus notes that Trimet's skimpy service doesn't match the city's parking requirements for new development — his point that most neighbors choose to drive because St. Johns has limited options to support a car-free or car-light lifestyle.

A woman who helped clean Ivy Island years ago says it's a dangerous intersection and that she's fine with it going away. "This is okay."

There is some further back and forth about the capacity of groups like SJNA to truly and deeply canvass all residents for input. And some discussion about the newsletter reaching more people.

The meeting adjourns at 8:53 p.m.