

Thanks for the Memories: Former FDA Presidents Recall Highlights of Their Administrations

Part Five: The 2000s

By Gail Zwirner, FDA Historian

With 97 ABC licenses in the Fan area, **Pat Daniels (2000-01)** Board went to the State level to support legislation proposed by Viola Baskerville and Panny Rhodes to strengthen the ABC Act language to provide for more neighborhood input into the process. That amendment was defeated in part by the strength of the convenience store lobbyists.

Pat's Code Enforcement Chair, Susan Smith, created a "Top 10" list of the worst properties in the neighborhood as opportunities to eliminate spot blight. Letters were sent to owners of boarded-up buildings to encourage them to rehabilitate the properties. Half responded and moved forward with renovations. The Board was greatly anticipating the expansion of CAPS (Community Assisted Public Safety Initiative) into the Fan to help eliminate these problems.

The House Tour Committee, Chaired by Pam Russell and Linda Urgo, celebrated the millennium with a three-day event, beginning with a Friday Night Gala. Guests were invited to partake in brunches, teas, and dinners hosted in homes throughout the neighborhood.

Steve Nuckolls, the Environment Chair, began his tireless quest to rid the neighborhood of graffiti. Three vandals were arrested that year and a "court watch" ensured maximum sentences. Troy Minor received a \$100 reward established by the Board for his role in the conviction of one graffiti vandal.

Many "green" efforts were successful in the community that year, including Scuffletown Park neighbors raising funds and service donations to rehabilitate the pocket park. Volunteers repaired brick pathways, planted lirioppe and purchased and planted other varieties to create a desirable urban greenspace. The Fan Woman's Club contributed to park improvement and installed benches in Meadow Park and Denise Kern led a group of Girl Scouts to clean and weed Federal Park. The most obvious contribution was the planting of 146 trees in empty tree wells throughout the neighborhood in a joint effort with the City.

John Vollino (2001-2002) kicked off his term with a "Drive 25" campaign. He had worked on traffic-related issues for a few years and heard repeated cries about cars speeding through the Fan. The FDA distributed car decals at the Annual Meeting for members to display in their rear car windows to encourage enforcement of the speed limit.

The Board adopted a policy targeted at traffic calming initiatives. The short-term component involved placing four-way stop signs at areas of greatest peril, including the areas around the schools. Then Mayor Tim Kaine introduced an ordinance to allow four-way stops throughout the Fan with the goal to provide relief for traffic problems.

The revitalization of Scuffletown Park was unveiled with much "fanfare" as 175 residents and invited guests enjoyed a picnic and summer concert. The Friends of Scuffletown worked with many city and corporate groups to create the lovely space. A decade later, the park is a welcome oasis.

The City Police Department created a multi-faceted Graffiti Task Force to identify, locate, arrest and convict vandals who defaced and damaged the Fan and its historic properties. The program included

financial rewards and incentives for information by residents leading to vandal arrests, a cleaning campaign, and a court watch.

In 2002, the first Fan property was investigated by the Community Assisted Public Safety (CAPS) Team, which is composed of code enforcement, police, fire, health and zoning officials. Properties are selected by the team based on the number of neighborhood complaints and the number of police calls to the property.

Susan Smith (2002-03) recalls VCU parties, graffiti, boarded-up properties and poorly maintained student rental housing to be the biggest challenges of her administration. The Board worked with VCU to encourage the university to become more proactive in helping solve the issues. Dr. Trani wrote letters to two of the worst non-resident landlord offenders appealing to them to take care of the properties. It took several years, but many of those properties have been rehabilitated.

Susan's Board focused on strategic planning in order to determine how to best meet the needs of the community. The short-term five-point plan included:

- Improving crosswalk signage;
- Improving communications by strengthening relations with city officials and holding town meetings to address concerns;
- Advocating for more police presence;
- Seeking better street lighting to improve neighborhood safety; and
- Getting trees appropriately trimmed and tree wells repaired.

Long-term goals included:

- Seeking city funding for raised crosswalks at key intersections;
- Designating key gateways into the Fan by means of historic signs, banners, arches, etc.;
- Increasing the number of owner occupied homes to decrease density and parking problems and stabilize the neighborhood; and
- Working with the city to correct inappropriate zoning.

Negotiations with VCU continued during **Heather Laird's (2004-05)** term regarding the University's Code of Conduct. VCU agreed to add "off-campus" conduct in the language of the code. She felt that collaboration was a big accomplishment. The Code Enforcement Committee created a brochure entitled "Tenant Rights and Responsibilities" to distribute at VCU's orientation and feedback from the students was that it was the most useful information they had received.

The FDA contributed to a project spearheaded by the Historic Monument Avenue and Fan District Foundation to place historic street signs throughout the neighborhood.

The Programs Committee hosted a City Council Candidates' Night and a forum on home assessments to educate everyone on the right and the steps to appeal.

The Public Relations Committee developed a welcome package for Fan newcomers. The package included a map of the Fan along with a broad range of information such as schools, churches and restaurants in the Fan, important City contact information and details on taxes and trash collection. Background on the history and architecture of the Fan were included as well.

Brett Burnam (2005-06) did not waste time with an attentive large annual meeting audience to get feedback from members on priority projects. The top ten suggestions were to: (1) Strengthen efforts to improve sidewalks; (2) Foster more local involvement by homeowners in picking up trash around their homes and in alleys; (3) Work with the City to get Fan streets repaired and repaved where necessary; (4) Prune trees throughout the Fan, particularly on side streets; (5) Encourage homeowners to keep their sidewalks clean; (6) Add more trash cans throughout the Fan; (7) Establish a tree well program to both provide guidance for plantings and maintenance for existing plantings; (8) Recognize Thomas Jefferson as our neighborhood high school and support it as Fox and Binford are supported; (9) Encourage more owner-occupied residences in the Fan; and (10) Establish a Block Captain program to help communicate safety and vandalism concerns quickly among the blocks.

The FDA Parking Committee convinced the City to set up a Fan sales center for parking decal renewals. Fifty-six owners took advantage of the opportunity to take a short stroll over to the old Stonewall Jackson School to update their decal for the year.

Monroe Park became the place to get connected when Wi-Fi access was added to the City's oldest park as part of the restoration process.

The FDA established a Block Management Program to combine the safety techniques of a "neighborhood watch" type program with a revitalization spin. The Fan was divided into twelve "sectors," each with a volunteer sector manager to lead the communications effort and recruit block captains.

Charles Samuels' (2006-07) Board identified issues to tackle for the year, including:

- Involving the community in the FDA and the FDA in the community;
- Relationships between the myriad of parties within the Fan and between the Fan and the City; and
- Crime and nuisance prevention.

The Board was able to sustain the popular Party Patrol without the ABC education grant.

During **Krista Mathis Samuels' (2007-08)** term, the Fan Lighting Committee worked with a consultant to identify the most appropriate fixtures for the Fan based on code standards and the neighborhoods architectural elements.

Inspired by an alley improvement plan created by Chris Ward for his urban planning Master's program at VCU, the Board dedicated up to \$50,000 of the proceeds realized from a record Holiday House Tour to fund grants to residents, businesses, or groups for the purpose of improving the alleys in the Fan.

Lee Downey (2008-09) began his year by summarizing what he hoped his year would achieve – record FDA membership and active committees, record attendance at popular existing events and many new successful initiatives, a phenomenal house tour, elimination of graffiti, successful district clean-up efforts and improved alley beautification through the success of the grants program.

We all watched anxiously as the extension to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts took shape on the Fan's west border.

The City approved the biggest expansion in the Fan Residential Restricted Parking District. Thirty-two new block faces – almost the entire Fan east of Meadow St. – were added to the district, creating a second parking zone.

The November/December 2008 issue of *Fanfare* included a special new “pull & keep” resident issue, intended to be a year-round reference for Fan residents. It included useful tips on parking, trash and recycling, street cleaning, pet owner responsibilities, graffiti and crime prevention.

The first block grants were awarded for the West Grace Street “Whiskey (Barrel) Rebellion.” Residents adopted whiskey barrels for plantings to beautify the alleys.

Construction began on a three-story addition to William Fox Elementary school to add a new staircase, elevator, and ramp to ensure compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act accessibility guidelines. The addition maintains the character of the historic structure and provides better access for all students, staff, and parents.

Barbara Hartung (2009-10) promoted the City’s Adopt-a-Tree program to fill empty tree wells and beautify the Fan. The FDA split the cost of a tree that an owner adopts and cares for.

Barbara acknowledged ongoing parking problems and the expansion of restricted parking may create a need for more blocks to petition to join the restricted district. She also recognized that with VCU’s growth plans, the FDA Board had to work to ensure that VCU respects the residential and historical character of the Fan as those plans develop.

The City installed a test group of the proposed new lights on Grace and Mulberry for the consultant and the committee to evaluate all project elements – pole height, color of the lumen and intensity of the light. From that pilot project, the consultant recommended 12 foot poles with 70 watt high pressure sodium lamps on Mulberry and 150 watts on Grace Street.

Thank you for all the positive feedback about my series of articles on the history of the Fan District Association. This is the last of five articles. Brian Baird has added the series to the website. It was a pleasure to meet and speak with the early pioneers of the Fan. Thank you for winning City battles and setting the standards we are able to enjoy today. –Gail Zwirner