

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

Part Four: The Nineties

By Gail Zwirner, FDA Historian

Dr. Trani arrived at VCU during **Stevie Wishnack's (1990-91)** term. She recalls that he was eager to meet board members and residents. That seemed very positive following the previous year's controversies regarding VCU's expansion plans.

Stevie's Environmental Committee Chair, E. G. Miller, identified needs and moved forward to have important systems repaired, including, believe it or not, adding sidewalks where none existed, replacing cobblestones in alleys where needed, repairing damaged gas lines, and correcting the mechanical problems of the sprinkler system at Fox School.

Board member Pam Brewster was appointed as head of the Clean Richmond Committee. Curbside recycling began in the Fan in 1991.

Ed Ramsey (1991-92) celebrated the 30th anniversary of the FDA with a big "birthday bash" at the Branch House. Chris Small chaired the event. Tickets were sold to capacity and a dozen neighborhood businesses provided financial support.

Safety efforts included a "Light Up the Fan" campaign to encourage residents to keep porch lights on all night because, as regular *Fanfare* columnist Shelley Rolfe said, "It's the Light Thing to Do." The FDA collaborated with Pleasant's Hardware to offer a sale of a special porch light fixture with an "electric eye" to turn on automatically at dusk and turn off at dawn.

David Hazlehurst (1992-93) invited VCU President Eugene Trani to speak at the FDA Annual meeting in May 1993. He spoke about a \$70 million capital investment for a new parking deck and building expansion and the need for new land to grow. He also announced an increase in the enrollment from 22,000 to 26,000 students.

Christine Plant (1993-94) outlined three goals for her administration:

- To increase membership through a variety of planned activities, including the "Discover Your Parks" picnic series. Members were encouraged to come to the event and bring a potential new member
- To increase the emphasis on code enforcement to reduce the opportunity for fire and other safety and health risks which endanger the community
- To improve zoning compliance throughout the Fan, which protects the neighborhood while giving each citizen an opportunity to voice opinions about changes that affect the neighborhood

Her board created a zoning committee, which was charged with reviewing all zoning requests prior to the board meetings, including a site visit. The board considers zoning applications after the presentation to the board by the committee.

It was logical for **Joanne Satterfield (1994-95)** to become FDA President after moving into the home at 2112 Hanover Avenue where the first FDA Board meeting was held over thirty years prior to her term. Joanne was the "Queen of Clean" and found her greatest neighborhood satisfaction after riding the

City's trash trucks, as we used to do on Spring Clean-up Day. She was always well-equipped with rakes, shovels and gloves and "left no stone unturned." Related to clean alleys, Joanne recalls that neighborhood graffiti was becoming a major threat. Her board supported strengthening the city ordinances in this area.

Joanne says one of her board's biggest projects was working with surrounding neighborhoods such as Carver that did not have as organized a civic organization as the FDA, to promote appropriate development on Broad Street. She describes that as a "huge accomplishment." Other than that, dealing with abandoned property was a consistent theme that persists through many administrations.

Bev Lacy (1995-96) says that street muggings increased during her term as President. Her Board responded by creating and developing one of the area's first citizen crime patrols. Over 300 volunteers took turns patrolling nightly as eyes and ears of the police department. After six months, street crimes decreased by 41% and after several years, the muggings decreased to a point of not needing the patrols.

Bev believes her Board's biggest accomplishment was the re-zoning of the south side of Broad Street between the Boulevard and Harrison Streets into an Urban Business Designation, a residentially compatible and pedestrian friendly zoning for the adjoining Fan neighborhood. This zoning proposal developed as a result of plans for a drive-through fast food restaurant to be built adjacent to homes on West Grace Street on the property of the former Capitol Theater. As a result of this zoning, the restaurant was built north of Broad Street, and in a style more architecturally compatible with urban not suburban development.

Other accomplishments included the FDA membership reaching 1000 members, the start of a community mentoring program at Binford Middle School, commendations by the Richmond School Board, and solidifying the mutually beneficial relationship with Retreat Hospital, which contributed significantly to the purchase of the FDA office on Strawberry Street and continues to support the Holiday House Tour, among other projects of the FDA.

A major zoning proposal for low income housing for the elderly at 1617-1621 Grove Avenue faced opposition from the immediate neighbors. The FDA held a series of meetings with the neighbors and the Better Housing Coalition. What had been hard opposition turned into support after the Coalition was given a chance to explain its project and the neighbors saw that the FDA was behind it. *The Columns on Grove* continues to be an asset to the Fan neighborhood.

Laura Lee Garrett (1996-97) remembers a relaxed attitude toward zoning decisions during her term. She was surprised when her Board moved toward more flexible density decisions and commercial uses. Laura Lee wanted to strengthen the Fan's reputation as a safe and desirable place to work and live, and capitalize on the newly rezoned Broad Street urban business district to attract new businesses. She provided an informative article in the October/November 1996 *Fanfare* outlining landlord and tenant rights and responsibilities.

The FDA's lobbying efforts were successful when Hugh Miller announced that the General Assembly unanimously passed, and Governor George Allen signed into law Virginia's first tax incentive for rehabilitation of historic structures. Most of the residential buildings in the Fan met the criteria for certification, since they are contributing structures to the Fan Historic District. To qualify for certification, any work had to be consistent with the U.S. *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*. What was particularly significant for the Fan in meeting the preservation goals

neighborhood-wide, was that residential properties were eligible for the credits. The new law would not require a change of use to investment property status in order to qualify for state tax credits. The tax credit program continues today to be administered by the Department of Historic Resources.

Drew Carneal's *Richmond's Fan District* was released on December 1, 1996.

Ruth Miller (1997-98) promoted the full partnership between the Commission on Architectural Review, the city council, and Fan property owners to protect the Fan as one of Richmond's most valuable historic assets. Her Board held town meetings, focus groups, a telephone survey, and focused an annual meeting on preservation guidelines for the Fan District.

In the April/May 1998 Fanfare, Bob Winthrop wrote a very compelling article about the preservation of façade architectural features. He described the front porch as a fundamental characteristic of Richmond's architecture from the middle of the 19th century onward. He feared that because of the large size of the district, many people regarded individual houses as being insignificant. Bob argued that each building *is* significant. "Rows of orderly houses with cornices lining up and colonnaded front porches set the rhythm of the district, as does the repetitive pattern of bay windows. They are the ordinary elements that serve to define the style of the neighborhood." He made an analogy that makes me think of Bob every time I go to the dentist. He said in his comparison of losing a tooth to removing a porch, "losing any tooth, we would all agree, can be a problem. But losing a front tooth is much more serious. To lose a molar is an inconvenience; to lose a front tooth is a mutilation!"

In December 1997, City Council denied a special use permit for the continued use of the Branch House garden for Fan community events, band concerts and picnics. The garden remains inaccessible today, much to the disappointment of many of us who remember regular events in the garden. However, the Virginia Center for Architecture is allowed a limited number of functions annually to help support the maintenance and restoration of the building.

Pam Russell (1998-99) recalls four things that dominated her term. First, the FDA purchased what is now the FDA headquarters at 208 N. Strawberry Street. At first, it did not seem like many people were inclined to commit to this project due to the financial liability for many years to come. However, once the Board committed to purchase and raise the funds to pay it off, it was not long before the only liability it presented was the regular utility expense. She credited Roger Wiley with the financial tracking on the project.

What it provided for the FDA was a legitimate right to vote on City of Richmond items, as the FDA became a property owner. Prior to that, the City of Richmond did not have any obligation to even ask for an opinion, although they most times put out "feelers" to the association.

Additional benefits to the FDA were: a central location for FDA history/data where all members had access; financial growth; a standard facility where all participants could work on neighborhood projects; a standard board meeting place so members who wanted to attend would know where to go.

The second major issue in Pam's term was the culmination of a proposal to designate the entire Fan as an Old and Historic District or a modified overlay district. She remembers leading an educational panel on the topic at Fox School and Dan Marks and Paul Feine had to stop an attendee who was opposed to the designation from storming the stage!

She felt it was one of the most turbulent times of all the years she was on the Board. It seemed that on one side was the position that either the entire Fan needed to be Old & Historic or no part of the Fan should be designated Old & Historic. However, she felt that the Fan was bigger than any area that had ever been given the city designation and the demographics were so diverse, that it became problematic to get the amount of citizen approval needed to retain any type of genuine historic restrictions.

The property owners who would have welcomed the Old & Historic designation were not in favor of any alternate proposal and the property owners who had always opposed any designation were still against any “weaker” proposal. Therefore, the final City vote did not support such designation.

Another challenge her Board faced was VCU’s plans for the Siegel Center. The proposal showed all cars exiting the parking deck after an event would move through the Fan. The FDA actively opposed this and ultimately VCU and the City developed another route.

Finally, the Firehouse Theatre group had been developing its company for many years in the old firehouse in the 1600 block of West Broad Street, hoping to someday purchase the building. One day the theatre’s artistic director, Carol Piersol, called Pam to see if there was anything she could do. The City was selling off tax delinquent properties and there was an investor who was going to take ownership that day, who she did not feel would let them continue their work. Pam called then Mayor, Tim Kaine, and discussed the possibility that proper notification had not been given equally to all residents of the impending sale. The Mayor looked into it and called off the sale. Subsequently, proper notification was given and the Firehouse Theatre Group was able to permanently secure the building. It remains an artistic treasure in the Fan today.

Of course the Presidents’ “significant others” have many memories as well, and frequently field phone calls for the Presidents. I recall the first major neighborhood change during my late husband **Paul Feine’s term (1999-2000)** was the announcement that Stuart Circle Hospital was going to close. Paul always liked a good story. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* called his predecessor, Pam Russell, for comment. She said that she was no longer in a position to respond in an official FDA capacity, but noted that Paul was actually in Stuart Circle that day having his hip replaced!

Paul would have said his administration was one of *rapprochement*, after, as Pam Russell described above, the multi-year development and proposal by many Fan residents to establish a preservation overlay district was withdrawn from consideration. Fortunately, efforts by historians Drew Carneal and Bob Winthrop, who have written articles and books about Fan architecture, and groups like the Historic Monument Avenue and Fan District Foundation, which has held several lecture series about preservation topics, have inspired residents to preserve and recreate some of the original architectural features of Fan homes. Porches are noticeably returning.

Other than having a captive audience for joke-telling while he took tickets at the homes annually at the House Tours, Paul’s favorite contributions were the three years he served as Editor of *Fanfare*. Those were the days of the oversized newspaper format when he pasted typed columns on boards. He was the last editor to wear the advertising hat as well, and in many cases he “designed” the ads after the advertiser slipped sheets of “chicken scratch” through our mail slot. The issue wasn’t “put to bed” until he drove the copy to West Point to the printer and waited for the return of 20+ boxes that were dropped off on our front porch for back-breaking distribution to the block captains by another volunteer. *Fanfare* distribution was always a challenge. People always look forward to receiving it and the later decision to mail it to members has been a success.