

Thanks for the Memories: Former FDA Presidents Recall Highlights of Their Administrations
Part Three: The Eighties
By Gail Zwirner, FDA Historian

James Stutts (1980-81) began his presidency after completing a term as Zoning Committee Chair. In an interview Drew Carneal did with him for the November 1979 *Fanfare*, he said while he felt “overcrowding, excessive traffic and inappropriate commercial uses can quickly deteriorate any neighborhood, zoning policy must remain flexible to encourage the healthy diversity which gives the Fan its distinctive personality.” Zoning review has been and continues to be a primary responsibility of the FDA.

City Council finally addressed the issue of returning to two-way traffic on West Grace Street on May 12, 1980 and the ordinance passed successfully after years of strategizing over this important residential change. The change was scheduled for New Year’s Eve, but was postponed until March 18, 1981. The April 1981 *Fanfare* reported contagious excitement generated by the change – homes being spruced up and “sold signs replacing sale signs.”

A well-represented Fan contingent appeared before Council again in December 1980 to support a proposed ordinance that would have restricted the number of licensed adult homes in residential districts. The FDA felt that in any district there needs to be a sense of balance, proportion and scale for diverse uses, and the Fan District, most notably West Grace Street, had borne more than its equitable share of such establishments. The proposed ordinance was defeated.

The FDA gained tax-exempt status in 1980.

“Being President of the Fan District Association was one of my life’s supreme accomplishments,” says **Robert “Bob” Taylor (1981-82)**, who now resides in Waynesville, NC. During his administration, Bob still feels he spent “a thousand hours a day” on a range of issues, with zoning topping the agenda. He recalls one Fan resident calling him and asking him where he was born. After he said he was born in Texas, the response was. . . “oh well, we couldn’t expect you to understand.” As many Presidents have done, he and wife Norretta, who was President of the Fan Woman’s Club the same year, offered the ultimate sacrifice, and held their home open for the House Tour. They felt the huge amount of work was the best way to promote the Fan.

The biggest event during Bob’s term was the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the founding of the FDA. The festivities included activities for the children, a wonderful concert by the Richmond Pops Band and a big chocolate cake – all in the Branch House Garden. Jed Wilson and Bob cut and served the cake.

In August 1981, the FDA convened a meeting of City officials, Fan civic associations, churches and businesses to discuss the concerns about prostitution activities in the Lombardy/Grace/Broad Street areas. Then Director of Public Safety, Jack Fulton, acknowledged that the problem “is the worst in the City.” Attendees pointed to an area bar as the center of the activities and Bob hoped that the next *Fanfare* issue would report that the “recent, colorful unpleasantness will be nothing more than a fading memory.”

Bob’s March President’s Letter had a guest writer. Bob Tingle presented a plan to rid the neighborhood of litter by having volunteers remove posters and other notices from trees and poles. He argued that the quick removal of posters will simply frustrate the advertisers and the Fan would develop a reputation as a neighborhood that does not tolerate litter.

Bob also shares some personal stories about our special neighborhood. He and Norretta had a lovely blonde Cocker Spaniel, who “allowed them to share his home on Floyd Avenue.” The 1900 block was close enough to VCU that they had many student-faculty neighbors who walked by their front door on a daily basis. They installed a little chain on the front porch so Max could sit outside, and, over the years, he accumulated a whole entourage of “people-friends” who regularly came up to sit on the porch and visit with Max. Often they brought him a cookie or some other treat. Max added so much to their quality of living that they frequently didn’t bother to close the front door when he was on the porch, although it was not unusual for them to see a stranger sitting on the porch with his/her arm around Max.

Elaine Grainger (1982-83) also served as *Fanfare* Editor from November 1979-May 1982, before becoming President. Elaine’s year is a good example of the volume and scope of zoning issues confronting an FDA Board for review. The October 1982 *Fanfare* cited six different requests including:

- A variance for an expanded certificate of occupancy for a Meadow Street pizza parlor
- An 80-seat expansion of the Stonewall Jackson Café deck and the required parking
- A request to investigate single family dwellings being used as boarding houses on Park Avenue
- A request for a zoning change at the Main Street Pepsi Building
- A request to construct a carport on West Avenue
- A request to convert a rooming house to a duplex, which sounded like a good idea until the Board discovered the building was originally zoned as single family

The November 1982 *Fanfare* issue brought seven more zoning issues to the Board:

- The plans to build a physicians’ office building at Retreat Hospital
- An illegal use of a boarding house on Boulevard
- The conversion of a coal bin to a furnace area in an apartment building on Stuart Avenue
- The construction of an “amusement center” and restaurant in the 900 block of West Franklin Street
- Several attempts to revoke an ABC license on Main Street
- Two more requests for ABC licenses on Robinson Street
- The mis-advertising of the use of a home on West Grace Street as a rest home, when in fact it was used as a home for children.

If revenue did not increase beyond House Tour proceeds, the Board expressed concerns about sustaining *Fanfare* at the monthly frequency, producing summer concerts, and continuing contributions to renovation projects at Fox School and the Foundation’s homes on West Grace Street. They discussed several ideas, including: reducing the number of *Fanfare* issues; increasing membership; promoting sales of the Monument Avenue coloring book created by Millie Jones; and conducting paid workshops to instruct residents on renovating garages for car or other use.

Code enforcement rose in Board priorities when they established a Committee on Environmental Problems. The purpose was to assist members who have problems getting City cooperation to correct neighborhood property violations, such as litter, overgrown weeds and deteriorating buildings. The Committee was going to keep detailed records and refer unresolved issues to Councilman Leidingger.

The April 1983 *Fanfare* highlighted the collaboration between the Historic Monument Avenue and Fan District Foundation, the Fan District Association and the West Grace Street Association to raise funds and engage “sweat equity” support for the restoration of three rooming house properties – 1826, 1832 and 1834 West Grace Street. The goal was to return the structures to single-family residences, resell them and turn the profits into purchasing

more homes ripe for renovation. That collaboration is considered to be the catalyst for the Renaissance of West Grace Street.

George Warthen (1983-84) recognizes Bill Leidinger, 2nd District Councilman at the time, for his commitment to the Fan. Bill attended all Board meetings, a tradition that continues today when meetings do not overlap with City Council meetings. He feels Rodney Poole, Chair of the Zoning Committee, did a good job with a contentious issue at 1400 Grove Avenue, when the building was sold from Baptist oversight to Mrs. Buchanan, who was successful in expanding the certificate of occupancy to create nursing home status.

The neighborhood enjoyed its third summer of concerts in the Branch House Garden.

The FDA switched gears in 1983 by hosting a holiday celebration for members instead of holding an annual house tour. Lombardy and Meadow Parks were decorated for the season. Santa arrived in a fire truck with treats for the children. With Santa and Theatre IV entertainers guiding the way, the group paraded to Meadow Park where a Yule log provided light and warmth. St. Bridget's choral group led the neighbors in carols.

George was pleased to announce in his December 1983 President's letter that City Hall appropriated \$50,000 for trees and he hoped that the Fan would get "its fair share." Another significant announcement in the same issue was one that contributed to the continuing restoration efforts of the Fan that we enjoy today. The Fan Woman's Club was going to conduct a "Super Survey Sunday" the following April to complete the information necessary for the Fan's application to register as an Historic District by the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission (the largest district in Virginia) and to have the Fan added to the National Register of Historic Places. Placement on the National Register allowed tax breaks on rehabilitation projects under the Economic Recovery Act of 1981.

Roy Burgess (1984-85) recalls the challenge of hosting all monthly Board meetings in his living room! He was elected when there were so many neighborhood needs that a call for volunteers produced at least eight candidates for four Board positions.

Fanfare documents the many contributions Roy made to the Fan, including the drive to return West Grace to two-way traffic, ABC challenges to problem bars in the Fan, his tireless commitment to help stabilizing the homes on West Grace Street purchased by The Historic Monument Avenue and Fan District Foundation, his West Grace Street Presidency and, of course, his term as FDA President.

Because he became President after a year when there was no house tour, after his nomination, he started quickly to get a tour chair and committee in place in plenty of time to reestablish the Fan tradition. A Fan-wide power outage on tour day created, by necessity, an enchanting candlelight tour. They did have to end the tour an hour early when darkness came.

Roy remembers fondly that his social chair, Sarah Early, organized four wonderful summer family concerts with free ice cream in the Branch House garden. Branch House access is something many Presidents mention with good memories.

Roy's term was not without zoning issues. The FDA was recovering from a "split" over a restaurant on Lombardy that was trying to move the kitchen and storage into the rear of the house fronting on Hanover Ave. "It got quite nasty." His year was spent "healing."

Jim East (1985-86) outlined his goals in the July/July 1985 *Fanfare* with membership at the top of his list. He discussed the logical argument that to increase the Fan's credibility with the City, the Board needed to cite its strength in numbers of members. At the time there were approximately 500 members, but nearly 20,000 people resided in the Fan. He felt the FDA would be stronger if it represented more residents.

Jim also worked to increase membership involvement at the committee level. He argued that a Board cannot satisfy everyone on every issue, but with increased participation, the Board should be able to represent the district more effectively.

Rick Grainger (1986-87) became FDA President at its 25 year anniversary. He cites the positive constants of a beautiful, historic neighborhood that is primarily residential and discusses how the evolution of the Fan with an influx of new residents impacted the Board's zoning review responsibilities. The numbers of cases the Board reviewed monthly was increasing due to a widespread problem of illegal certificates of occupancy. The commercial properties that contribute to our great neighborhood also require Board scrutiny for licensing. Ed Eck made his impact in the "Uptown" area on Main Street that year in the renovation and development of many dilapidated buildings in the blocks east of Lombardy. The Board's concern was how that new investment would affect parking in the residential areas north of Main Street.

A celebration to unveil the plaque including the Fan on the National and State Registers of Historic Places took place on October 19, 1986 in Meadow Park. Over 3,000 buildings were photographed and surveyed by Fan Woman's Club members in a two-year project to complete the application process for the designation. Mayor Roy West, Councilman Bill Leidinger and Bryan Mitchell, director of the Virginia Division of Historic Landmarks, participated in the event.

The tax man arrived with a vengeance in 1987. Because of the commitment of Fan residents to improve properties in our urban neighborhood, property values – and consequently tax assessments – rose dramatically that year. The Board was told that in many cases, the assessed values rose from 30% to 130%. The FDA hosted a neighborhood meeting and invited representatives from the assessor's office to explain the appeal process. Residents requested an across-the-board roll back of assessments in the Fan. It was no surprise that the request was declined and the assessor's office encouraged residents to file individual appeals.

Mark Logan (1987-88) started his term outlining three broad objectives:

- To increase awareness, membership and use of the association through an increased number of community functions
- To preserve and enhance the recreational use of our parks and the Fox School playground
- To resolve in a three-to-four year time frame, privately or publicly, the Fan's pressing need for a family recreational facility that includes a swimming pool

The Board committed up to \$7,500 toward the landscaping of Fox School, which was one-third of the project's estimated costs. In their proposal to the Board, the Parks and Trees Committee described Fox School as the largest green space in the Fan, even though it is not a park.

A major proposal for expanded use of Mrs. Plyler's Nursing Home at 1613-21 Grove Avenue occurred during Mark's term. Walter Regirer, the Home's President, General Counsel and Chief Administrator applied for a Certificate of Public Need to reconstruct the nursing home, adding approximately 66 beds to the 114 existing at the time, and replacing several original buildings on the block with new construction. The association expressed

concerns about demolition of buildings contributing to the historic district and the impact on parking with the anticipated 70 additional employees on site on the peak shift.

Pam Wood (Bishop) (1988-89) focused her term on safety when the FDA established a Neighborhood Watch Program. A “Crime in the Fan: Just the Facts” column appeared in *Fanfare* with statistics of major crimes of the tracts that include the Fan.

The FDA hosted a “Fan-A-Rama” event in April 1989 to offer residents lots of expert ideas for improving the exterior of a historic home. Binford Middle School hosted the event and speakers included architectural historian (and comedian) Bob Winthrop, who spoke on Fan facades; Karen Shipp, who discussed landscape options; and Art Miller, who spoke on stained glass in Fan homes. Vendors dealing with exterior beautification also had booths offering advice and supplies.

The Virginia Department of Health denied the application for a Certificate of Need to expand Mrs. Plyler’s Nursing Home during Pam’s term.

Pete Boisseau (1989-90) ended the decade with a three-point plan for his term as President:

- To continue doing everything the FDA had traditionally done and done well – such as zoning watchdog, house tours and park improvements
- To increase the visibility of the Fan, leveraging its addition to the National Register of Historic Places and Virginia Historic Landmark status
- To have more fun—to improve the sense of neighborhood generating more opportunities for social interaction with diverse neighbors—the strength of the Fan. Spencer Bowles took on the “fun job” and staged a number of events. The job included one specific goal—bring the Easter Parade back to Monument Avenue in 1990. Spencer achieved this and more. (Pete recalls that a downtown events organization stopped sponsoring it for some reason to do with alcoholic beverages. Anyway, the parade came back as part of the 100th anniversary of Monument Avenue in 1990.)

Pete says, “It’s funny how unexpected issues pop up and intrude on a neighborhood civic association’s modest agenda.” The June/July 1989 issue of *Fanfare* carried an ominous story on page 1 – “FDA Leads Coalition against VCU Plan.” He continues, “The details are not so important any more—basically the plan called for the university to expand to the west and south into historic neighborhoods—because we flat out won as far as the Fan was concerned. But until we did, the VCU Master Plan came to dominate my term as president.” The coalition included the West Avenue Improvement Association, the Lower Fan Civic Association, the Monument Avenue and Historic Fan District Foundation, and the Oregon Hill Improvement Council (OHIC).

The FDA’s position was that VCU should expand to the north along Broad and Grace where there were parking lots and underused and empty buildings already for sale. The bumper stickers said “Go north VCU, not west or south.” When you drive on Broad between Belvidere and Harrison, remember that all of the university related development there now did not exist in 1990. The university and the Fan District signed an agreement that basically said VCU would not expand further west of Harrison Street. Pete also recalls that the FDA agreed on a plan to let VCU share maintenance of Monroe Park—which was in bad condition then—with the City. VCU had a great director of grounds. He remembers that the Coalition also won an offer from VCU not to expand south of Green Alley—parallel to Cary, a half-block south of that street—but OHIC never agreed to it, to his recollection. (Recently, VCU tore down an old stable south of Green Alley near the new student recreation center despite protests from Oregon Hill residents who said VCU had promised not to.)

Pete has mostly good memories from his term. Winning the VCU fight was one. Soon afterward, Eugene Trani began his term as president. The FDA invited him and Lois Trani to one of the Richmond Pops concerts in the Branch House gardens on a lovely June Sunday. It was one of the Tranis' first public appearances. Pete's term had ended in May, but he was now the "VCU Liaison" for the FDA. "What is your agenda?" Dr. Trani asked him. He recalls stammering, "Now that the Master Plan issue had been put to rest, I really don't have an agenda." "Well, I do," Trani replied, and began to talk about his ambitions for VCU. Pete remembers walking away thinking this is a nice change of pace as VCU presidents went, but he'll never be able to pull all that off at VCU. Pete *hoped* he could—and he exceeded what he thought was remotely possible in terms of physical development.

There were other less rewarding memorable moments. The FDA was in a contentious dispute with a couple of college student bars on Grace and Broad Streets. One night the phone rang and a man said: "Pete is dead meat." That has a way of focusing your thoughts, but he and Susan decided that people who make threats rarely carry them out. (Susan made significant contributions to the FDA as well, serving as *Fanfare* Editor for several years.)

Early one Sunday morning the phone woke them up and a woman wanted "to know what you are going to do about the transvestite prostitutes on Grace Street" and hung up. "I was still groggy and trying to piece together the meaning," Pete reports. He knew "prostitute" and he thought he knew what "transvestite" was, but it took a while to sort it all out. His only thought was "I bet the president of the Brandermill Civic Association doesn't get calls like this."

One goal Pete's Board set was to plant 140 trees in empty treewells they surveyed in the neighborhood, an effort led by John Molster. Thanks to an invaluable, but tight-fisted treasurer, Bill Smith, and a highly successful HouseTour headed by Bill's wife, Jane, the FDA was relatively flush with cash. He recalls bringing up the idea of buying trees and getting the City to plant them at several monthly Board meetings. "No, the Board always decided; let's hang on to as much of our cash as we can, just in case we need it."

They later learned that the City would provide 1-inch diameter trees for free; you just had to sign up and ask for them. But for just \$50 more, the City could buy 2-inch trees. The difference in the survival rate of 2-inch vs. 1-inch trees was significant. At his last meeting as president, Pete's Board agreed to put up \$5,000 to allow the City to buy 100 of the 2-inch trees. The issue then became how to determine which of the 140 spaces would get the 100 trees. The Board decided that residents would request them on a first-come, first-served basis, on the condition that they would "adopt" their tree, which would come with "papers" outlining watering and care needs. Today there is a 20-year-old tree in front of Pete's house and many others in the Fan, already providing nice shade and being appreciated as a major beautifying element in our neighborhood as some of our great mature trees reach the end of their lives. The Adopt-a-Tree Program continues successfully today.

Pete says he has seen later Presidents and Boards accomplish projects they thought about and even other good works they never dreamed of. All in all, he's glad he moved to the Fan over 38 years ago.

The author welcomes any additions or corrections to this article. If you have any issues of Fanfare or any other documents reflecting the history of the Fan District Association, please contact Gail Zwirner at gzwirner@richmond.edu. Coming in the October/November issue, "The Nineties."