

03/30/97

Even After 2 Decades, ANCs Fall Short of D.C.'s Dream

By Todd Beamon

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Daisy Olarotimi was stunned on Election Day last November when she showed up to vote at her Southeast Washington precinct and saw **there were no candidates for the seven seats on her local Advisory Neighborhood Commission.** So she wrote in her own name -- and soon found herself representing residents of the Garfield-Douglas neighborhood in Ward 8 and chairing her ANC8B District.

Yet barely three months into her term, Olarotimi, 53, wants out. Her ANC still has three vacancies, and the retired federal employee only recently got access to the commission's checking account. She's been ticketed twice -- at \$50 each -- while parked at District government offices on ANC business, and her ANC is being audited by the D.C. Comptroller's Office because of alleged improper payments to civic groups by previous commissioners.

"It takes a special person to do this -- and you do make enemies," said Olarotimi, whose district near the Prince George's County line includes several public housing complexes and Camp Sims, the abandoned National Guard base at Alabama and Mississippi avenues SE. "The drug addicts, they slash your tires. The landlords don't want you pointing out problems. The mayor and the city council, they don't like you being a thorn in their side. It is a headache."

More than two decades after they were chartered by Congress as an experiment in grass-roots democracy, the District's Advisory Neighborhood Commissions are still struggling for greater clout and continuity. Established by the D.C. Council in 1975 as part of home rule, the commissions were to give residents a stronger voice in decisions that affect their communities.

But the initial promise of these neighborhood commissions has given way to disillusionment, according to many current and former ANC members and others. The ANCs, they say, have been stymied by funding cuts, poor financial management and insufficient training. The newest troubles for the volunteer organization surfaced last week when the D.C. auditor accused Mary Treadwell, who heads an ANC in Columbia Heights and was once married to Mayor Marion Barry, of improperly diverting \$10,900 allocated by the District for community services. The U.S. attorney's office for the District is reviewing the allegations.

Treadwell, 55, has denied wrongdoing in her ANC operations. Treadwell, who works in the mayor's Office of Policy, was convicted in 1983 of conspiring to defraud the federal government by taking money from low-income tenants at a housing complex she managed.

The Columbia Heights audit is part of an overall examination of ANC finances by the D.C. auditor's office to be completed next month.

Arrington Dixon, a former chairman of the D.C. Council who oversaw the establishment of ANCs, reflected recently on their problems and general decline.

"We wanted to create a structure to get full grass-roots participation in government," he said in an interview before the auditor's report on Treadwell was made public. **"[But] maybe it was too much government. Maybe the government should have left it alone and let the civic-minded people step up and serve through the civic and community organizations. Maybe we brought government too close to the people."**

There are 37 Advisory Neighborhood Commissions in the District, each drawn along neighborhood lines according to population. Every ANC is made up of varying numbers of Single Member Districts (SMDs), each representing about 2,000 city residents. The current 299 commissioners receive no salary but are given about \$2,000 a year for office supplies and modest neighborhood grants. Commissioners serve two-year terms and provide input on community concerns that range from potholes and public safety to business development, liquor establishments and condominium conversions.

City officials and agencies are supposed to give "great weight" to ANC views, though the commissioners are advisory only.

"We really take them seriously," said council member Jack Evans (D-Ward 2), who got his start in politics in the late 1980s as a member and later chairman of ANC2B in Dupont Circle. "We look to them to get their advice. Ninety-five percent of the time, we follow the lead of the ANC."

Not everyone agrees about the influence of the commissions on government decisions. Some ANC commissioners argue that grass-roots links to the community will take on more importance now that the District's financial problems have forced a federal takeover of many operations.

"There's a critical moment that hasn't been here before," said Treadwell, who was interviewed before the report by D.C. Auditor Anthony Cooper was released. "This is the only legitimate place for a citizen voice."

Yet with the appointed D.C. financial control board calling most of the shots these days, other ANC members wonder how much clout neighborhood representatives will wield in a city where the powers of the mayor, D.C. Council and elected school board have been largely usurped.

Commissioners cite these complaints:

The ANCs aren't taken seriously by city agencies, particularly the D.C. Alcohol Beverage Control Board.

ANC budgets have been slashed drastically in recent years because of the District's financial problems. The current total budget is \$562,000, down from \$1.2 million two years ago.

Two ANCs -- 6C in Anacostia and 8D in Washington Highlands -- cannot legally conduct business because they don't have enough members elected to form a quorum, according to the D.C. Board of Elections. Ten ANCs still lack chairmen.

Commissions are hampered by federal and city regulations that restrict their spending and slow their ability to take quick action on behalf of their communities.

ANCs also are dogged by internal conflicts. A recent dispute in Georgetown ended up in court after an incumbent commissioner lost her seat to a Georgetown University student and unsuccessfully tried to challenge students' votes in the election. Also, misdemeanor assault charges are pending in D.C. Superior Court after two ANC6A commissioners on Capitol Hill got into a fight last fall.

Despite some obvious problems, many ANC representatives say the commissions are operating effectively -- and enhancing the quality of life of their neighborhoods.

"Even if you're skeptical of how much good you're going to be able to accomplish, you want to prevent government from doing bad," said Gary Imhoff, a freshman ANC member in the Columbia Heights commission, 1B, chaired by Treadwell.

But it's a tough job.

"The people who do this really are insane," said Beth Kravetz, chairman of ANC3E in Tenleytown-Friendship Heights. "You're constantly bumping your head up against a brick wall."

ANC problems were highlighted during last November's election. Of the 299 seats up for grabs, nearly 15 percent -- 44 -- had no candidates. Another 44 seats were filled by write-in candidates, according to the D.C. Board of Elections.

As of last week, 28 ANC seats still were vacant, leaving 9 percent of the District's 606,900 residents without neighborhood representation. The first ANC election in 1976 had 118 out of 367 seats for which there were no declared candidates, but the number of vacancies had dropped to 31 by the 1992 election.

"It's a time for us to be active and step up and say, 'We can do something for our city, and this is how we're going to do it,' " said Anne M. Renshaw, chairman of ANC3G in the Chevy Chase neighborhood.

The ANCS have been stepping stones for neighborhood activists with political ambitions. Besides Evans, council members Frank Smith Jr. (D-Ward 1), Harry Thomas Sr. (D-Ward 5) and Sandy Allen (D-Ward 8) has served as commissioners. Florence Pendleton (D), a commissioner in Ward 5 for 12 years, is one of the District's two shadow senators to Congress.

ANC issues and attendance at meetings vary. On Capitol Hill, for instance, only eight residents attended a recent meeting of ANC6B, where commissioners opposed a rezoning request for a \$350 million development on Potomac Avenue. In the city's wealthy Ward 3, more than 60 people attended when ANC3E supported the Psychiatric Institute of Washington's proposal to convert 14 hospital beds into a residential treatment program.

"Blacks don't get involved in it because they've got other things they're doing," said Constance Smallwood, a former longtime 6B commissioner. "I tell people that your voices mean a lot more than you think." Her daughter, Juanita, now represents the Single Member District involved in the Potomac Avenue proposal.

In Anacostia, ANC6C cannot meet because it has only four of nine commissioners. And in ANC1B, many of the 18 residents present at a recent meeting stormed out as commissioners spent more than two hours debating minutes and bylaws.

The current audit by Cooper is to make sure every penny is accounted for. But the commissioners say the penny-pinching and cumbersome regulations have hurt their ability to do their jobs. ANC funds can be spent for rent and mailings and other office expenses. But federal guide lines prohibit reimbursements for personal expenses -- including business cards or stationery with commissioners' names printed on them.

"If a person is in a community representing the ANC, why can't you buy business cards?" asked Oliver Johnson, 6C's acting chairman. "How do you put a dollar value on our service? If you take away the budget, you won't make one dent in the District's finances."

The advisory nature of the ANCs also rankles members, who say they don't have any legal authority to sue or force other changes. This restriction was intentional.

"You had to keep an eye on them," Dixon said, recalling the political concerns that surfaced when ANCs were set up. "[Council members] were concerned about junior city council people coming at them and rattling their cage."

Kathy Patterson (D-Ward 3) said her D.C. Council committee, which oversees the ANCs, plans to propose even stricter legislative controls on the money given them.

Joseph H. Hairston, who chairs ANC4A in Shepherd Park, said he'll stay on anyway "because I don't want there to be a vacuum in my neighborhood. I'm not elected because I'm great. I'm elected because nobody cares."