

# EMPIRE BUILDING 201

## A LINE IN THE SAND

*St. John's Activists Ask, "Does the City Want Public Input?"*

BY DAVE LISTER

IN AUGUST 2003, AFTER 18 MONTHS OF DESIGN WORK, THE CITY OF

Portland brought forth an improvement plan for Lombard Street, the arterial that serves the entire north Portland peninsula. Replete with bike lanes, bubble curbs, transit stops and skinny houses it represents a true picture of Bohemian utopia—a place where folks can enjoy a sidewalk beverage while they admire panoramic views of the Willamette River and the St. John's Bridge. Prague on the Willamette.

In keeping with the spirit of public involvement, the city handpicked neighborhood association volunteers to provide input. These volunteers included City employees, Metro employees and folks with ties to the contractors and developers who would benefit from the plan. The planning division printed up 150 copies of the plan and made them available to the residents through the St. John's library.

Enter Sharon Nasset, real estate agent and North Portland activist. Nasset decided that the plan, which would reduce traffic lanes on North Lombard, but do nothing to mitigate heavy commercial truck traffic, was more than a little alarming. So did other residents and neighborhood business owners.

So Nasset developed the "Nasset Survey," a 14-item questionnaire. This survey was made available to residents through local businesses. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the items on the questionnaire and identify themselves as neighborhood residents by providing their names and addresses. Prior to the Nasset survey, most of the respondents had no idea that plans were in the offing for their neighborhood.

Nearly 300 neighborhood residents filled out Nasset's survey. The compilation of the results showed the following.

*Respondents opposed bike lanes on Lombard by a ratio of seven to one.*

*Respondents opposed bum pout curbs on Lombard by a ratio of 13 to one.*

*Respondents opposed removal of left turn lanes on Lombard by a ratio of 30 to one.*

Respondents opposed additional "skinny" lots by a ratio of 12 to one.

All items are included in the city's plan and all are items that the city had said were in accordance with the wishes of the residents.

When Nasset dutifully attempted to provide the results of her survey to the City of Portland, she was advised that the time period for public input on the plan had elapsed and the plan was scheduled to be put forward to the city council for approval.

Undaunted and undeterred, Nasset decided to take things a step further. With help from her activist friends Jim Karlock and Carol Dobrovlny she created a website, [www.savelombard.com](http://www.savelombard.com), where she posted details of the city's plan along with her survey results. She also scheduled an open meeting for concerned residents on November 13, 2003 at the St. Johns Community Center. Nasset figured 25 or 30 people would be a good turnout.

At a quarter past seven folks were still streaming in. In all, approximately 150 neighborhood residents turned out to find out more about the plan, many of whom had still never heard of it. The 40 bound copies of the plan provided by city Plan Manager Barry Manning disappeared rapidly.

Nasset kicked off the meeting by stating that the process of public involve

ment had been thwarted through

the lack of adequate notification. Manning countered that 2000 postcards had been sent to residents to solicit their input and involvement an appropriate number, he thought, even though changes to Lombard directly affect 40,000 peninsula residents. At the open microphone, residents voiced their concerns over potential traffic restrictions and business owners decried the loss of parking spaces. Some people supported the plan. Some supported certain aspects of the plan, but were strongly against others.

In the end, debate centered on public involvement and notification. One resident stated that he had been aware of the plan since its inception because he made a point of being active in the neighborhood association.

"People shouldn't have to go to neighborhood association meetings to find out about a plan like this," countered Dobrovlny. "The city should have contacted each and every resident on the peninsula. As it is, about six people have provided input in a plan that will affect over 40,000."

Prior to the meeting, Nasset had sent invitations to Portland Mayor Vera Katz and all the sitting members of the city council. The final sentence in the invitation letter read:

"We hope you choose to partner with our community, working with us to create a resolution to this unacceptable plan."

Neither the mayor nor any of the council members attended. There was, however, one very recognizable individual listening intently in the back row—former Portland Police Chief Tom Potter, candidate for Mayor of the City of Portland. o