

Three and One-Half Steps

Since my name was mentioned in the official Planning Commission minutes with some incomplete information and no explanation of the primary reason for my "resistance" to parts of the Block 11 changes, I need to offer some clarification. And I would like to see that reason reflected in the official minutes. I am speaking as the mother of a disabled adult son with hydrocephalus, epilepsy, problems walking, and significant brain injury. We have been Grove residents for 12 years and we are your neighbors.

Since the opening of the public path to Second Avenue, the remaining issue is this: The PC has now said that the wide, graduated (ramp-ready) stairs giving my disabled son access to the main entrance of our home must be demolished. The reason is because 3 1/2 steps are on a tiny patch of unusable, dead-end town property between two houses (Range and Hutchinson).

Ignorance Is No Excuse

But, first, I need to acknowledge that, since World War II, the previous owner of 8 the Circle (Julia Marks, 1945-2003) and I have in all innocence and ignorance assumed since that this area was our property. We walked down the path from Miller Drive to the wooden gate that led only to this one house, surrounded by fences on both sides and another house.

Neither of us understood much about the intricacies or types of surveys or permits, so it was a natural assumption that this enclosed area was our property. But, it was a wrong one. I made mistakes in not understanding that the drawing of my house did not include these steps or have any idea that they encroached on Town land. The former owner built a double-shed and a propane tank on this small patch of land, and I built ponds, a sculpture garden and these special steps giving my disabled son access to our main entrance. I now acknowledge that ignorance or misunderstanding is no excuse. And for that I apologize.

Opening Up The Path from Miller to Second Avenue

The PC's main issue was the opening up of the 1898 path from Miller Drive through four properties to 2nd Avenue. Consequently, I have now complied

fully with this objective, removing ponds, gate, brick terrace, and all other landscaping features. As soon as the Town decides what to do with this opened-up, sloping path that leeches mud down the main path, I will remove the last rock and 9 cobblestones.

The Remaining Challenge

What remains is the order of the PC to tear down Christopher's main access to our home and which is the main way he carries heavy bags of fuel up the stairs every day to heat our home. In other words, the request is to tear down the entire stairway because 3 1/2 steps remain on Town property. I have asked for help from so many people and I have requested that the Town find a way to accommodate these 3 1/2 steps .

I fully understand the objections of Grove residents who oppose the sale of any additional Town land to residents. And I understand that no current ordinances, easements, or exceptions currently cover this tiny patch of 3 1/2 steps.

If this tiny patch were ever usable by the Town, it might make sense to refuse accommodation on principle. However, this tiny remaining patch does not encroach on the public path. And it can never be used by the Town because the end of this dead-end path between the two houses (which once gave access to 3rd Avenue) was sold off to another Grove resident decades ago.

Harm to a Disabled Resident

This goes back to my main reason for "resistance" to the demolition of the stairway that was never mentioned in the PC minutes. It is because of the harm that a disabled neighbor is now experiencing.

As I have mentioned, my son Christopher has hydrocephalus, epilepsy, and significant brain injury from six brain surgeries. He has problems with his gait, stumbles often, and suffers from constant tremors. Only when his muscles are taut can he ride a bike. Because he looks "normal" and speaks well, he has experienced a great deal of discrimination in his life when people did not realize the extent of his brain injury. In this case, the PC probably did not fully realize the pain in his experience from the beginning in how the situation with "his" stairs was being handled.

How The Situation Was Handled

It began with no official advance notice or explanation to neighbors, no meeting or walk-through with the four neighbors affected, as had been suggested in PC meetings. Notice came in a brief email to me (with no access to the survey) while the Planning Commission was aware that I was out of the country in Bangladesh. Then there was a formal letter with survey attached that was sent to my son.

I suspect that you had no idea of the profound effect such a letter could have on a person with a brain injury. He, not unreasonably, understood it to mean that a corner of his bedroom would have to be demolished along with what he calls "his" stairs. Also, in just more subtle ways, I suspect that the PC members did not realize how many times you woke him up as you gathered underneath the window where he sleeps and he heard your entire conversations. No knock on the door to explain why people were there.

Christopher has been traumatized by this situation, believing it to be very personal because of his disability. The trauma has escalated as the months have gone by, and he has been in extensive therapy over the issue. He speaks about it every single day. His dad, his brother, and other family members who were here over Christmas are extremely concerned about him.

I have talked with countless Grove residents, including many former Grove officials, and the HPC members about the situation and the options. Many Grove residents are now aware of the situation with Christopher.

Many, if not most, say the tearing down of this stairway because of 3 1/2 steps makes no sense. Despite our best efforts, we have found no option for building a ramp under code to the main entrance that (1) does not greatly increase the physical difficulty for Christopher and which he will interpret as personally directed to him because of his disability or (2) that does not encroach on town land from another direction.

Many of us moved here because of the small community where neighbors seemed to care for one another. It is painful to see these values under severe stress because of 3 1/2 steps.

As requested, I have opened up the public path. That was hard for me because of a childhood dream of this type of garden and cascading ponds.

But, the remaining situation now is not about property or aesthetics; it is about a human being with disabilities and a brain injury.

The Planning Commission has just passed an ordinance exception that allows neighbors in Block 11 to have fences higher than regulation required for the rest of the Grove. Surely, with all your creative minds, someone can find a solution that values the health and welfare of a disabled resident more than fences.

Maggie Range
8 The Circle
January 6, 2016