



NEWS

www.chrs.org

December 2001

CHRS Fights Billboards in the District

by Dick N. Wolf
Chair, City Planning Committee

Capitol Hill and other important areas of the District of Columbia are now threatened by the re-introduction of billboards after 70 years of prohibition. They were introduced in August 2000, through a regulatory loophole in the construction codes of the District. Since then the City Council has been scrambling to deal with the issue, and has come up with a "containment" policy that only the sign companies find satisfactory. Its proposed bill limits such signage, but allows for its transferability and unlimited existence in large areas of the District of Columbia.

At its October Board meeting, CHRS adopted a resolution opposing the re-introduction of billboards—"special signs"—into the District of Columbia and calling for the elimination of signs already permitted through amortization, i.e., required removal within a specified time period, or other means.

A hearing on special signs was held on October 31st by the City Council's Committee on Consumer and Regulatory Affairs. Citizen group after citizen group (including CHRS) testified against having any signs remain in the District. Legal experts testified to the efficacy of amortization and non-transferability as a means of eliminating the signs.

Only the billboard companies and their lawyer testified in support. The latter made no claims as to any benefits for the District of Columbia from these enormous advertisements: they stated only that if the compromise bill they had agreed to didn't go through, they would sue to protect their property rights.

Although Scenic America declared Washington, D.C. as one of its "Last Chance Landscapes" based, in part, on the return of billboards, no District agency has testified—not even the Office of Planning and Historic Preservation. Indeed, the silence from official Washington is deafening.

However, Capitol Hill organizations have been loud and clear in their condemnation of the return of billboards and the need to get rid of them. ANC 6B, Barracks Row/Main Street, and CHAMPS have sent strong letters to Ward 6 Council member Sharon Ambrose, who chairs the DCRA committee holding the hearings.

The CHAMPS letter, in particular, written by Frank Reed, Chair of their Planning and Zoning Committee, puts our community's thoughts in striking language: "Although the pending legislation (Bill 14-380) makes permanent the 32 permit cap, as we understand it, it does not prohibit the transfer of sign permits within a large, although defined,



Instead of a billboard, new condos now occupy the corner of 6th and Pennsylvania.

portion of the city. The real point is that in addition to a permanent moratorium, a mechanism must be put in place which will lead to the ultimate elimination of these signs. Frankly, it was a mistake for the Council to have allowed these signs in the first instance, and if there is a cost associated with their forced elimination, so be it. It could only be modest in comparison to the aesthetic cost to this beautiful city."

The issue is not a matter of esoteric aesthetics, but goes to the core of the character and development future of the city. Some years ago, Capitol Hill residents and businesses succeeded in eliminating the billboard at the corner of 6th St and Pennsylvania Ave. SE. The site is now filled by a million dollars

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President's Column

by Rob Nevitt

"The Capitol Hill Restoration Society represents over one thousand members and has, for over forty years, worked to preserve the historic character and special life style of our neighborhoods."

One version or another of this statement precedes testimony and appeals by CHRS representatives. It gets respect, but what impact is it having on the issues we are about?

In several newsletters you have been reading about "Station Place," the development on the two-block piece of land east of Union Station, behind the Thurgood Marshall Building and right at the edge of the Historic District. No office building larger than this has been built within the district, let alone on the edge of a neighborhood. The original design deliberately turned a glassy back to the east. Further, it offered no access to residents heading for Union Station and no egress for workers inside, except to Union Station.

The Station Place Task Force, organized by your Society and headed by Charles McMillion, is staffed by over sixty neighbors. It devotes energy, expertise, and time to researching and presenting arguments that will help to make the building more congenial architecturally, more supportive to development, and more comfortable as a construction project that will involve thousands of dump trucks coming and going, pile driving, and an influx of construction workers.

You should be proud of the task force's professionalism, hard work, and restrained advocacy in dealing with the developers, the bureaucracy, and the SEC (which will lease a large part of the building). We have wrung concessions from the developers, but the bureaucracy has shown little capacity or interest in dealing with the project in a larger policy context or as

part of long-range planning.

The Fine Arts Commission condemned the design initially, but did a complete volta-face without any evidence that the developers had met their (and our) objections to the design. During a series of meetings the Office of Planning acknowledged that the building was an affront to the City's Comprehensive Plan, and then it issued a report that was no impediment to the developers doing what they pleased. Individual ANC members made their own accommodations with the developers, although the ANC as a body largely agreed with the objections that the CHRS task force substantiated.

The ultimate affront was the Zoning Board's denial of CHRS's request to be heard on the issue: the Board claimed that our comments would be redundant to those expressed by the Stanton Park Neighborhood Association (SPNA), which has obtained standing. (We are protesting this, and the SPNA is doing everything possible to let our voice be heard in the very limited time allowed.)

Only Ward Six Council Member Sharon Ambrose took up the issues in a vigorous way: she alone protested that our representation on the task force was important, and that our voice was rational and one to be heeded.

Lest we be misunderstood, we are in favor of the development of this site and SEC's tenancy. What we seek are modifications that are of little consequence in the context of the millions of dollars represented by this development.

The point here is not to make the case that is proving so hard to make in the larger world of business and officialdom. It is to wonder: Why is it so hard?

For all the rhetoric about long-term planning and neighborhood development, it appears that the Mayor and the Executive Branch are little committed to



these ideas; they bow before commercial interests when presented with plans seriatim. Boys Town and the development of the campus between RFK and Congressional Cemetery provide other case studies.

Perhaps our thousand members are merely a number and Capitol Hill is still a puzzle to those who don't directly experience it. As a group we seem to lie somewhere in between the disadvantaged and their nearly automatic advocacy and the traditional influence of the obviously wealthy.

I don't think we are dealing with a system hopelessly corrupt or hopelessly inefficient. But it doesn't seem that clear analysis and pure motives are going to get us a stronger voice in the evolution of political and bureaucratic thinking about us and where we are going.

What will? I would be interested in anyone's ideas. Would a profile of our membership be useful? How could we develop such a profile? How many of us vote here? What amount of taxes do we pay? What is our income? Where do we work and volunteer? Are certain answers to these questions any assurance that we would be taken more seriously? Much is happening on the Hill — from M Street to the Anacostia and H Street — and we have played no small role in all that. How can we play our role even more effectively? *

Capitol Hill Restoration Society (CHRS)

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www.chrs.org

Founded over 40 years ago to preserve and protect Capitol Hill's residential character, the Society is now the largest civic association on Capitol Hill, and one of the largest in the entire District of Columbia. From the beginning, the Society has played a key role in maintaining the diverse, residential character of our neighborhood.

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worth of housing and is occupied by tax-paying residents.

Another billboard—or special sign—at 1003 8th St. SE has recently threatened our community and its further development. A sign in this location undermines extensive efforts to include the areas south of the expressway along 8th St. SE in the Main Street program that has been underway for several years. The program's goal is to establish a special and historic character for 8th St. SE as a unique commercial district, one that will attract tourists, residents, and the employees and contractors at the Navy Yard. All this deliberate and time-consuming effort to enhance our principal business street was harmed by the intrusion of a crude and irrelevant billboard.

Signs like this provide little direct tax revenue. They do little or nothing to advertise business specifically within the city. Moreover, there is no way to control their content. Today's National Gallery sign can be a bottle of beer or marching cigarettes tomorrow. Of course, we can imagine the political signage that will appear.

The bill being considered by the Committee does little to stop the kind of problem represented by the 8th St. SE sign. Other cities deal with the issue in a much stronger manner. Raleigh, North Carolina, and Salinas, California, have rigorous codes for eliminating billboards through amortization. Closer to home, Falls Church and Montgomery County have gotten rid of their billboards through various processes, including amortization.

The arguments against ridding this city of this billboard scourge — lawsuits and the need to pay vast judgments or other forms of compen-

NOTE: This article is based partially on Dick Wolf's testimony at the Committee on Consumer and Regulatory Affairs' hearing on Oct. 31, 2001. Full transcript of that testimony is posted on the CHRS website, www.chrs.org/documents.htm. Those without internet access may request a printed copy from the CHRS office.

sation —don't wash. The sign companies may sue, but they won't win. Compensation will be minimal, if the companies are taxed to provide a fund for payout.

No one has convincingly made the case that somehow special signs add to the business development potential of the District. Washington D.C.'s future in attracting business is, in fact, compromised by the existence of special signs. The Congress knew what was right for this city in 1931 when it banned billboards.

Some Council members suggest that only a few "marginal" citizen troublemakers are complaining. On the contrary, the vast majority of the citizens of this city (including the business community) do not want these signs. Only a few property owners and sign companies are behind this whole mess, and they are using money and political connections in order to benefit a very few, to the detriment of the many. The Council needs to resist these powerful forces and do what is right: get rid of these signs.

If you agree, you may wish to contact Council member Sharon Ambrose and all the At-Large members. Their phone numbers can be found at <http://dccouncil.washington.dc.us/> *

Broken Sidewalks, Broken Promises

by Gene Smith
Chair, Environment Committee

I have long thought that the newly-laid brick sidewalks and our historic brick alleys add a quaint, comfortable feel to our neighborhoods on Capitol Hill — something to savor as we stroll along, especially during this long, beautiful fall with clear blue skies. They help us to feel secure and at home, in spite of a beefed-up police presence, National Guards on our street corners, blocked streets, extra sirens, and over-flights that have come to us in this most unusual fall season.

But a terrible problem has developed with these same brick sidewalks: hasty, clumsy, asphalt repairs. Asphalt is being plugged into our sidewalks — along Massachusetts Ave. NE, in block after block of North Carolina Ave. SE, and along numbered streets on the Hill. All in all, the beauty of our brick sidewalks and our neighborhood is being bastardized by the entire process.

As you might suspect, the underlying problem tends to be related to tree roots. That is something that can be expected, and will likely get worse as new trees are planted to revive the tree-lined boulevards that we all enjoy so much. In the case of at least one site, the problem appears to be related to a rodent burrowing in under the new sidewalk. Nothing is being done there at all — except that the rodent is probably feeling very secure in its newly lined home.

If the new brick sidewalks are not going to be properly maintained, what is the point in laying them in the first place? The aesthetic value of historic sidewalks is ruined by the asphalt.

Is this a problem of funding? Would it not be better to use funding for new sidewalks for repair of the

newly installed sidewalks? Clearly, this is an incremental project, reaching random blocks on an as-needed basis. Wouldn't everyone be happier if they knew that whenever they got their brick sidewalks, they would be prized and properly maintained — instead of feeling that they will get the same slap-dash asphalt patching that is so frequently seen?

Might this be a communication problem? Are we not getting the ear of the right division within the Department of Public Works? Or might it be a contract problem? Is there a contract that provides for original brickwork in laying the new sidewalks but not for repair of the very same sidewalks? Might this be simply a problem of priorities? Certainly, it may seem to be a minor irritant to those with no sidewalks, those witnessing drug sales or hearing gun shots on a regular basis, and those with a nuisance property or other abandoned property down the block.

We have been asked to go about our lives, to resume our cherished

way of life, to show our sense of security in our every-day lives, even as we live in the shadow of a symbol of democracy that is clearly a potential target of hostile forces.

These sidewalks of ours are a minor symbol of their own — a piece of Americana that makes us think of Kansas and Kentucky, Vermont and Colorado, and all those other homes some of us left for Washington, DC. I don't think it is asking too much to have a job done well — and re-done to the same high standards when necessary — on our streets and sidewalks.

Or did I miss something here, in the Capital of the Free World?

If you share these concerns and have a specific address that needs attention, I would be delighted to have another point of reference to bring to the attention of the powers that be at the Department of Public Works.

You can reach me at gmsmith@smithbrandon.com. ✧

Judge Dismisses Boys Town Lawsuit

As we prepared to go to press on Friday November 30, we read a report by Mark Segreaves on the *Voice of the Hill* website that a United States District Court had granted a motion to dismiss the lawsuit filed by Girls and Boys Town against Sharon Ambrose, Ward 6 Council Member. Judge Robertson is said to have "admonished lawyers for the Nebraska-based youth organization for lack of facts to support their action."

This court action does not include Boys Town's suit against neighborhood activists Will Hill and Ellen Opper-Weiner, founders of Southeast Citizens for Smart Development (SCSD), but their lawyer was optimistic it would also be dismissed and plans to file a motion to this effect.

On Tuesday, December 4 (while this issue is at the printer), the Board of Zoning Adjustment will hear SCSD's challenge to the Zoning Administrator's decision to issue permits to the proposed project.

We will be reporting on the outcome in the February issue — the *News* will not be published in January. ✧

CHRS Board Reviews Status of Old Naval Hospital

Two presentations regarding the fate of the Old Naval Hospital on Pennsylvania Ave. SE were put before the CHRS Board at the November 20 monthly meeting. Capitol Hill Arts Workshop (CHAW) Executive Director Jeffery Watson, supported by CHAW Board members Joel Martin and Ann Richards, described CHAW's ongoing activities and explained why CHAW needs additional space and flexibility that cannot be accommodated at their current location in the old French School at 545 7th St. SE.

CHAW is eager to participate in efforts to renovate the Old Naval Hospital, with the intent of using the space for its own operations, classes, and performances. CHAW Board members are pursuing the effort by meeting with local officials responsible for the decisions that must be made before any renovation efforts can move forward. They have also hired a development firm to increase funding and have commissioned a feasibility study to determine whether they can raise the funds necessary for the massive effort required for the Hospital's renovation. Results of that study will be available during the winter of 2002.

CHAW has plans to make space in the old Hospital building available for use of other community organiza-

tions if they are selected as the primary tenant and property manager.

Barbara Eck, Chair of the Society's Committee on the Old Naval Hospital, also reported on her meeting with The Friends of the Old Naval Hospital. The DC Office of Property Management has authorized the Friends to act as an agent for gathering community ideas, proposals, and criteria for tenancy for the building. The final decision as to who occupies the building rests with the Office of Property Management.

The Friends insist they are open to any and all proposals and suggestions. The group is committed to overseeing historic renovation and installing a component that will educate the broader community about the history of the building. Once it is restored, Friends want to ensure that a maintenance plan is in place and that future tenancy serves the Capitol Hill Community. A motion to support The Friends of the Old Naval Hospital in their efforts and to advise OPM, the ANC, and the City Council of our support was unanimously passed at the Board meeting.

The full text of the motion approved by the CHRS Board is posted on the Society's website, www.chrs.org/documents.htm. Those without internet access may request a printed copy from the CHRS office. ✧

Not to be Missed! A Winter Wonderland Weekend on Capitol Hill

The Capitol Hill Arts Workshop invites the community to celebrate this festive season by joining in on its "Winter Wonderland Weekend." A main highlight is the Jazz, Hip-Hop Nutcracker, a contemporary take on a classic holiday tradition. This Nutcracker is presented by students of the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop's youth dance class, along with Momentum Dance Theatre and the hip-hop and break-dancing company, Pure Energy. It's offered at the Hine Junior High School, at 7th and Pennsylvania Avenue SE, on Friday, December 14th and Saturday, the 15th at 8:00 pm, and on Sunday, the 16th at 5:30 pm. Tickets are \$10.00 for adults, \$5.00 for children 12 and under.

The weekend ends with everyone's favorite holiday house party, the "Winter Revelry." On Sunday, December 16th from 2-6 pm, revelers will enjoy a moving pageant of private Capitol Hill homes, elegant food, and delightful entertainment. Each stop is organized around a different theme. Christmas in Norway is conjured up in music and food in one house on 7th St NE, while another offers traditional Italian music by a strolling violinist and opera singers. At a third, there's a feast of classic jazz, champagne, and chocolates.

Tickets are \$25.00 for adults and \$10.00 for children 12 and under. They can be purchased at Antiques on the Hill (701 N. Carolina Ave. SE, 202-543-1819), Riverby Books (417 East Capitol Street SE, 202-543-4342), and other outlets. For more information about this or other "Winter Wonderland Weekend" events, please visit CHAW's website at www.chaw.org or call CHAW at 202-547-6839 (545 7th Street SE). ✧

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

WE THANK THE FOLLOWING PATRONS & SPONSORS

Patrons:

Albert & Margaret Crenshaw
Michael & Mary McGill
Katie Miller

Pat & Virginia Quinn

Sponsors:

Cheryl & Matthew Chalifoux

Norman & Nancy Metzger
Shelley Svoboda & Neil Rhodes
Greg Vass
Amy Weinstein

NEW MEMBERS

Marina Galvani & Michael Crawford
Susan Sherman

It's a Wonderful Life on Capitol Hill!

by Pat Schauer

This past year, the lives of CHRS volunteers have been more than filled with the time-consuming negotiations — Bryan School, Medlink, details of other school conversions to Results the Gym and condos — and the endless tales of Eastern Market, Boys Town, and Station Place.

We have been particularly outraged over Boys Town: our tax dollars have been taken to purchase the land, and our tax dollars will be used to support the facility. In addition, a SLAPP suit has been filed against community activists who have spoken against the project. (SLAPP stands for Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation. Our lifeblood, as it were.)

For five months, Station Place has consumed those who are opposed to the proposal for a too dense, too high, and inappropriate glass office building right next to our Historic District at Union Station. Not only does the plan disregard the context of the immediate neighborhood, it fails to take into account the fragile condition of the brick townhouses on F Street NE that were built over long-forgotten Reedy Creek. One house is even held together by steel bands!

The work mentioned above must be carried by our Historic District and Zoning Committees. They do it in addition to their regular load of about a dozen regular cases each month. Such cases have multiplied of late, as new people move onto the Hill. It is already a full-time job informing newcomers about the historic district and zoning regulations by which we abide, and offering them the benefit of our experience in inner-city living, with its required give-and-take.



Without the work of CHRS volunteers, East Capitol Street could easily have ended up looking like New Jersey Avenue NW.



The fences, concrete barriers, and barbed wire that have sprung up around Capitol Hill are a good reminder that the work of CHRS will never be done.

All this is on top of the shock of September 11 and the anthrax scare. The security folk seem to be out of control — erecting fences, concrete barriers, and barbed wire in the most improbable places. Worst of all, they commandeer our streets suddenly and arbitrarily.

But our beautiful city is still here to see and savor, and Capitol Hill has rarely looked so good. Perhaps we need to take a deep breath, like Jimmy Stewart, and consider, in our case, what Capitol Hill would look like if all those civic-minded volunteers had not been so willing — with little thanks — to give of their time over the years.

- ✧ Imagine an East Capitol Street lined with office buildings instead of the rich variety of houses, gardens, and people who live there twenty-four hours a day.
- ✧ Imagine Eastern Market all gone, replaced by a parking lot or even — gasp — a Wal-Mart!
- ✧ Imagine Pennsylvania Avenue SE filled with high-rise office buildings looming over the neighborhood.
- ✧ Imagine Capitol Hill without a Historic District designation: ranch houses, McMansions, aluminum siding, and intrusive curb cuts.
- ✧ Instead of the finely designed stores on D St., across from the Eastern Market Metro, imagine a Papa Johns Pizza in a poorly designed building whose enormous delivery trucks block the street and access by fire trucks.



With the help of CHRS, the Eastern Market continues to serve our community as a social and economic focal point.

- * Imagine Capitol Hill surrendered to the automobile culture, with a freeway down Eleventh Street, NE and SE, wiping out Philadelphia Row and many other Gessford houses.
- * Imagine our streets without the residential parking permits that at least discourage commuter parking all day long, or streets cleared of residents' cars, with traffic patterns reversed to accommodate special events at RFK.
- * Imagine Lincoln Park surrounded by streets with unmarked lanes where a kind of bumper-car mentality reigns, instead of the well-designed lanes now in place.
- * Imagine Capitol Hill without the annual community celebration of the House and Garden Tour on Mother's Day.

So what's left to do? Lots, you can be assured. Among other things:

- * Eighth Street south of the freeway needs to be included in our Historic District to protect our first Main Street.
- * Owners mustn't get away with demolition by neglect and leaving their buildings open to the elements.
- * We need enforcement of regulations that controlling parking by commuters and parking on public space, especially when garages have been converted to living space.

Thermal Comfort Draws Crowd for November's Preservation Café

Nancy Metzger Chair, Historic District Committee

Drawing on lessons from the past as well as technological advances of our own times, architect Robert Weinstein explained to a standing-room-only audience at November's Preservation Café how to increase the thermal comfort inside their Capitol Hill row houses.

Weinstein noted that when heat was supplied by one or two Latrobe stoves in their fireplaces, earlier residents of Capitol Hill used tactics such as closing off rooms in the winter to conserve heat, sitting in wing chairs to block the draft, and adding heavy rugs and draperies for insulation.

In the area of building modification, Frager's Hardware supplied illustrative samples of products that help keep warm air inside and cold air outside: attic insulation; interior storm windows of "shrink wrap" and double stick tape (caution — paint might peel when system is removed); cord weather stripping and felt weather stripping; programmable thermostats; dryer vent valves for reclaiming hot air; spray foam applied to outside of outlet box behind the switch cover and foam pads as outlet sealers. Items to increase energy efficiency included ceramic heaters; compact fluorescent light fixtures, hot water tank covers; and clean furnace and air conditioner filters. When all else fails, there is still the old-fashioned night cap!

Special thanks to Frager's Hardware for their efforts in rounding up appropriate weatherproofing products and a word of appreciation to the new owners of the Upstairs Room (above Caffe Italiano, 1129 Pennsylvania Avenue, S.E.) for extending the meeting space to the Preservation Café.

The Preservation Cafés will return in February with topics to be announced early next year. *

- * We need to identify and report illegal office uses of many residentially zoned properties.

Take heart. Be pleased with our accomplishments. Join us to continue the good fight for our extraordinarily good life! *

Mark your Calendar!

DECEMBER

14–16 Friday–Sunday

Performances of Jazz Hip-Hop “Nutcracker”, Hine Junior High School, 7th and Pennsylvania Avenue SE

16 Sunday, 2–6 p.m.

CHAW’s Winter Revelry House Tour (see page 5 for details)

18 Tuesday, 6:30 p.m.

CHRS Board meeting, Old Naval Hospital, 921 Pennsylvania Ave. SE

20 Thursday, 10:00 a.m.

Historic Preservation Review Board hearing on Capitol Hill Historic District enlargement, 440 Fourth Street NW, Room 220 South.

JANUARY

8 Tuesday, 7:00 p.m.

Talk by Holly H. Shimizu, Executive Director of the U.S. Botanic Garden, Capitol Hill Garden Club, Capitol Hill United Methodist Church, Seward Square (5th Street at Pennsylvania Ave SE).

15 Tuesday, 6:30 p.m.

CHRS Board meeting, Old Naval Hospital, 921 Pennsylvania Ave. SE

15 Tuesday, 6:30 p.m.

Centennial of the McMillan Commission. Panel discussion of how the McMillan Commission has transformed the monumental core of Washington, D.C. National Building Museum. Registration required. Tel: 272-2448

REMINDER:

The next issue of the *News* will appear in February, 2002. There will be no January issue.

New Beginnings at the U.S. Botanic Garden

The U.S. Botanic Garden has been closed for more than three years, undergoing extensive and expensive renovations to its historic structure (located across from the Capitol and along First Street SW). The modernized building that will open before Christmas will include a restaurant, enlarged shop, and many more user-friendly exhibits.

Executive Director Holly H. Shimizu will present slides illustrating the history and reorganization of this wonderful resource at the regular January meeting of the Capitol Hill Garden Club, Tuesday, January 8 at 7:00 p.m at the Capitol Hill United Methodist Church on Seward Square (5th St. SE at Pennsylvania Ave SE). Everyone is welcome, and there is no charge.

Ms. Shimizu is well known as

one of the hosts of *The Victory Garden*, a gardening show broadcast on public television stations. She has written and lectured extensively, and led international botanical and horticultural trips to Europe, Japan, Costa Rica and Bermuda. She was curator of the National Herb Garden at the US National Arboretum during the 1980s and was Assistant Executive Director of the U.S. Botanic Garden from 1991 to 1996. She was Managing Director of the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden in Richmond, Virginia, from 1996 to 2000. *



Holly Shimizu

Let Us Know If the *News* Is Late!

Starting with this issue, Capitol Hill-area copies of *CHRS News* are being mailed using the USPS’s nonprofit bulk mail rate. Cost savings are substantial—almost \$150/month after initial fees are paid. (Many thanks to Hilary Russell and Katie Miller for researching eligibility requirements and for handling the paperwork necessary.) One caveat: delivery may take longer than with first class. We’d like to track the new system’s effectiveness regarding timely delivery and receive feedback if your *News* arrives later than December 12. Please alert us: you can leave a message at 543-0425 or send a e-mail to CapHRS@AOL.com

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