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## BAY VILLAGE NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION, INC.

Hi Bay Village Neighbors:

As I write this, election returns have come in, and we welcome Michelle Wu as our new Mayor, and Ruthzee Louijeune and Erin Murphy as new At-Large City Councilors. Ed Flynn of course continues to represent us in District 2, and At-Large Councilors Michael Flaherty and Julia Mejia return. We offer congratulations to the winners and look forward to working with each of them and their respective offices in the coming year. As I've noted in recent newsletters, City government seems to have been in a state of suspended animation for the last few months: there have been many staff departures from the departments with whom we regularly interact (e.g., Parks, BPDA) and responsiveness has stalled. We are hopeful that the Wu administration will bring new vigor to City Hall and kick-start progress on delayed initiatives.

Speaking of elections: we combined last Monday's monthly Executive Committee Meeting with our Annual Meeting, at which we elected a slate of leaders for the coming year. BVNA elections are, admittedly, rather less drama-filled than most city, state, or national contests. Like Ed Flynn, I have been returned to office by a majority that might make Kim Jong-un blush.

But while the formal confirmation of our brick-sidewalk politburo hasn't been the source of contention, I'd nevertheless like to underscore that we aim to be inclusive. Pretty much everyone who wants a role can play a part –we now have about 30 members of the Executive Committee, which is a large fraction of our approximately 250 members, and we are likely to add one or two more during the course of the coming year. We probably have the largest ratio of Executive Committee members to total membership among all the Boston neighborhoods, and that's a good thing. It's good that we have multiple hands to help out on most of our committees, able to cover for one another when vacations or work commitments interfere; it's good that we have a broad cross-section of neighborhood residents to work through and ultimately vote on issues that may be complex and nuanced.

I'll get to these committees in a moment, but first:

### **Neglected Would-Be Special Guest:**

#### **- Stefanie Seskin, Boston Transportation Department**

I don't think it reflects complacency that sometimes comes from uncontested elections, but I completely spaced on the fact that several weeks ago I promised to give Stefanie a chance to speak about plans to improve the pedestrian experience around the Public Garden, and she patiently sat through Monday's Zoom call without calling me out on that. I'm sincerely sorry and embarrassed. A link to the BTD presentation on proposals to improve the crosswalks to the Public Garden is included in the email with the link to this newsletter. Overall, the proposed changes look promising to me – in my apologetic back-and-forth with Stefanie, I've highlighted that we are also concerned about crosswalks closer to us on Charles Street South (see City Services update below).

## Committee Updates and Teams for 2022:

### Social

I hope that you all enjoyed the Halloween festivities! The pumpkin carving contest was very successful, with about 20 entries, several of which are pictured below:



Thanks to Rob Lashway for organizing a very successful trick-or-treat: I'm told that we had about 50 kids participate, although thanks to the generosity of neighbors, many children's baskets were full before they made it to my house! I'm sure I'm not the only one working through extra candy.

As many of you are aware, Craig Davis will be stepping back from the Social Committee in the coming year. My thanks go out for the huge effort he put in to make our events a success, ably



assisted by Ryan Jones and Nancy Cahn – the fall social at MJ O’Connor’s, the Block Party, and the Halloween events of the past weekend were just what we needed to begin the transition back to in-person from sterile Zoom interactions.

While Craig is stepping back, Ryan and Nancy are continuing, and they are being joined by Alexandra Neuse, a relatively recent arrival to the ‘hood, and Nan Rubin, a Social Committee veteran of prior years. Welcome All!

### **Membership**

Jamie Brewer has been spending less time in Bay Village in recent months, so she is handing over the reins to Daniel Krulewitch, who is eager to meet new neighbors. Jamie and Craig have been instrumental in helping us boost membership in the past year – no small feat, given the challenge of pandemic-era outreach.

### **Parks**

On October 14<sup>th</sup> members of the team met for the third time with the Parks Department and the Copley Wolff Design Group, landscape architects paid for by a generous grant from the Brown Fund, to review final plans for the redesign of the Bay Village Park. While we would like to preserve the fundamental character of the park, we hope is to be able to improve accessibility, introduce permanent seating, create an environmentally friendly water feature (the existing fountain is a water hog), and provide an electrical connection for special events.

As a reminder, you can access video recaps of the Brown Fund meetings here:

<https://www.boston.gov/departments/parks-and-recreation/improvements-bay-village-neighborhood-park>

Assuming we are able to finalize the funding – this isn’t a minor job, the cost is estimated to exceed \$500K – we’d hope to be able to begin construction next summer.

Joe Kuranda, Aoife Austin, Marie Nolan, and Carol Carlson will run our Parks Committee next year, so we will essentially have complete continuity. (Carol is being formally added to the team, but informally she has logged more hours on our parks than anyone in the past year, for which we are all extremely grateful!).

### **Community Relations**

Jo Campbell and Roque Dion will continue to lead this Committee in 2022. I believe that Jo is in her sixth decade of involvement with BVNA, and I am only one of many Presidents who have benefitted from her guidance.

### **Planning and Licensing**

#### **- Bay Village Historic District Commission**

The next Bay Village Historic District Commission (BVHDC) meeting will be on Tuesday November 9<sup>th</sup> at 4 PM. The key agenda item will be a follow-up review of the design of the third-floor addition at 95-97 Broadway that we discussed at the September EC meeting, first reviewed by the BVHDC in October. You can participate in this meeting on the web at [HTTPS://US02WEB.ZOOM.US/J/81806601762](https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81806601762) or by calling 301-715-8592 and entering Meeting ID 818 0660 1762 #. You can also submit written questions or comments to [BAYVILLAGEAC@BOSTON.GOV](mailto:BAYVILLAGEAC@BOSTON.GOV)

### - **Park Plaza Castle**

A proposal is in the works to use the event space in the Park Plaza Castle on Columbus Avenue (not the Arlington Street side) to bring an “Immersive Art Exhibit” (i.e., something along the lines of the Van Gogh exhibit that has been circulating across many cities).

The proponents met briefly with the Planning Committee but did not have a complete proposal ready at that time; more to come.

### - **Chinatown Parcel R-1**

Councilor Ed Flynn’s office invited us to nominate a member to the Project Review Committee for Chinatown Parcel R-1, which consists of several parcels on Hudson and Tyler Streets that have recently been used by Tufts Medical as a surface parking lot. This is the proposed permanent location for the Chinatown Boston Public Library branch that has been temporarily located in the World Trade building at 2 Boylston Street for many years. Similar to the Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology Project, where we recognize that our interests are secondary to those of the Ellis Neighborhood Association, our interests in R-1 are secondary to those of Chinatown. Nevertheless, we have long been supporters of the library project, and we are pleased to be able to help with this effort. Ben Beck will serve as our representative.

### - **140 Clarendon Street**

We received notice last week that Beacon Communities and the Mount Vernon Company closed on the YWCA property. This will provide affordable housing, with a large portion dedicated to housing persons who are currently homeless. Our thanks go to David Wright, who represented Bay Village on the Impact Advisory Group.

The Planning and Licensing team for 2022 continues next year: thanks go out to Sarah Herlihy, Katherine Nelson, Ben Beck, and Craig Douglas for their efforts on what continues to be one of our busiest committees.

## **City Services**

At Monday’s meeting, Kim Kulesakaran raised concern about the danger of the crosswalk on Charles Street South from Melrose Street over to Eliot Norton Park. As we’ve long experienced on Arlington Street, traffic tends to speed recklessly on the over-wide street, one of the few blocks in the City that is reliably uncongested. Councilor Flynn, who joined our Monday meeting, jumped in to volunteer to set up an on-site meeting with the Boston Transportation Department to discuss options. More to come.

The Fall Neighborhood Clean-Up will be on Saturday, November 20<sup>th</sup>. We will post details and notice on NextDoor closer to the event, but assume that we will start at 8AM at the Bay Village Garden, corner of Melrose and Church.

I’m happy that Ian Johnson, Brian Boisvert, and Allie Fitzgerald will continue to lend their experience and effort to the City Services team in the coming year.

## **Safety**

The good news is that the most recent crime update from the BPD was unremarkable, we remain one of the safest neighborhoods in a relatively safe city. The bad news is that the camera project continues to be held up by the lack of accountability and follow-through that has characterized

the BPDA and multiple City departments during the interregnum. Danny Moll has spent the last several weeks trying to chase down the “Accept and Expend” paperwork that the BPD tells us is the last step needed to actually get this started.

Bethany Patten has agreed to join Danny Moll in the battle against Kafkaesque bureaucracy in 2022. Godspeed.

### **ADCO**

Nancy Morrisroe will continue to represent us at the Alliance of Downtown Community Organizations. Our peer organizations are also hoping that the new administration can break a logjam of open issues and provide clarity on policies around topics like electronic billboard regulations, short-term rentals, and the granting of variances more generally.

### **Vice President**

Trish Gillis, who has diligently helped us in many roles over the past several years, steps in as Vice President for 2022.

### **Treasurer**

Scott Orzell is taking over in 2022 for Treasurer Tim Kacich, who has filled this role superbly for the last decade. Thanks, Tim, for all your service, and thanks, Scott, for jumping into the fray.

### **Historic Anniversary - Coconut Grove**

Ruth Knopf of Fayette Street alerted me that the documentary “Six Locked Doors,” produced by Zachary Graves-Miller, will be re-aired on WGBH, Channel 2, on Thursday November 18<sup>th</sup> at 9 PM. This reviews the history of the Coconut Grove tragedy, its causes and aftermath, including interviews with survivors. If you haven’t already seen it, I encourage you to mark your calendars.

The fire on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1942 is the most famous/infamous event associated with Bay Village. It was the second-deadliest single building fire in United States history, and its ramifications extend to the present day. I have hesitated to include it in my then-and-now write-ups only because it is so well-known and so well-documented. But given the approaching anniversary of the event and the influx of new members to BVNA, I thought it worth addressing, even if most of you are familiar with the history. In addition to the Graves-Miller documentary, if you are interested in learning about this in more detail, I highly recommend John C. Esposito’s Fire in the Grove (Da Capo Press, 2006).

The Coconut Grove first opened in 1927, at a time when Bay Village and the surrounding area were becoming part of Boston’s expanding entertainment district. While many of the venues in Boston’s Theater District are older – there were already dozens of theaters in the area by 1900 – the roaring twenties saw the opening of some of the largest and grandest stages, including the Metropolitan Theater (later Wang/Boch) (1925) and the B.F. Keith Theater (later Opera House) (1928). With the advent of “talkies” came more purpose-built cinemas, like the Paramount (1932). As I noted in the newsletter covering the history of the film industry in Bay Village, the massive growth of motion pictures led to huge need for film storage and support operations, a majority of which clustered in and around Bay Village, as it was close to the primary venues. For the same reason, Bay Village became a base for support industries for live performances, such as specialists in stage set construction and lighting. With significant resources close at hand, it’s not surprising that nightclubs also were established here. In many cases, space for both clubs and the commercial enterprises that supported the entertainment industry were cobbled together out of century-old townhomes, in some cases with updated facades, in other cases as more complete reconstructions on top of old foundations.

Ironically, the Cocoanut Grove's existence and early success owed something to a tragedy a few blocks away. In the wee hours of July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1925, the Pickwick Club on Beach Street in what is now Chinatown collapsed as clubgoers danced the Charleston. 44 people were killed and scores more were injured. The old, five-story brick building had been weakened by rain, damage from a previous fire, and, most importantly, by permitted excavation work to create a parking garage next door. But many people, including Mayor Curley, attributed the collapse to vibrations caused by the still-licit Charleston. In a classic case of belated overreaction to cover and distract from the role municipal negligence played in the tragedy, the City closed all clubs for a few days, tightened its previously lax inspections, stepped up enforcement of prohibition, and crusaded against dances viewed as immoral. Many clubs closed permanently. But the enforcement of codes and the reticence of City officials toward bribes did not last very long.

By the time "the Grove" first opened as a speakeasy two years later, the fuss over the Pickwick Club debacle had presumably worked itself out, and the market for nighttime revelry was clearly underserved. With the ratification of the 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment in 1933, business boomed. Soon the Piedmont Street nightclub was the most famous in Boston, and in the tradition of Boston nightclubs, its politically-connected owners flagrantly ignored City regulations, including the fire code. Over time, the footprint of the club expanded. Fast forward to the wartime autumn of 1942. Objectively, the Cocoanut Grove was an almost perfect firetrap, in violation not just of the weak regulations of the time, but also common sense. The club was a rabbit warren of rooms spanning multiple buildings, with no provision for wayfinding or exit signage if the lights went out. On busy evenings like November 28<sup>th</sup>, it was routinely packed to over double its ostensible maximum occupancy. To ensure everyone paid the cover, many doors were locked and other doors and windows were hidden behind blinds and decorations. The principal entrance on Piedmont Street was a narrow revolving door that led to a ten-foot-wide atrium, and a side door on Broadway opened inward. The notorious *piece de resistance* was the highly flammable floor-to-ceiling tropical décor which festooned the basement Melody Lounge, accessed via a four-foot-wide stairway at the end of a narrow corridor.

The oft-repeated tale is that someone had unscrewed a lightbulb in a corner of the dimly-lit basement lounge, perhaps so that a couple could make out in more complete darkness – a busboy came over and lit a match to replace the bulb attached to the fake palm trees. Whatever caused the first spark to light the decorations, within seconds an inferno raged across the lounge and up the stairs. The fire department response was quick, but the frantic crush of clubgoers jammed and broke the revolving door and the inward-opening door on Broadway. Within a matter of minutes, 492 people were dead or fatally injured.

The magnitude of the tragedy ensured it was front-page news nationwide, and within days there was a huge flurry of activity to improve and enforce fire codes in many cities. Unlike the Pickwick collapse of 1925, the Cocoanut Grove fire did lead to a municipal reckoning and lasting changes in regulations and enforcement. Because of the Cocoanut Grove, revolving doors must be paired with outward-opening doors, floor and wall coverings are more flame resistant, and occupancy limits are more strictly enforced. Even so, there were echoes of the Cocoanut Grove fire in the Station nightclub fire in Rhode Island in 2003.

The photos below show the then-and-now from Piedmont and Shawmut Streets. The Cocoanut Grove marquee, three arch entryway, and the infamous revolving door were located approximately where the entrance to 17-19 Piedmont is today. The bulk of the club's irregularly-shaped floorplan was to the right of the entrance, but the Melody Lounge, where the fire started, was in the basement directly below. The Shawmut façade, with its multiple locked doors, was immediately to the left of the townhouse at 16 Shawmut, where there is now a little connecting street, renamed "Cocoanut Grove Lane" in 2013. The Broadway photo from 1942 cannot be



duplicated today, as the entire street and most of the club footprint is now buried under the Revere Hotel garage.



Although the masonry and even the most of the roofs of the Cocoanut Grove buildings were not compromised by the fire, the remains of the club were boarded up for a few years and eventually the whole complex was torn down. For decades the parcels sat as empty parking lots. The Grove was far from the last famous club in Bay Village – the Latin Quarter at 46 Winchester, opened in the 1930s, lasted until 1955, and LGBTQ clubs like the Other Side on Broadway, the Punch Bowl on Stuart, and the Napoleon Club on Piedmont flourished into the final decades of the last century. Today, only Jacques remains. But while the Cocoanut Grove fire did not initiate the end of Bay Village clubgoing, its closure and demolition did portend the perception of blight that triggered clumsy urban renewal efforts in the ensuing three decades. The automobile was taking over, and neglected buildings were increasingly being torn down for surface parking. Prior to the Second World War, almost every lot in the neighborhood was built upon: starting with the demolition of the Grove, Bay Village became increasingly pock-marked with empty lots.

Despite its magnitude and national significance, the Cocoanut Grove fire has historically lacked a major memorial. The only marker has been a small bronze plaque on Piedmont Street that was commissioned and paid for by BVNA many years ago. Earlier this year, the non-profit Cocoanut Grove Memorial Committee (no affiliation to BVNA) was awarded a \$250K Community Preservation Act grant to construct a memorial in Statler Park according to a design approved by the Boston Arts Commission. We wish them success in seeing this to fruition.