

The work of PELT

How Rosemont residents joined forces to inform the neighborhood

BY MARK EATON

In September 2022, a group of Rosemont residents had been working individually on city issues. Dina Deringer, Dick Blatt and former Sheriff Dana Lawhorne had each been working on environmental or traffic issues, particularly the chronic traffic back-ups on southbound Russell Road at its intersection with King Street and Callahan Drive.

According to Lawhorne, they asked themselves, “Why aren’t we doing this as a committee?”

Thus, the Planning, Environment, Land Use and Transportation Committee – known as PELT – of the Rosemont Citizens Association was organized to inform the neighborhood about new developments and city projects. Citizen association committees and subcommittees focused on, for example, land use, are not new, but PELT was a first for the RCA.

According to the RCA’s website, everyone in Rosemont is automatically a member of the RCA without an obligation to pay dues.

“We’re trying to be effective for all 1,400 households in Rosemont, and to provide

value to them and to the city,” John Hill, PELT’s chairman, said.

A Rosemont snapshot

Rosemont is a small neighborhood adjacent to Old Town and Del Ray, located near the George Washington National Masonic Memorial and the North Ridge neighborhood.

According to United States Census Bureau data between 2019 and 2023, Rosemont had a population of more than 4,000 people in slightly more than 1,500 housing units. The median age of residents, according to the data, was nearly 40 years, with 2.6 persons per household. About 72% of Rosemont’s housing units were owner-occupied and 76% contained married couples. Almost 50% of Rosemont’s residents arrived in the neighborhood after 2015.

The neighborhood, conceived by Philadelphia investors, was envisioned as a commuter suburb of Washington, D.C. In Rosemont’s early days, a street car line ran down the median of Commonwealth Avenue. The neighborhood was developed in the early 1900s, according to the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, and was designated a historic district in 1992 by the National Register of Historic Places.

Rosemont hosts major wa-



PHOTO/JOHN HILL

From left to right: Garrett Erdle, John Hill, John Patrick, Matthew Pfeiffer and Dina-Marie Derringer.

ter and sewer infrastructure along Hoof’s Run. The neighborhood has two traffic bottlenecks at the intersection of King Street, Russell Road and Callahan Drive and at the intersection of Cameron Street and Commonwealth Avenue where a railroad bridge limits traffic.

PELT’s origin story

Hill credits Lawhorne, who has now stepped down from PELT, with the idea of an RCA infrastructure liaison that became PELT. Lawhorne, a native Alexandrian, has deep ties in the Del Ray and Rosemont neighborhoods.

Lawhorne had been active in weighing in on flooding issues, including a long-running effort to clear the Hoof’s Run culvert of debris, when he saw that the RCA’s active listserve

revealed community concerns.

“We needed a unified voice because so many things, including flooding and traffic, affected Rosemont,” the former sheriff said in an interview.

Lawhorne advocated in extensive meetings with city officials for adjustments to the timing of the traffic lights at the intersection of King Street, Russell Road and Callahan Drive. According to Lawhorne, the light for southbound Russell Road traffic was set for 22 seconds to discourage cut-through traffic. The result was extended traffic back-ups on Russell Road.

“It felt like the only way to get out of Rosemont was to be shot out of a cannon,” Lawhorne said.

Lawhorne gathered data by counting cars and timing stoplights. With his findings, he approached the Traffic & Parking Board and held numerous meetings and discussions with city staff. Ultimately, the duration of the green light for southbound Russell Road traffic was increased by eight seconds and the back-ups have been reduced.

PELT’s other founding members range from newer residents to longtime pillars of the neighborhood, including John Patrick, who moved to Rosemont in 1984 and formerly

served as RCA’s president.

Hill has lived in Rosemont since 1988. He’s currently on the board of AlexRenew, the wastewater treatment authority for Alexandria and parts of Fairfax County. Hill represents the RCA on the city’s Stormwater Advisory Committee.

Garrett Erdle, a real estate developer, has lived in the neighborhood since 2004 and Deringer, who has been in Rosemont since 2007, works as a fraud investigator. Matt Pfeiffer has lived in Rosemont since 2015, and has two children at Naomi L. Brooks Elementary School. He is a planner with Arlington County’s Planning Division.

“The sum of what we do for our jobs factors into our PELT work,” Erdle said.

PELT in action

PELT’s monthly meetings, which are open to the public, provide an informal forum for more detailed discussions of city infrastructure plans and processes than would normally occur in an RCA general meeting. PELT provides regular updates on issues or projects relevant to Rosemont residents through an “Infrastructure Topic of the Month.”

PELT provided updates, at

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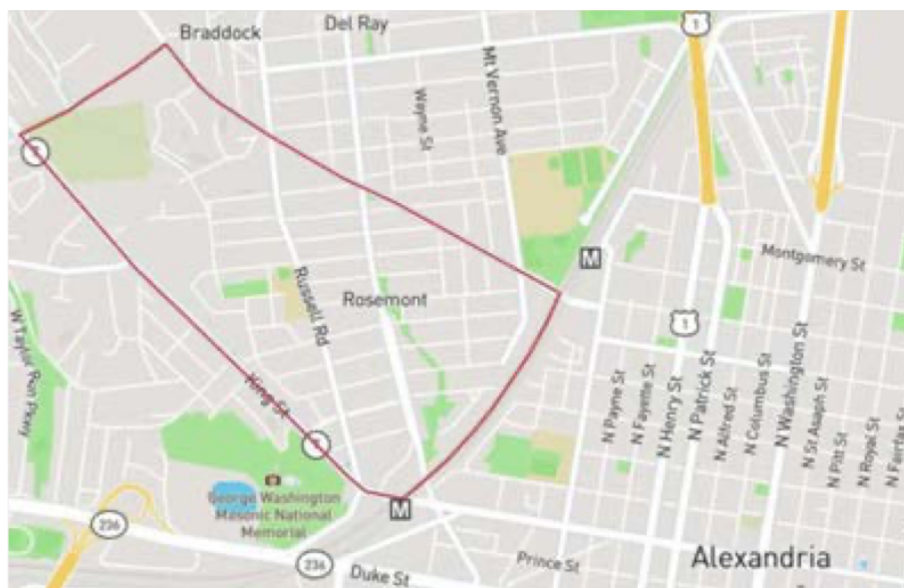
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PHOTO/MARK EATON

Rosemont was developed in the 1900s as a commuter suburb.



PHOTO/GOOGLE MAPS

Rosemont is adjacent to Old Town and Del Ray.

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RCA monthly meetings and through the RCA's website and monthly newsletter, on the impact of July's rain storm on Hoof's Run, glass recycling procedures, the Zoning for Housing amendments' impact on Rosemont, the Hoof's Run culvert cleaning and a status update of the housing development across from the Braddock Road Metro station.

PELT has not acted in its own name since it was created

in 2022. Instead, PELT performs analyses and informs the RCA's members of city plans and the consequences of those plans. When appropriate, PELT proposes a resolution to be voted on by the RCA, but nothing PELT does precludes individual residents from interacting with city officials.

Hill said that there may be as many as seven large infrastructure projects in Rosemont in the next 10 years, including the replacement of the aging railroad bridges over

King Street and Commonwealth Avenue. Accordingly, Hill said, PELT's goal was to be a "knowledge focal point" for the community.

Erdle said PELT seeks to "create positive working relationships" with a city staff that, in some cases, is wary because of the heated discussions over local issues such as the traffic configuration of Seminary Road and the effect of the Zoning for Housing amendments on single-family neighborhoods.

"What we do allows people to digest information about the city at their own pace," Erdle said.

Several Rosemont residents that the Times reached out to for comment said they weren't aware of PELT, and attendance at the monthly RCA meetings is low, raising the question of whether greater awareness would increase PELT's – and RCA's – effectiveness.

But Rosemont residents who were aware of PELT say they are grateful for the work of the committee.

"We are lucky to live in a community where committees like PELT are working to increase information flows to city residents," John Porter,

former principal of T.C. Williams High School, now known as Alexandria City High School, wrote in an email.

"The PELT Committee is our most reliable resource for information on zoning and infrastructure issues affecting Rosemont directly. It is the only source of information dedicated specifically to the Rosemont community," civic activist Kirk Fedder wrote in an email.

Ellie Shea, who has lived in Rosemont for many years, said PELT was "very helpful" in finding out if homes in the neighborhood had lead pipes.

PELT board members said they expect to interact with the RCA and the city on the new streetscapes planned under the rebuilt railroad bridges over King Street and Commonwealth Avenue, which include larger walkways and bike lanes.

While these projects will take years to complete, PELT considers the planning process to be important to Rosemont residents because of the possible elimination of a right-turn lane permitting Cameron Street traffic to turn right on to Commonwealth Avenue.

PELT is also developing a pattern book showing typical

Rosemont house elevations or facades to provide developers as a reference source before they begin teardowns or other substantial home renovations. PELT also maintains a topic list – including flood remediation grant procedures, removal of "gator bags" and Alex311 request procedures – that is monitored and updated.

Hill said that PELT addresses one of the varied purposes of a civic association. For some residents, a civic association is primarily a social organization: the RCA has hosted a Fourth of July celebration for many years to encourage residents to get to know each other. But PELT shows that civic associations can also help their neighborhood's residents by engaging with city officials about projects relevant to the neighborhood.

PELT also offers those so inclined the opportunity to serve by becoming more informed and informing others about relevant city plans and projects.

"Many Rosemont residents don't know about the quality and amount of work done [by PELT.] It's very impressive," Patrick said.

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