

Anonymous post on EveryBlock questions Ald. Pawar and developers' Integrities Charges turn out to be 'mostly crap'

By MARK SCHIPPER

A thread of posts and commentary generated recently on the website EveryBlock—a communication platform that defines itself as "the best way to follow neighborhood news and connect with your neighbors"—may have naturally formed itself into an almost case-study example of the virtues and severe limitations of the venture's information exchange format.

It began when an anonymous user writing under the call-letters CGC posted a purposefully incendiary, suggestive headline implying something was definitely foul about a real estate zoning change approved for 1819 West Montrose, in the 47th Ward.

The basis for this assertion was that David Brown, who purchased the property in 2009, had donated to Ald. Ameya Pawar's political campaign, and chaired Pawar's transitional team for several months after the alderman took office in 2011.

CGC's headline read: "47th Ward Close-Allies and Donor Seek HUGE Zoning Changes." Without apparently perceiving the irony, CGC put down several hyper-links meant to flush out the ostensibly secretive tit-for-tat relationship between the property owner and the alderman, and the details behind the zoning change.

"The thing about EveryBlock," said Ald. Pawar, "is that it does nothing but stir the pot most of the time. Many times it's anonymous; that kind of thing is easy to do anonymously. My office has a policy of not communicating on EveryBlock, because people don't know who they're talking to and it's mostly crap."

The irony washed-in when the links sent users to Ald. Pawar's website, where all of the project's details, application forms, photos and contact information for the property owner, architect, and project were posted.

"If what that post said was the case, that would mean anyone who buys property in the ward could never have supported me," responded Ald. Pawar to the suggestion. "We have a rigorous zoning process, a zoning advisory committee and community meetings. I don't know of any other alderman who's made it this transparent. You can go to our website and find everything; it's all there and all online."

What's also readily available on-line is a City of Chicago zoning map. The map, which can be accessed through the city's official website, shows the zoning change at 1819 Montrose—from B1-1 to B3-2—in fact brought the parcel into alignment with the properties directly across Montrose to the north, from numbers 1818-to-1830. The lone remaining business property on the block is zoned B3-1.

What that means is the very premise of CGC's post—a "HUGE" zoning change for a connected ally of the alderman's—was invalid and probably disingenuous from the outset.

CGC did not have the old fashioned courage to show his/her face and explain what now appears to be an anonymously posted piece of innuendo/slander. A message was left on the

thread by Inside Publications offering CGC an opportunity to make public his/her position; to take it to the alderman and the ward's residents, as it were; but CGC remained in the shadows, silent.

The property owner, Brown, by appearances CGC's ethical opposite, agreed to meet your reporter at 9 a.m. sharp the morning after he'd been informed of the accusations contained in the post thread. He agreed without preconditions to answer any questions the newspaper might have, and offered a tour of the property

What's on the grounds now is a neatly laid out community garden called Montrose Green. It has been a rich growing season, and in the bright sunshine of a Friday morning in June, yellow-and-black bees buzzed plot-to-plot fertilizing the plants. Growing from the dark soil inside the wooden boxes was green, dense, and full of life; half-a-dozen residents and restaurant people were there watering their plots.



Chef Rick Miranda, left, and David Brown stand in front of Miranda's garden plot at Montrose Green.

"Don't be afraid of the bees," said Brown, smiling. "You need 'em; I was told that."

Brown donated the plot to the Northcenter Neighborhood Association in March of this year for a period spanning approximately two years. The association had gone to 40 properties in the neighborhood looking for a place build their garden before meeting Brown, project coordinator Nina Hish told Timeout Chicago during a recent interview. Hish said they

couldn't get a landlord to talk to them.

"The pop-up garden is temporary," said Brown, "and those organizations know that. The Northcenter Neighborhood Association, along with the Peterson Gardening Project, came to me with the idea, and within 15-minutes I said 'yes'. I said I wanted 20-percent of the plots dedicated to the Common Pantry. It's Chicago's oldest operating food pantry. I'm on the board and been very active with that. It's personally important to me. They think they're going to get literally a ton of produce for the pantry this summer. They're working out the harvesting schedule."

The 116 remaining plots were sold for \$65 a piece, and that revenue too will go to Common Pantry.



Alderman Pawar's plot at Montrose Green.

Ald. Pawar was given a garden on the site, as was Mayor Rahm Emanuel, whose produce haul will go to Common.

Most of the neighborhood's most prominent restaurants and artisan shops keep plots, too. Mrs. Murphy and Sons, Bad Apple, Fountainhead, City Provisions, Brown Trout, Blue Sky Bakery and Cafe 28 each maintain a garden of vegetables and herbs they plan to use in dishes served at their establishments. Rick Miranda, the chef at Cafe 28, was there watering his tomatilloes during the tour and interview.

"In terms of my motivations here," said Brown, "the city, the Metropolitan Planning Commission, any urban planning academic you talk to says when you have a site that is so well served by transportation, like the 'L' and bus-lines, that you try to build more of your urban activity and density there. The zoning change basically allows us to provide slightly higher number of residential units, in terms of use for ground floor tenants it gives us a broader platform to go after in terms of the types of tenants I want."

In September of 2009, when Brown returned to Chicago from Washington D.C. with the non-Hodgkins lymphoma that

threatened his life in remission, he resolved to start-up his own business. He called it Harrington Brown, LLC. It was, he said, the right time to transition from being a Managing Director and CEO of companies with an international imprint doing business mostly in corporate real estate, to a local operator.



The space at Montrose Green.

He bought the Montrose property from the CTA at auction for \$605,000 in 2009. This is his only project.

"I was still recovering when this came," said Brown.

"Working in pajamas from home before I got into remission. I said, this could be a great opportunity to buy a site in the neighborhood I live in, near the restaurants I go to, the pantry board I'm involved in. Let me do this, I'll buy it and if it takes five years to make it work that's ok. The stars were really aligning to make this happen."

The plan is to build a four-story building with retail on the ground floor, office and commercial space and apartments above that, said Brown. "We're not building million dollar condos here, but apartments appropriate for the neighborhood."

Another theme in heavy rotation on EveryBlock was the notion that an enormous building was going to rise up on Montrose, blotting the sun and causing the neighborhood to wither, if the posters were to be believed.

But the truth is that a residential building bordering the property to the west stands four stories high, and the Brown Line 'L' platform on the other side of the property stands approximately 35-feet high. Brown's building is currently set for 47-feet.

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In this particular case, it appears the alderman may be right.

