

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA OFFICE OF PROPERTY MANAGEMENT
EASTERN MARKET – REHABILITATION
225 7th Street, SE
Washington, D.C.

Delegated Action of the Executive Director

Pursuant to delegations of authority adopted by the Commission on October 3, 1996, and 40 U.S.C. § 8722(b)(1), I comment favorably on the concept plans for the rehabilitation of Eastern Market at 225 7th Street, SE, Washington, D.C., as shown on NCPC Map File No. 41.00(38.00)42270.

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Eastern Market, designed by Adolph Cluss and completed in 1873 during Alexander Shepherd's tenure, (and with a 1908 north hall addition designed by city architect Snowden Ashford), is a historically and architecturally significant public building. It illustrates and reflects the growth of the District of Columbia after the Civil War into a modern urban center. Originally serving the shopping needs of residents living in the eastern portion of the city, the market is a rare survivor that is known throughout the city and region. On the original 1964 landmark list for the District of Columbia, the building is listed in the District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites for both its exterior and its interior significance, and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. A 1994 amendment to the earlier nomination incorporated updated research about the interior of the building.

A concept for the rehabilitation of the market had already been approved (in Spring and Summer 2006) with further review planned, when the market burned in an electrical fire on April 30, 2007. The previous scope included interior work such as the installation of air conditioning, and the stabilization and replacement of the concrete floor. (The brick vaults below the floor have been failing for some years.) Proposed exterior work included lighting at the entrance doors and in the trees at the north plaza, replacement of missing acroteria on the roof, a small dormer for the chiller, ADA-complaint ramps and, notably, the installation of skylights along the roof ridge. The project architect is Quinn Evans Architects.

NCPC recently approved, as a delegated action, a related DDOT street improvement project (new sidewalks and street light standards) for 7th Street, SE.

The District of Columbia Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) and staff have been thoroughly involved with the development and review of the project and reviewed it again at its meeting on June 28, 2007, after which it delegated final approval of details and decisions to the staff. There is a great deal of public interest in the project. After the fire, which displaced the market vendors, Mayor Fenty promised a swift rebuilding of the market. The burned roof has already been removed. The anticipated reopening date will be in the spring of 2009.

The Commission's review of District of Columbia public buildings is advisory outside of the Central Area and its authority is to comment on proposed exterior alterations to the building and site. The current submission is a revised concept, and final plans will be submitted in coming months.

The fire damaged the roof beyond repair, caused considerable damage to the windows, and caused the loss of about 50% of the plaster on the interior walls. Unfortunately, the original iron roof truss, a fully visible and highly significant interior feature of the building and a rare survivor of this era, was seriously damaged. Many of the truss connections as well as members were compromised by the heat of the fire. Comprehensive analysis also revealed that the existing trusses would not meet the structural requirements of the current building code. A proposed solution would salvage half of the members, which would be alternated with inserted new members that would resemble the historic members as closely as possible (but whose dimensions would be slightly larger, however). In addition, the new purlins would be thicker and made of steel rather than wood. Further consultation will conclude whether this approach is the most appropriate. The appearance of delicate, uniform trusses should be retained, weighed against the value of retaining as much of the original fabric as possible.

Exterior post-fire repair includes the replacement of damaged and missing window muntins and the installation of glass window panes. The architects stated for the first time at the HPRB meeting on June 28 that they are considering translucent (rather than transparent) glass for the market windows. I recommend that the nature of the window glass be studied in concert with the proposed skylights as the design is finalized. The remaining proposed exterior alterations, proposed before the fire, include: replacement of roof fabric with slate shingles; the construction of a continuous ridge skylight (shown in Cluss's plan, with *in situ* iron skylight frames); the replacement of missing acroteria (projecting decorative elements) at the cornice pediment and chimneys; and the installation of accessible ramps, light standards next to doors, lights near the main door and in the lower level entrances, and 25-foot light standards in the north plaza among the trees along North Carolina Avenue, SE. There will be some utilitarian alterations in the alley to the west of the building, including a lift, two grated vaults, and two air intake shafts across the alley next to the natatorium. The proposed lighting is still under discussion. I recommend that the 25-foot contemporary-style light standards be studied further to ensure a compatible appearance and light level, and I concur with the HPRB's recommendation to check the levels of all of the existing and proposed lighting together.

The most significant exterior alteration proposed by the applicant is the construction of skylights along both sides of the roof ridge. An 1886 photograph of Eastern Market (taken in the decade following the market's opening and the earliest known photograph of the building) does not show the skylights. However, Cluss's architectural plans contain the skylight and his design intent is clear. Current inspection of the interior ridge confirms that the cast iron skylight framing was original to the building and that the building was designed to have a continuous ridge skylight. Either the skylight glass was not installed late in the original construction of the market, or it was installed and removed relatively soon thereafter, likely as a result of leaking. In either case, there have been no skylights in the market's roof for the past 120 years.

The proposed installation or re-installation of skylights has been the subject of study and discussion by members and staff of the Historic Preservation Review Board and among architectural historians and architects with the Capitol Hill Restoration Society and interested community members. There will always be debate about the reconstruction or near-reconstruction of missing historic fabric in the rehabilitation of significant buildings. I recommend that the matter be decided by the District of Columbia Historic Preservation Review Board after weighing the physical evidence and hearing comments from interested citizens. Staff supports either conclusion as professionally valid, since a decision not to install the skylights when the roof is rebuilt would restore the market to its earliest-documented appearance (1886) and a decision to install skylights would return the market to Cluss' documented design intent, which—give the physical evidence of the iron skylight frames in the roof—was possibly realized during the original construction of the building in 1873.

Since the problem of light penetration on the market food is a continuing topic of discussion, I recommend that the proposed reconstruction of the skylights and the proposed use of translucent rather than transparent glass in the exuberant, Italianate-style arched windows be considered together.

The Coordinating Committee reviewed the proposal on June 13, 2007, and forwarded the proposal to the Commission with the statement that the project had been coordinated with all agencies represented: NCPC, the District of Columbia Office of Planning, the District of Columbia Department of Transportation, the District of Columbia Department of Housing and Community Development, the General Services Administration, and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

NCPC staff has determined that because the project is a District agency project proposal outside the Central Area of the District of Columbia, the Commission does not have an independent NEPA responsibility or Section 106 process obligation, in accordance with NCPC Environmental and Historic Preservation Policies and Procedures.

Patricia E. Gallagher, AICP
Executive Director

