

COUNCILMEMBER ANITA BONDS, CHAIRPERSON
COMMITTEE ON EXECUTIVE ADMINISTRATION AND LABOR
PUBLIC ROUNDTABLE

on the matter of DC Archives Building Project
Thursday, December 14, 2023, at 2:00 PM

Testimony of Beth Purcell on behalf of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society

(submitted online, in advance)

Good afternoon. My name is Beth Purcell, and I am the Chair of the Historic Preservation Committee of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society (CHRS). CHRS is a charitable organization dedicated to advancing historic preservation, and education on neighborhood history on Capitol Hill. CHRS strongly supports the DC Archives Building Project.

Project summary

The District's current archive at 1300 Naylor Court, NW (built in 1883 as a livery stable) has reached its storage capacity and the building is not adequate to preserve records.

The District of Columbia Department of General Services proposes a new DC Archives Building on the University of the District of Columbia - Van Ness Campus. The Office of Public Records, which operates multiple city archival facilities, has identified a need to construct a new modern facility to accommodate the District's long-term archival preservation needs. The current proposal would construct a new four-level, 118,000 gross square foot (plus penthouse) building to house office, research, exhibit, meeting, archival storage, and document processing space. The project is designed to meet the following key goals:

- Preserve the history of the District of Columbia;
- Create a state-of-the-art archival facility;
- Provide critical services to all DC agencies including records management, education, and resource sharing; optimize facility and space for centralized records storage, records processing, digitization, public access, exhibits, and offices;
- Maintain a cost-effective, secure, environmentally controlled archival and records center storage facility; optimize temperature and humidity performance and control; eliminate air-infiltration issues;
- and achieve LEED Gold Certification.¹

¹ Adapted from NCPC, Executive Director's Recommendation, File # 8473.

Preserving, storing, and accessing the District's records might initially appear to be a dull but necessary municipal obligation, but in fact these are vital records that will help District residents research their history

Why CHRS supports the DC Archives Building Project

Every week people ask CHRS for help in researching neighborhood history. A modern DC Archives can provide significant resources to people who want to learn about local history. Some examples include:

Records of the Board of Examiners and Registrars of Architects

In 1924 District government began to regulate architects as a profession. To register, architects had to submit an application under oath, including their biography and their important commissions, in effect a short autobiography. We urge homeowners to start with Historyquest on dc.gov to learn who designed their house. Once they know the name of the architect, they can visit the modern DC Archives and look for more information on their architect.

Land records

The land records reveal how developers subdivided squares into lots to maximize profit and how they financed their projects. This information contributed to our understanding of how one-block streets developed. Records at the DC Archives show how Emerald Street, NE developed, which was essential to making the case for a successful historic district nomination. The post-August 1921 land records are online. Improved in person or online access for pre-1921 records would interest many District residents.

Engineer Department records

These files, arranged by square, show changes to streets and also permit applications. For example, during World War II a Capitol Hill business applied to process chickens for the U.S. Army (in a building that no longer exists). Residents could also file complaints about neighborhood conditions. From these complaints, current resident can learn a lot about life in the neighborhood in the past.

The employees at the DC Archives are knowledgeable, friendly, and helpful. They could make an even greater contribution in a modern facility.

Thank you for considering our testimony.