

New Amsterdam Public Market Association

Public Testimony to

The New York City Council Oversight Hearing on the Present and Future of the Seaport
Held by the Lower Manhattan Redevelopment Committee (Councilman Gerson, Chair) and the
Waterfront Committee (Councilman Nelson, Chair)

Monday, September 15, 2008

Good morning Chairman Gerson and Chairman Nelson. I thank you for this opportunity to testify on the future of the Seaport.

My name is Robert LaValva and I am the director of the New Amsterdam Public Market Association. I represent a growing coalition of New Yorkers - some of whom you will hear from today, and many more who will be attending future hearings. We are united in our resolve to see the two, historic, waterfront market halls at the Seaport - the *Tin Building* and the *New Market Building* - preserved intact and in place, so they can be restored and reused for their intended purpose: as *public* market halls, to be filled with independently owned local food businesses.

Our mission is consistent with the original vision for the Seaport, and the reason this historic neighborhood was spared from demolition in the first place: to serve as a world class civic destination where New Yorkers - and not just tourists - could experience a unique interweaving of commerce and culture in keeping with the character and history of the neighborhood, yet relevant to the present.

Today, this vision survives only in fragments, but we do not believe this is cause enough to give up on it altogether. Rather, we feel this is an opportunity to gather the creative, organizational, and philanthropic resources our city has to offer and transform the Seaport into a cultural and commercial district unlike any other in the world. The path to achieving this worthwhile aim is to reject entirely the mall development proposal now being pushed for the Seaport by General Growth Properties, and to instead revive the thoughtful and comprehensive *public* planning process that was initiated by SeaportSpeaks.

As Councilman Gerson well knows, SeaportSpeaks was a two day planning conference on the future of the Seaport held in March 2006. The conference gathered neighborhood residents and businesses; elected officials, government agencies, civic and cultural associations; architects, planners, and historians; and developers including the Seaport's tenant, General Growth Properties. After studying the neighborhood and hearing expert presentations, this extremely representative and democratic assembly proposed a set of principles to guide the development of this rare neighborhood - the only surviving fragment of New York's first port, which dates to the very origins of this city.

The most important of these recommendations was to develop and implement a governance and funding mechanism - such as a local development corporation - to oversee the Seaport and any future development in the neighborhood. In the words of SeaportSpeaks:

“As a designated Historic District, the Seaport enjoys certain protections but it lacks a governing body to protect its historic character during a time of extensive new development by both public agencies and private developers. Such an entity must be driven by a mission to enrich and balance between the culture, history, commerce, and public space.”

The need for a such a governing body, which must include genuine community participation, can be traced back to the creation of the Seaport District in 1968. At this time, the same Urban Renewal law that had been used to clear away the rest of the East River waterfront was applied to the Seaport in an

unprecedented way. Its purpose was changed from “demolition and redevelopment” to “*restoration and rehabilitation*.” Eminent domain was used to place private property in public hands with the purpose of preserving it. And so for this reason, all uses and changes made to public properties in this *public* district - which includes the two fish market buildings on the waterfront - must not only be approved by the public; they should be *directed* by the public, and not by outside developers such as General Growth. The governing body proposed by SeaportSpeaks would ensure such participation.

We do not need to guess what will result when this planning process is driven by mall developers because we can see it by visiting the Seaport today. The 1980’s remaking of the Seaport into a “Festival Market Place” was initiated with the promise of creating a unique destination, characterized by independent retailers and respect for the Seaport’s character. But despite the \$200 million in city, state, and federal funding (today’s dollars) used to subsidize this private development, its public promise soon enough degenerated into what we see now: a suburban shopping mall disguised as a city neighborhood, which detracts from its character rather than enhancing it. Historic piers were compromised to make room for the Pier 17 mall, which was from the beginning much too large, blocking iconic views of the Brooklyn Bridge and adding far too much retail to this small area. And public streets, while seemingly enhanced with cobblestones, were removed from the normal urban context when all outside street vendors were prohibited from using them, and when they became completely surrounded by chain stores, further disconnecting them from true urban life.

It is even more important to remember why the Festival Marketplace was first invited to the Seaport: the development was to have generated millions of dollars to fund the Museum and its cultural activities. None of this funding ever materialized, and there is no reason to believe any of the benefits promised in the current General Growth proposal will materialize because this proposal, too, will fail. It will fail because it repeats the same, outdated concept that cities should be suburbanized; and it will fail because its massive size will overwhelm the scale of this very fragile historic neighborhood to the point of no return.

Furthermore, the GGP proposal will compromise the integrity of this *waterfront* district by destroying the New Market Building and by moving the Tin Building from its historic site, which marks the birthplace of the world famous Fulton Fish Market. We should keep in mind that these two buildings are the only *waterfront* structures remaining from the time the Seaport functioned as a maritime district. To demolish or move them would thus be the same as preserving a body and then cutting off its head. We would also lose a tremendous cultural resource and opportunity - equivalent to demolishing Boston’s historic Faneuil Hall or Seattle’s Pike Place Market.

Creating a non-profit governing body for the Seaport is the only way to exploit its true potential. We urge the City Council to review the SeaportSpeaks proposal and to move in this direction. While some may feel this will take time and set back progress, we should remember the Seaport is 400 years old and its value to our city is inestimable. It deserves to be treated with this in mind, no matter how long or complex the process; we, New Yorkers, deserve nothing less.

Thank you.