

Friends of the DC Archives

January 22, 2015

Jonathan Kayne
Interim Director
Department of General Services
District of Columbia Government

Dear Mr. Kayne:

The Friends of the DC Archives is a volunteer organization that believes a strong DC Archives is essential to the democratic process in the District of Columbia. The Friends advocate professional management and state-of-the-art storage for the current and historic records of the District Government. We have consistently supported all efforts to build a facility to house the records of the DC Government: by testimony in front of the city Council, in the press, in meetings with the Secretary of the District and representatives of the Department of General Services.

Consequently, we were surprised when on January 15 we learned that the Department of General Service had issued a Request for Proposal “to engage a design firm to provide architectural-engineering services for the new District of Columbia Office of Public Records and Archives.” Our surprise turned to puzzlement and, indeed, dismay, when we read the RFP and noticed the proposals are due on February 11 and the notice of award will be issued “on or about” February 27. This is a very short time to address a project as complex as an archives building, particularly when the District and its new Secretary have not made key decisions about the functions that will be taking place there.

Our concern became even greater when we read in the RFP states that the Archives will go into an existing building (“a Class A or B office building or equivalent that is currently built-out”). Our collective experience with building archives is that retrofitting an existing building is likely to be more expensive—potentially far more expensive—than building from the ground up. We are concerned that the limited funds available will make a retrofit prohibitively expensive and could endanger the entire project.

We are puzzled that no sites for the facility are mentioned in the RFP. Location is a primary concern for an archives, which must serve as a place where school children can discover the city’s history, where people interested in family history can find the marriage certificates of grandparents, where academic can work, and where the interested public can see exhibits and participate in programs designed to help bind the larger DC community together in understanding our collective past.

We also are troubled by the statement that “the new Archives will require 90,000 cubic feet

of record storage space.” The survey that DGS conducted last year found that the District currently has about 300,000 cubic feet of records, and the Friends knows of additional records that were not included in that total. It is inexplicable that DGS would decide to design (construct) a new facility for less than one-third of the existing records, and we know of no consultation with the Secretary’s office that would have led to such a decision.

Finally, we believe that requiring only LEED-Gold Certification means that the building will be below the standard used today in modern construction in the city, which regularly is built to LEED-Platinum. A building that is to hold the city’s history needs to comply with sustainability requirements of LEED-Platinum.

The Friends of the Archives urge you to:

1. Delay the dates for Proposals Due and Notice of Award by one month each. This will give bidders more time to make an informed proposal. During that time, DGS should meet with archival professionals, such as the Friends, the District of Columbia Archives and Records Center Advisory Board appointed by the Secretary in May 2014, and the Federally-mandated Historical Records Advisory Board for the District to get their views on the criteria that should be used in judging the bidders’ submissions.
2. Appoint an experienced professional archivist to the panel that reviews the bids, to ensure that professional expertise is available while the decision is made.

The Friends of the DC Archives support efforts to ensure a sustainable future for the records of the city’s past. Please call upon us if in any way we can help you build a state-of-the-art Archives for the District of Columbia.

Sincerely,

Trudy Huskamp Peterson
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Co-Chairs, Friends of the DC Archives

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