

2
3 January 7, 2015

4
5 The Honorable Pat Donahoe
6 Postmaster General
7 United States Postal Service
8 475 L'Enfant Plaza SW
9 Washington, D.C. 20260-0010

10
11 **Re: Sale of Air Rights above Old Chelsea Station Post Office at 217 West 18th Street**

12
13 Dear Sirs:

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15 Manhattan Community Board 4 (CB4) recently was informed that the United States Post
16 Office (USPS) intends distributing a request for proposal (“RFP”) in January 2015 to sell
17 the air rights over the Old Chelsea Post Office at 217 West 18th Street, New York, NY.
18 CB 4 is extremely disturbed by USPS’s the lack of community outreach about this
19 proposal which would result in a significant development. An in-depth discussion and
20 meaningful input from the local community, elected officials and CB4 are essential.

21
22 Background and Community Input

23 In 2013 the Postal Service declared its intention to close the station and sell the property.
24 This proposal threatened to demolish a significant historic building that is on the State
25 and National Register of Historic Places and curtail the postal services for the local
26 community. The proposal was vehemently opposed by both the community and elected
27 officials and the proposal was withdrawn. Furthermore, CB4 advocated to the New York
28 City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) for the site to receive a New York City
29 Landmark designation (see enclosed letter). The LPC did not make that designation.

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31 CB4 first learned of USPS’s new proposal to sell the site’s air rights when a notice was
32 posted at the Old Chelsea Station in late November 2014. The notice provided only a 15-
33 day comment period for the general public to respond and did not provide any significant
34 information regarding the details of the RFP process. CB4 is aware that the UPPS has
35 asserted that community groups were notified by mail of these development plans in
36 August 2014 but CB4 was not included in that mailing and furthermore, CB4 heard from
37 several of the community groups that they did not receive any such notification.

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39 CB4 understands that the letter was sent to Gov. Cuomo, Mayor DiBlasio, Manhattan
40 Borough President Gale A. Brewer and CB4 dated November 26, 2014 provides CB4 a
41 60-day period to offer comments about the proposed sale ending January 25, 2014. CB4
42 has requested USPS to attend a public meeting; however, to date USPS has declined to
43 attend. In addition, it was only after CB4 and Congressman Jerrold Nadler’s office made
44 requests of USPS that USPS provided information that was essential for CB4 to properly
45 comment on the proposal.

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1 For these reasons CB4 is discouraged by USPS’s lack of transparency and outreach to the
2 community regarding this important issue. Therefore, CB4, along with local elected
3 officials, urges USPS to extend the comment period and to attend a community meeting
4 hosted by CB4.

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6 Description of Proposal

7 The USPS intends to sell unused development rights over the Old Chelsea Station to raise
8 money and plans to convert the property to condominium ownership with a “Residential
9 Unit,” a “USPS Unit,” and common elements (lobby, gym, mechanicals, etc.). The post
10 office is to continue to operate. The existing building is to have a preservation covenant.
11 USPS intends to issue a Request for Proposals (RFP) in January 2015 for the air rights
12 sale for a new eight-story residential tower, set back from the front of the post office to
13 preserve the “visual aesthetics of the existing façade”. The proposed 7,409 SF residence
14 would rise 83 feet above the existing post office roof. Conceptual renderings suggest a
15 modern slab building. The site is in a C6-2A zoning district which permits residential
16 uses. Buildings near the Old Chelsea Station are primarily residential, many with ground
17 floor retail. Most heights range from three to seven stories; several are nine to 15 stories.

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19 CB4 Concerns and Recommendations

20 To provide local residents and organizations an opportunity to voice concerns and pose
21 questions about the proposal, CB4 held a public hearing at its January 7th full Board
22 meeting. *[Mention if USPS representative attended meeting and what they did.]* Written
23 testimony from Chelsea organizations and residents along with a summary of comments
24 and questions from that public hearing are enclosed.

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26 *Requests to USPS about Process*

- 27 • Significant expansion of the period of time during which USPS accepts public
28 comments as well as the comments of local officials and CB4.
- 29 • Review by CB4, elected officials and community of a draft version of RFP before
30 it is issued with sufficient time to analyze and comment on it.
- 31 • Inclusion in the RFP of ongoing community participation and oversight in project
32 development.
- 33 • Explanation of USPS response to the December 5, 2014 letter of the Historic
34 Council of Historic Preservation which states: “It is the opinion of the ACHP that
35 the USPS finding of no adverse effect is based on an insufficient assessment of
36 adverse effects for the referenced undertaking and is not supported by the
37 covenant as presently written.”

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40 *Questions and Concerns about Proposal*

- 41 • The USPS announcement states that the post office and the residence will share
42 “common elements” (lobby, gym, mechanicals, etc.). How much space in the
43 existing building will be shared or used for the proposed residence? Will this
44 sharing of space effect the operation of the post office?
- 45 • The description of the proposed residential development should include a zoning
46 analysis and discussion of the impacts on nearby buildings.

- 1 • The RFP should require that the design of the new residential portion respects and
2 relates to the existing historic building. The current rendering may be conceptual
3 but it certainly does not show any sensitivity to the Old Chelsea Station as “a
4 handsome, well-proportioned Colonial Revival style building” (from Statement of
5 Significance for the National Register). CB4 and the local community should
6 have input in the style and materials of the exterior of the new residence.
- 7 • The proposed residence should include 30 percent affordable apartments in
8 accordance with CB4 policy for new residential development (for all types: rental,
9 cooperative and condominium housing).
- 10 • Explain if USPS explored the possibility of transfer of air rights to adjacent
11 property, and if not possible, describe why. Is there a specified geographic area
12 where development rights can “land” or are they restricted to the area above the
13 existing post office building?
- 14 • Clarify whether or not the post office will remain open during construction of the
15 residential portion above and the shared space on ground floor.

16
17 New York State Assembly Member Richard Gottfried asserts in his December 11, 2014
18 letter to the USPS that “it has become commonplace for local and elected officials and
19 community groups to find themselves blindsided by USPS development plans.” We
20 sincerely hope that in this instance we can start a cooperative process that proves
21 Assemblyman Gottfried wrong. A transparent process will benefit both the USPS and the
22 community.

23
24 Sincerely,

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26 Christine, Lee, Betty

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28 cc: Mr. Daniel Delahaye, Federal Preservation Officer, United States Postal Service
29 475 L’Enfant Plaza, S.W., Suite 6670
30 Washington, DC 20260-1862

31
32 Mr. Joseph J. Mulvey, Real Estate Specialist, Facilities Implementation
33 United State Postal Service
34 2 Congress Street, Room 8
35 Milford, MA 01757

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37 elected officials
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