



Records Preservation & Access Coalition

BRIEFING PAPER FOR THE BIDEN-HARRIS PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION



SALE OF NARA FACILITY IN SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

Biden-Harris Platform

Recommitment to the Open Government Directive to meet the records management needs of Federal Agencies and the Public.

Relevant Programs

Agency: National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)

Program: Office of the Chief Operating Officer

Agency: Public Buildings Reform Board

Agency: Office of Management and Budget

Recommendation- Cancel Sale and Transfer of Records

The proposed sale of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) building in Seattle and relocation of its records to Riverside, CA and Kansas City, MO should be canceled. A move from Seattle would be a critical loss to the millions of residents in the states that are currently served by the Seattle facility since **less than one percent of the 56,000 cubic feet of records are digitized** and available online. If a decision is made to sell the property, the branch should be relocated to another facility in the Seattle area.

Recommendation- Improve PBRB Considerations of Impacted Parties

The Public Buildings Reform Board should improve consultation with parties impacted and/or displaced by its decisions. **Moving archival records 1,200 miles away does not serve patrons of the archives** and adds insult on top of the previous closure of NARA Alaska.

The Records Preservation and Access Coalition (RPAC) advises the genealogical and historical communities, as well as other interested parties, on ensuring proper access to public records and on public policy related to strong records preservation practices. RPAC is sponsored by the National Genealogical Society and the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies and is supported by American Society of Genealogists, Association of Professional Genealogists, Ancestry.com, Board for Certification of Genealogists, and International Commission for the Accreditation of Professional Genealogists.

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Background in Brief

The Public Buildings Reform Board (PBRB) was established under P.L. 114-287, the Federal Assets Sale & Transfer Act of 2016 (FASTA), as an independent agency to identify opportunities for the Federal government to significantly reduce its inventory of civilian real property and thereby reduce costs.

On January 24, 2020, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approved the recommendations of the Public Buildings Reform Board (PBRB) to sell 12 Federal properties valued at \$500 to \$750 million. The PBRB has been working with the General Services Administration (GSA) to prepare the properties for sale. Initially, PBRB intended to sell the properties individually but due to the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on the commercial real estate market, it will offer the buildings for an expedited sale as a single portfolio. OMB intends to prepare the sale of the property in January 2021, make awards by July 2021, and close the sales by September 2021.

The 10-acre Seattle building site is located on land that would be prime for residential development, with views of the Cascade Mountains and Lake Washington. "Relocating FARC will make 10-acres of highly valuable land available, likely for residential housing, in the Hawthorne Hills neighborhood just to the west of Lake Washington in the Puget Sound region of Washington," the report reads.

NARA's Seattle records include those of the states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Alaska dating back to 1840. It contains irreplaceable documents and is used for research about everything from tribal history to Japanese internment during World War II and fur seal hunts on remote Alaskan islands. The documents include old property, military service and marriage records, court cases, census records from Alaskan villages before statehood, tribal rolls and treaties, and records of timber sales. There are 50,000 files related to the Chinese Exclusion Act, which limited the presence of Chinese laborers in the U.S. from 1882 until 1943, including photos and interrogations of Chinese immigrants.

Opposition to the Sale and Relocation of the Archives

On January 4, 2021, Washington state Attorney General Bob Ferguson, the State of Oregon, more than two dozen Native American and Alaska Native tribes, and several historical societies from the Northwest filed a lawsuit in the United States District Court for the Western District for Washington to stop the sale of the National Archives building in Seattle.

The lawsuit contends that the Seattle archives are not eligible for sale under the Federal Assets Sale and Transfer Act, which exempts buildings used for research in connection with federal agricultural, recreational, or conservation programs. Among other things, the lawsuit noted, the archives are used for research under federal historical preservation programs and to litigate land use, water rights, and conservation issues. In addition, Executive Order 13175 was enacted by President Bill Clinton in 2000. It requires that the federal government consult with Native American Tribal Councils on matters that have substantial direct effects on them. Tribal Councils contend that no consultation took place with them on this matter.

The sale is opposed by all eight U.S. senators and many congressional representatives from Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. "This is the DNA of our region," said Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson. "These are documents that are not digitized. Moving them a thousand miles away essentially and effectively eliminates public access to these critical documents."

"The records stored in Seattle's Federal Archives are vital to telling the story of the Pacific Northwest's history," said Washington Sen. Patty Murray, the third-most-senior Democrat in the Senate. "I look forward to working with the incoming Biden-Harris Administration to explore every option available, including the appropriations process, to ensure that they remain accessible to local stakeholders."