Good afternoon Council Member Chin. I thank you for this opportunity to testify on the use of public funds to benefit the people of New York.

My name is Robert LaValva and I am the President of the New Amsterdam Public Market Association. I represent a growing coalition of New Yorkers who want to see the two, historic, waterfront market halls at the Seaport — the Tin Building and the New Market Building — preserved intact and in place, to be restored and reused for their intended purpose: as public market halls, to be filled with independently owned local food businesses. I advocate today that funds under control of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation be dedicated to restoring and refurbishing these buildings, as well as the piers that sustain both structures; and the adjacent, historically related market square at Peck Slip, as illustrated in the diagram below.

Since 2007, my organization has been holding markets in front of these structures to raise the public’s awareness of their significance. The markets have brought thousands of New Yorkers from all five boroughs back to the Seaport, as well as visitors from Westchester, Long Island, New Jersey, Connecticut, and cities as far as Boston and Washington, DC. They are drawn by the uniqueness of our markets to visit a neighborhood they usually avoid. Time and again, they state “I never realized this neighborhood was so interesting. I thought it was just a mall for tourists. Why doesn’t the city do something with the Fulton Fish Market?” Such reactions point to a seldom encountered opportunity: to preserve a place that is unlike any other in the world. The Riverfront Market District can be remade into a destination as relevant and compelling as Central Park. Such a transformation will generate local economic development and job growth, whose importance at this time cannot be overestimated. Preserving and repairing the Riverfront Market Houses is the urgent first step, and conforms with the intended use of funds under control of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation.
The Riverfront Market District is New York City’s oldest surviving neighborhood. Its origins can be traced to 1642 when scheduled ferry service was established to bring farmers and their goods from Long Island to feed the growing city of New Amsterdam. This ferry ran from Brooklyn to the area around Peck Slip in Lower Manhattan. The Brooklyn side of the ferry is depicted above in an engraving made by William Burgis in 1717.

This regular ferry service helped make the neighborhood around Peck Slip - now called the “Seaport” - into the city’s first and most important market district, whose use as a market site still endures after three centuries. The Fulton Fish Market was only the most recent major market to take place in this neighborhood; and for the past three years, New Amsterdam Market has ensured that this tradition continued unbroken. There is no district like this in the entire City of New York. Places with such long and traceable histories attract residents as well as visitors, generating new businesses and jobs. Preserving authentic places is a form of economic development.

The local tradition of building riverfront market houses began in 1675, when the city’s Governor declared that a “fitt house” be constructed on the water side, near where Broad Street met the East River. We know this market house existed because it is described in various records from the time, and also was depicted in a sketch of the Riverfront Market District made by Jasper Dankarts, a visiting minister from Europe, in 1679.
The Tin Building and the New Market Building are the last Riverfront Market Houses built in this local tradition. In October 2008, when both structures were threatened with demolition, the historian Helen Tangires, our nation’s leading expert on public markets, submitted the following letter to Manhattan Community Board One:

I write in support of preserving the historic Tin Building and New Market Building at the Seaport in Lower Manhattan, and to establish within them a civic institution: the Public Market.

My support for this proposal comes in my capacity as an historian of public markets in the United States. I argued in my first book, Public Markets and Civic Culture in Nineteenth-Century America, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), that public markets are more than just places for buying and selling of food. They are vital to civic policy and they reflect the profound belief in the moral economy—the effort on the part of the municipality to maintain the social and political health of its community by regulating the ethics of trade in the urban marketplace. Their central location near major transportation routes, particularly waterways, exemplifies their important role in the economic, political, and social life of the city.

In my book Public Markets—published this year by the Library of Congress—only one market is given an entire chapter: The Fulton Fish Market. This market is perhaps the most emblematic public market in the United States—owing to its longevity, dominant situation on the East River, and place in the world’s food history. The Fulton Fish Market and its historic buildings represent so much about where we have come as a nation and where we are going. It speaks not only to our maritime history but to the world’s environmental history and the future of its waterways—waterways that hopefully will continue to serve as both cultural resources and as food sources. It is time for us to recognize this important institution.

I urge Community Board One to consider the Tin Building and the New Market Building from this perspective, and to do everything it can to prevent their needless demolition.

The historical significance of the New Market Building has also been recognized by the Municipal Art Society, which released a special report on this 1939 structure which can be found at this website link:

http://mas.org/la-guardia-south-street-seaports-la-guardia-era-market-finally-recognized/

...continued on reverse page
As stated in the Municipal Art Society Report,

The New Market Building has both architectural and cultural significance as the last functioning site of the important commercial and shipping hub at South Street Seaport. The period of significance for both the State and National Register Historic Districts should be extended to include the final home of the Fulton Fish Market at the Seaport. The historic New Market Building is both the last building constructed exclusively for and occupied by this cherished institution in Lower Manhattan, and is thus representative of the final phase of the district’s period of significance. Its innovative modern design only adds to its importance. As such, it is worthy of being considered a contributing element within the State and National South Street Seaport Historic Districts.

I urge the City Council to consider this expert advice in recognizing the uniqueness of the Fulton Fish Market and this equally unique opportunity to preserve such a legacy for future generations as well as our own. Preserving public space as a means of generating economic development is an unquestionably appropriate designation for the Funds to Be Used for Lower Manhattan Redevelopment that are Under the Control of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED

by Robert LaValva, President
New Amsterdam Market
September 15, 2010