



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Barry Margeson

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

BARNES: [I am interviewing] Barry Margeson, for the Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project. This is November the 3rd, 2009, and Barry, we'll start with where ... actually in the beginning, I guess, was before the fire when you were working for the city, and then we'll take up from there as to how you became involved with Eastern Market. The interviews that we're doing now are really based on Eastern Market, and the people who were involved in that market, including vendors.

So, Barry, start wherever it's convenient for you.

MARGESON: Sure. Ah, the first, well, really the first exposure I had to the market was as a visitor, and, I'm an artist and I sold art at the market for a short period of time in the Hine School lot with Carol Wright. And following that, I worked for the Department of Small and Local Business Development and the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development's office. And I was working there when the fire happened, in April 2007. And, um, I was one of the D.C. government employees who [were] assigned a group of merchants to make sure that the difficult process of transitioning to the temporary market went as smoothly as possible. And I remember working with Mel Inman and Bill Glasgow and some others in that capacity.

And then, I did a—I was away for a year and I came back to the D.C. government and began working at Department of Real Estate Services (DRES), and my assignment, one of my assignments was Eastern Market. And when I was first hired, my assignment was really just to oversee an RFP process—a Request for Proposals process—and on January 1st of 2009, the ... we had not chosen a winner yet among the bidders for the RFP process, and so the D.C. government began managing the market and so I began managing the market. And so my first exposure in that regard was going out to the market a couple of weekends before January 1st and acquainting myself with the outside exhibitors and farmers. And, with the help of some of my colleagues at DRES, telling people about what was going to happen over the next couple of weeks and the big change that was going to occur when the DRES began managing the market, which I think wasn't so much of a big change. There were some, you know, changes that we thought were going to be difficult that actually didn't turn out to be as difficult as we thought. And so since that period, DRES has been managing the market and it's been a very, very interesting and an enjoyable process for me. It's been ... I've really enjoyed the opportunity to get to know the outdoor exhibitors and the farmers, and the merchants inside. It's a ... and the community of people who come to visit Eastern Market and see it as their third place, or their home away from the office, and home itself. And many, many people feel that way.

BARNES: So, essentially, you started the management process, for you, and the Department of Real Estate Services started while the vendors were housed, actually, in the temporary building, is that correct?

MARGESON: Yeah, that's correct, yeah. So we ... on January 1st we began managing the market and it was on June 26 [2009] that the market reopened. And so there was a significant period when we were managing the market. And I have to say that there's another small element to the story which is that, at one point we determined that it would be best for DRES to continue managing the market. We weren't completely satisfied with the bidders [to manage the market]. And we also ... there was a difficult period coming up ahead that we felt we would be best at administering the management through that period. And that period involved some major streetscape work, and working together closely with Department of Transportation and it also involved the grand reopening of the market, and so working very closely I worked for the Portfolio Division of DRES, and working very closely with the Construction Division of DRES, to make sure that that transition went smoothly.

It's also important to note that, um, the D.C. government owns the Eastern Market building but has never had a real good idea of what the finances are for the building and for the operations of the market. And that has to do, in part, with the fact that there are so many loosely developed management structures, one beneath the next. And so we've never really known what the finances were of the market. And the D.C. government has had to put in a lot of money into the market in the past. And so this seemed like a good opportunity for us to figure out exactly how the market worked, with all of the different elements involved, including, you know, the outdoor exhibitors, vendors, the farmers, the merchants. And now, the North Hall as well, which is a new element to the picture after the temporary structure. But of course it's always been at the market.

BARNES: Well, I was thinking, just as you were speaking, about the fact that there were people that go back—like the Glasgows—that go back forty-some years in that market and they rented it from the D.C. government back then, and then, I guess, well, at that time there were probably only two vendors. But then, I suppose they were the management, back then. And so, has this just continued to be a loosely formed management group among the vendors? And then how does that play into the outdoor vendors?

MARGESON: I'm not certain of the history of the inside merchants. I do know that Eastern Market Ventures, who we contracted with for management of the market, had some sort of arrangement with John Harrod, and John Harrod had an arrangement with Tom Rall to manage the market on Sundays. But I honestly don't know too much about the legality of those arrangements.

BARNES: Now what existed when you actually came into the picture, in terms of management?

MARGESON: Well, that's the structure was ... Eastern Market Ventures managed the merchants and the farmers, and then they, I believe, had some kind of a deal with John Harrod and Market 5 Gallery, and then John had some kind of a relationship or deal with Tom Rall for Sundays.

BARNES: So now all of this has been pulled back under your management. That would include the outdoor merchants as well as the indoor, and the North Hall?

MARGESON: That's correct.

BARNES: Any contracts with the North Hall for events would go through your office?

MARGESON: That's correct. Yeah. And that's been a fascinating process, I have to admit. The North Hall has been a space that has been obviously used in the past, and used well. There's legislation that defines how the pricing should be, and at the same time there are very clear market prices for the space, for events like weddings and, you know, big national level fund raisers and so on. And so it's always interesting and, in my perception, fun to create pricing structures based on all of the elements that go into a price, at the market—you know, market prices and the costs and competition and everything. And so putting together this pricing structure with all of these constraints was interesting. And I think that we did a really good job to make it so that—I feel strongly—that in the future, the North Hall will be used completely and extremely well. I'm hoping it will be fully booked at one point in time, hopefully soon. And we will be able to have a large number of community and arts events at very appropriate prices for them. And we'll also be able to have weddings and national level fund raisers and so on, again, at prices that are appropriate for them, and turn it into—and turn the North Hall into—a great community and arts center as well as a contributing part to the financial system of the market.

BARNES: Do you anticipate that there will be other renovations that need to be done to the North Hall to make it more marketable?

MARGESON: Renovations? Probably not.

BARNES: Systems, perhaps?

MARGESON: Systems, sure, possibly. There, I think that we'll be buying some chairs down the road so that community groups can use the space for meetings and so on. There's a bit of an echo in this space, and so we'll likely be doing something with that although I'm not sure exactly what yet. So, yeah, there are definitely some improvements that need to be made and that we'll make over time.

BARNES: Well, one of the things, of course, that I was alluding to has to do with the acoustics. It's just like a cavern when there's music. It's just so loud and overpowering that for something like a wedding

reception would be very difficult to deal with. Because people can't just sit and chat with the music going on. But then of course there's always the option you could set tables out on the outside as well, which does help. I don't know—and I've talked to several people about this—what really can be done about the acoustics at this stage. But apparently you are working on that.

MARGESON: Yeah, we'll work on it. We don't know what the solution is, quite yet. There's still a lot to be done, in many regards, at the market and so that's not on the top of the list right now, but it certainly is on the list.

BARNES: [Laughs] That's good to know. Well, let's just shift for a moment and talk about the actual transition from the temporary building to the renovated old market building and what were some of the problems and difficulties, or changes that had to be made as [a] result of equipment and that kind of thing that did not transfer.

MARGESON: I think one of the big issues that we had was—at one point the plan was to move all of the walk-ins [refrigeration units] and—walk-ins, not deli cases, but walk-ins—over to the new building. And after a period of time, as we thought about that, and as the city administrator expressed his interest and the mayor expressed his interest in a fast move, it became clear that we weren't going to be able to do a fast move, transferring those boxes, and so that was one of the big decision points, when we decided that we were going to sell the old boxes and just create new boxes from scratch in the new space. And that was a good decision, and that made it so that we could have a quick move. Probably as quick as was possible.

BARNES: Were there any other difficulties in the actual move, logistically?

MARGESON: In the move itself, uh, not really, I don't think. It actually went relatively smoothly. There's always a big punch list of things to do after a big construction project is complete and that's certainly the case here. And though, even though it's been whittled down, from about a 45-page document down to—we have about one page of punch list items now. But that was a ... you know that's always difficult.

BARNES: What is the future of that temporary building?

MARGESON: We don't know quite yet. We ... it won't be there, it'll be moved someplace else for probably some other department's—DC department's—or agency's usage.

BARNES: But it certainly worked well.

MARGESON: Yeah, it really did. It ... you know I thought that ... I was amazed at how well it worked. It is [a] testament to the importance of the merchants and how interesting a market is, and just the layout

and the space of a market, in comparison to a mall or a grocery store or something like that. It was fascinating to me that you could put Eastern Market—you know, all of the merchants of Eastern Market—into an ugly building, a very nondescript, white, ascetic building and it would work. It would work. And it did.

BARNES: And why was that?

MARGESON: I think that it was because ... it had a lot to do with the community that comes along with Eastern Market and that has been established over time. I think it has to do with the merchants themselves and the relationship that—if you could say, “mom-and-pops”—can have with their clients, their customers, and that you don’t get from a standard grocery counter deli case clerk at any other store. Um, that rapport is strong.

And one of the—just to get back to North Hall for a moment—one of the really interesting things that I’ve found about North Hall is the interest that people have in having memorial services in the North Hall. People love Eastern Market, they just love it, and they don’t love it individually, they love it as a couple, or as a family, and so, you know, if one member of the couple passes away, then what better place to have that memorial service than at a place that you both love together? And so that, you know, that’s a community and that’s a personal linkage that is beyond the structure of the building, and of course the historic market built in 1873 is a wonderful building. But it was interesting to see that that community and that love could carry on for the years—the period—of the temporary building and then come back into the new building.

I’d also have to say that the weekend market is a very, very important component of Eastern Market. And you know the guys and ladies who are at the weekend market—the vendors and the farmers—didn’t really ... every weekend, boy, it seemed like every weekend there was some little change in where they were. But nonetheless, they were always out there in a similar fashion. And so that allowed the market to carry on throughout the period of the temporary structure. Just the fact that, even if you didn’t go during the week, it—for many people—it’s a tradition to go out there on the weekend and you can expect to see your friends. It’s a place where, if you’re a Capitol Hill resident, then you can almost be assured that you can run into a good friend or a family member when you go to the market on the weekend.

BARNES: Well, it’s like, people who still come from Anacostia, they’ll ride a bus to come in to Eastern Market, to pick up their chicken wings, or other things, that is a part of their family tradition, that they have had going back to their mothers and their grandmothers and even probably beyond that. And so, I share with you the feeling that, not only is it Capitol Hill, but it is also the extended families that go way beyond Capitol Hill, and that come back. And they come back to visit the merchants, because they recall

their mothers and their fathers talking about those merchants. So they do have that loyalty, and contributed, I'm sure, to the funds that came in, in order to keep the temporary market going and to keep the vendors in business until they could be moved into the newly restored building.

Now let's talk about the problems—or the complaints, if you will—that the vendors had about their setup and the things that were maybe a little different when they moved back into their home. One of the things, one of the complaints that I've heard is the raising of the counters up off the floor, because they were too high.

MARGESON: Right. Yeah, I feel very strongly ... I agree with them completely about that. I think that the personal interaction is absolutely important. And that comes with the ability to look eye to eye with the person who you're buying from. And so, yeah, that was unfortunate. And it's also taken a bit of time for us to get resolution on, but that's coming down the road shortly, I hope. Yeah.

BARNES: So there will be an adjustment made, you think?

MARGESON: Yeah. Yeah.

BARNES: Because it is still possible to lower them and still get under them to clean them, which I thought was ...

MARGESON: Well, we'll drop them all the way down to the ground.

BARNES: Oh, you're going to go all the way down?

MARGESON: Yeah, we'll go all the way down to the ground. At least that's what the plan is right now.

BARNES: Yeah.

MARGESON: And, um, and when you go all the way down to the ground—which is what many—you know if you walk around to any other—drive around to any other grocery store, many of them are dropped all the way down to the ground, which means that there's no real place to clean. There's not that area between that you need to clean, it's just flush with the ground.

BARNES: So it really isn't a health issue? Sanitation issue, I should say.

MARGESON: I don't think so. I think that with the solution that the architect is proposing, that it won't be a sanitation issue at all.

BARNES: That's great. Is that Baird Smith that is proposing that ...?

MARGESON: Yeah.

BARNES: ... who was the architect, the chief architect, [the Director of the architect/engineering team for the Eastern Market project] I guess.

MARGESON: That's right—for QUINN EVANS | ARCHITECTS.

BARNES: Right. Were there other issues or problems that ...

MARGESON: One of the other things that we're working on right now, again, is the shades for the South Hall. Light comes in strongly during the sunup and sundown, and so we're ... that's another issue that we're working on. We're putting up shades that can be pulled down and drawn back up during those periods. We have test shades on five windows right now and we'll put them on the rest of them soon. And that's ... you know, I have to ... Capitol Hill Community Foundation has just been such a fantastic asset to Eastern Market and to the community around Eastern Market. They just jump in whenever they're needed, you know, whether it's after the fire with their extraordinary generosity, or during this period right now with helping out with the shades and with the deli cases. Um, they're just ... it's just an organization that is hard to describe in terms of its generosity towards Eastern Market and the community.

BARNES: And you can't think of any other issues that are being settled at the moment?

MARGESON: None that are that, you know, sort of, controversial or interesting.

BARNES: Well, what about the closure of Seventh Street on weekends?

MARGESON: You know, at the last meeting that I went to, the meeting that Councilmember Wells had, I came away from that convinced that the community felt like closing that street off to traffic and opening it up to pedestrians was a really great thing. That was my perception. The issues were parking; that was one of the issues that came up. And parking is always going to be bad around a market and it's—you know parking is—I live in a residential area that's far away from a commercial strip; parking is bad where I live! You know, parking is bad in D.C. So, you know, that was one of the issues, and everybody felt strongly that—or the majority of the people felt strongly that—you know, parking is just something that you need to deal with. And live with. And it's difficult, but that's part of life.

BARNES: Well, speaking of parking, will the city be putting meters back on Seventh Street?

MARGESON: We already have multi-use meters back on Seventh Street. They're there already, on the east and west side. Are you talking about south of C Street? Uh, there will be meters, there; I don't know when they're going up.

BARNES: [Laughs] Oh!

MARGESON: Yeah, I'm almost certain there will be meters there.

BARNES: It was nice when they weren't. I think that did a lot for people who came in and used the market.

MARGESON: Right, well ...

BARNES: Because there's not that many parking spaces behind the market.

MARGESON: Yeah, well, we will be putting up [one] hour parking signs behind the market, and we'll be enforcing it. So that will happen. But, yeah, you're right; I mean it would be nice if there was free parking everywhere.

BARNES: Yes, it would!

MARGESON: I'd love it too!

BARNES: [Laughs]

MARGESON: I work for the Department of Transportation ... [and I'm always] looking for spots ...

BARNES: Well, I wanted to know what is in the future for Eastern Market with regard to future plans of anything that will be added, taken away, or amplified in any way.

MARGESON: Can you be more precise?

BARNES: I'm thinking, it is a living organism, and change does happen, so do you see anything in Eastern Market's future that would be different, or would be added, or, changes in vendors, or ...?

MARGESON: Um, I don't ... I mean, one of the big changes is that the North Hall is going to be activated much more than it currently is. Obviously, we've just gotten started with that. We had about ten events last month, and we'll have about ten events this month and I hope that December we'll have fifty.

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MARGESON: So the activation of North Hall—that's going to be a space that is used every weekend day and every night of the week, seven days a week, so that'll be really exciting. And the prices are special for groups that are—and events that are—open to the public. So the goal is to make it so that if

you're walking by and you see something going on there, in all likelihood it will be something that you can just walk in and attend. You'll probably have to pay a fee. But you'll be able to walk in and attend. It won't be a private affair or something like that. Although there will be weddings and other things that are closed to the public.

In terms of the outdoor vendors, and the farmers, I don't see much need for change. One of the great things about Eastern Market is how it attracts so many different groups of people. There's diversity in the people who sell, and there's diversity in the people who come to buy. And that's very important to me. I think that when you make ... I'm concerned that if we make significant changes to that, then it may change the dynamics of the system, which is something that has worked for a long time. One thing that I would like to see is, we have a lot of jewelry vendors out there and I'd like to see less jewelry vendors. I'd like to see more people who sell specific types of antiques, people who sell antique bottles; you know an individual who sells antique bottles, another individual who sells antique boxes, et cetera; that type of stuff. But—and for the people who sell the same types of jewelry—because there are a few vendors who sell the same types of jewelry—I would rather work with those vendors—and we are working with those vendors—to sell different products, rather than tell those vendors that they can't vend at the market anymore. Because like I said before, the community of the market is extremely important and I think that everybody who is at the market—everybody—contributes something to what we have and what is Eastern Market. So, that's ... those are sort of my feelings on the outdoor vendor mix.

We need more food vendors who sell products that you can take and go with, and I would like to put those—more vendors like that—on the Natatorium, where they are currently. We have about five out there and I'd like to see more out there. It's a great space for people to go and have a bite to eat, and share some time with a friend while sitting down at a table under an umbrella and chat. Um, and Mitch who sells crepes brings a lot to the market; um, let's see, Brett Bond who sells pretzels out there brings a lot ... as well as the other guys who are out there. And so that's something I'd like to see grow.

BARNES: One quick question about ... will there be another RFP let for management or is it going to stay under your department?

MARGESON: We're working on issuing an RFP right now, as a matter of fact, yeah, so there will be.

BARNES: There are going to be a lot of people that are going to be sad over that. The word on the street is how pleased they are with the job that you have done and your department has done. I would like you to speak to your interaction with the Eastern Market Community Advisory Committee (EMCAC).

MARGESON: Sure. Well, thank you for that. It's been a ... I think that we'll get a great manager for the market. I've loved working with the EMCAC; I've loved working with everybody at the market. EMCAC is an extremely professional organization; nobody—I've never met anybody who knows how to run a meeting quite like Donna Scheeder does. All of the members of EMCAC bring something to bear and they all have very distinct interests and expertise that goes well beyond what I know about the market or could have ever learned in the short period of time that I've been here. Larry Gallo is one of the most knowledgeable people about the legislation and how it works together with the outdoor vendors. Monte Edwards is just a storehouse of knowledge about the structure itself, the building itself, and—about the old building and how it was, and the new—the temporary building, I mean, he just knows And the historic building itself now, and all the changes that have been made, all the upgrades, he knows so much about it. So all of the individuals who are on EMCAC bring so much to the table and it's just been an absolute delight working with them. It truly has.

BARNES: Well, as I said, the word on the street is that they feel the same way about you. So I do so much appreciate your taking the time to give us this interview for the Capitol Hill History Project. And we look forward to perhaps talking with you again. The board will meet but we hope that won't be soon. Thank you very much.

MARGESON: Thank you Ev, it was nice to do this.

END of TAPE 1/SIDE 2

END of INTERVIEW