



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Kathleen Penney

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Transcriber: Elizabeth Hannold

TAPE 1/SIDE 1

JAYAMAHA: [This is Dilshika Jayamaha] interviewing Kathleen Penney, Chief Engineer of the District Department of Transportation, for the Overbeck Capitol [Hill] History Project. It is June 2, 2009, and we are meeting at Coldwell Banker premises at 605 Pennsylvania Avenue SE, Washington, DC. Ms. Penney, thank you very much for agreeing to the interview and if I can start things off by asking you to give us ... give me a brief sort of introduction about your involvement more specifically with Eastern Market.

PENNEY: Sure. I am currently the Chief Engineer at DDOT, but at the time that the Market burned down, I was Deputy Chief Engineer and, in fact, I was working on the South Capitol Street/Frederick Douglass Bridge project, which was going gangbusters and we were sort of at the height of our busyness and then all of sudden this huge catastrophe happened in the neighborhood and we started—I and some of the others I worked closely with—my boss at the time, John Dietrich, were getting called in to emergency meetings at the City Administrator’s office. Dan Tangherlini was the City Administrator and he assembled a team around him that was really people that he knew were going to be able to pull this together quickly and figure out how to solve something really quickly.

So at the time I got involved, there was already some conversation with the merchants and the Eastern Market Citizen’s [ed: Community] Advisory Committee about how to keep people in business and how to continue the function of Eastern Market and there seems to be a lot of consensus building around putting the Market on the triangle right next to the Metro, at Eastern Market Metro. There was some concern I remember about the ability for people to park and the ability for people to drive in to the Market. And so some other ideas came up. One was of course this idea of using Hine Junior High School’s playground and, obviously, that was where ultimately we ended up.

So I’ll back up now and start over. I remember actually learning of the fire. It’s interesting. I had had a very busy morning, with getting the kids out the door and going to school that morning and I had not turned the news on as I always do. But I got on my bike, and I put my daughter on the back of my bike, like I always do, and we headed towards Watkins Elementary School and I was riding down Pennsylvania Avenue from my house at Third Street SE and ran into a friend just as I was crossing Seventh Street. And of course she said, “Hello,” and she looked very concerned and agitated and she said, you know, “Do you know what happened?” and I, of course, didn’t. And she didn’t even say anything. She just sort of turned and pointed at the Market. And I saw the smoke and the smoldering and all the fire trucks around it still. This was probably about 8 or 8:15 in the morning. So things were actually dying down at that point. So I obviously was shocked as everybody was and I took my daughter with me and we went up to the Market and looked around and of course it was just ... it was a scene of such horror. And there were people just

sort of wandering around in a sense of such shock and wondering how to react to a situation of such magnitude. It was really striking how much impact it had on people personally. I was really taken aback, not only trying to process it myself, but also understanding and seeing other people react, that they too felt such a sense of loss and such a sense of personal ownership of the building. And it immediately became obvious that this was something defining for this neighborhood and that, even then, recognizing that probably, in the long run, good would come out of this event, that it was very difficult to see such destruction take place in a place that affected us all so deeply.

JAYAMAHA: From what you have just been saying, I gather you're also a Hill resident?

PENNEY: I am a Hill resident. I've been here about 10 years and I have two kids that go to school on the Hill and my husband and I both work within walking distance of the Hill and so it's very much the center of our lives. And, like all of our neighbors, we've shopped at Eastern Market and spent time browsing at the flea market and gone to Hill-o-ween and, you know, many of the other community events that happen there.

JAYAMAHA: Right.

PENNEY: ... decorated our houses from the art that is at Eastern Market.

JAYAMAHA: Of course. I think we've all done that. [Both laugh] Definitely. I was hoping you could back up again, sort of a little more to the beginnings, sort of what you were talking about in terms of the response to the fire. Could you perhaps sort of talk us through a little bit of, in brief sort of, what steps were taken in order to sort of agree to come up with the sort of ... the reconstruction of the Market, sort of how the streetscape was designed, a little bit about sort of those details, if you could talk us through a little bit.

PENNEY: Sure. Well you know there was already a project underway to upgrade the streetscape and the awning in front of Eastern Market, in fact, had already been upgraded and painted and repaired and parts of it replaced. And so, the work was already underway from DDOT's point of view—the actual streetscape of Seventh Street. And it wasn't anything terribly fancy planned, it was basically just sprucing up what was there. And so, we were working closely with the Office of Property Management, the DC Office of Property Management, who had plans to, in fact, do a complete upgrade of Eastern Market—the building as well—and honestly, we were feeling like the timing was not going well because DDOT was a little bit ahead and we were trying to adjust each other's schedules to try to do it in a way that seemed logical and was going to be to the benefit of the neighborhood. And so, the fact that this happened really before the major parts of that construction happened is probably fortuitous in hindsight.

JAYAMAHA: Right. And in terms of that process, what did you find in addition to the timing as you were saying, sort of trying to coordinate that, what did you find was sort of the biggest challenge, because there was obviously sort of a public outcry or desire to have the Market redone very quickly so there would be some amount of pressure coming that way but also obviously coordination issues? Could you talk a little bit about sort of the challenges you had in terms of the process?

PENNEY: Yeah. I think we sort of were exploring within our little ad hoc task group sort of what could be done, before we set goals because we knew that the real goal was to keep all of these very small, family-oriented merchant businesses from disappearing. We knew what a treasure that was to the community and how important to the city's texture and core that really was. And we realized that there was not much leeway. That if we went six months to a year that most of those businesses would fold or move to other locations and we likely would never regain that kind of business, family business, and the long-standing merchants that had been at Eastern Market for so long. And everybody involved recognized how important that was. That that really had to happen and that, you know, everything else about the Market had to be focused on making sure that those businesses could survive. We knew that the building itself, the design was not quite ready. We talked about, you know, just hurrying the design along. But it was clear that was not going to be able to happen fast enough really to be able to save these merchants. There was some focus initially on giving them stipends and helping them survive and, you know, that quickly becomes messy. It's difficult for a government to provide cash assistance. We could always provide small business loans, but the reality is nobody could afford to go into that kind of debt. And of course, looking at the economic condition now, thank God we didn't put the businesses in that position, because with the stress that everybody is feeling now, that surely would have overburdened some of those business owners.

So we looked at a number of things. I remember one idea was that the baseball stadium was about to open and there was ... there's a big bus garage just north of the baseball stadium and that was one of the locations we considered, but the buses weren't quite out yet, so that wasn't going to happen soon enough. And we were sort of just brainstorming of, you know where could we put these people, where could we set this up so that this could continue to operate and continue to stay whole? And it quickly became apparent that the smartest thing was going to be to keep them as close to their existing location as we could so that it would continue to serve the same market and keep the same loyal customers. So that became a really important thing. We had a couple public meetings that were very, very heated. Huge turnout. All kinds of people came and participated. It wasn't just the people whose livelihoods were based on the Market. It was also many of the people who felt, you know, ownership, just as customers of the Market. So, emotions intensified so quickly and so strongly and [Laughs] it was a trying time to try to

make sense of all the things that people wanted and needed and try to make sure that we focused on the things that were most important.

JAYAMAHA: Thank you. So in terms, obviously those were some pretty big challenges, if you could talk a little bit about what are the things that actually fell into place quickly, sort of what really worked and sort of in terms of the various entities and actors involved, how did people come together? Because, at the end of the day, reopening in June means things have happened pretty fast, and by and large there seems to be a positive sort of overview in terms of people's reaction to the reconstruction work and so on. Of course, there are things like road closures and so on that need to be worked out, but certainly it has been a fast and quick process. So if you could talk a little bit about sort of what are the things that really came together for that to happen?

PENNEY: Yeah, so pretty quickly, once we settled on a location and we coalesced on what our plan was going to be, we were very careful not to make promises at that point because really none of us knew what we were going to be able to accomplish. And again the community was so emotional and so intense, we were trying to be very careful not to put ourselves in a position where the decisions were made for the wrong reasons. So the decision was made to put DDOT in charge of the project and that was primarily because DDOT had the, you know, in the city there are basically two entities in the government that had the capability at the time of being able to run capital improvement projects, and the Office of Property Management already was working on the building and so the decision was made to tap into DDOT's resources to focus on the temporary structure so that both of those could be handled in as urgent and expeditious a manner as possible.

So I happened to be the person that was connected to the neighborhood that had some project management experience that, you know, was recognized as somebody that could pull this off. And so I was asked to come in and I happily did so and a few recommendations were made and I talked to a few contractors and developers in the area and we got some advice and we ended up pretty quickly settling on Turner Construction who had been engaged in the baseball stadium projects and we knew that they were a class act and that they were going to have adequate resources. And they really offered help and they came to the table and said "We'd like to help you." You know, "Tell us what we can do." And so, Turner put together a crackerjack team of a man named, Tom Angers [sp?] and Joel Causey, who led this effort, and from day one they really were absolutely terrific. We really formed a partnership and figured out how to move forward in as quickly as possible a way.

And they came up with a design. They had the contacts already with the company that has the temporary, you know, the tent structures. They had experience with that. And so we pretty quickly nailed down a design based, more than anything, on what we could do quickly and that was going to be feasible.

I think one of the most fun afternoons we had in the early days was when we went into DCRA [Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs], and DCRA is wonderful, but over the years has developed a reputation that they have now improved rapidly upon. But at the time, you know, permitting was something that was dreaded by any developer in town. And so, we went into the permit office and Linda Argo, who is the director now, was fairly new still and she was wonderful. She pulled all of her staff into a conference room. There probably were 15 or 20 DCRA people and myself and we brought in the Department of Health people and the Department of Environment and the Turner team and myself and we sat down and quickly decided on what permits would be necessary, how long it would take and what it would take to get them done, and the guys were terrific. You know the way they handle business, they say, "Well please fill out this application." And, you know, I had the audacity to say, "Tom Angers, please give me your business card." And he handed me his business card and I gave it to DCRA and I said, "You have everything you need." And they stuttered for a minute and they said, "Well, you're right, we do." [Laughing] And they filled out all the applications. They did all the work and they made it happen and I think probably didn't get anywhere near enough recognition for their efforts in getting this through. And Sam Williams, who was then in charge of special events for DCRA, really championed that and did a terrific job of making sure that all the pieces fell into place. And it was easy because everybody understood how important Eastern Market was, everybody wanted to contribute and wanted to use their expertise to make this happen. And it was really fun to see when you bring everybody into a room with a common purpose how quickly things can get resolved. So that was a lot of fun.

JAYAMAHA: That's wonderful. It's so interesting when you talk about sort of the people actually coming together to do that. Getting back a little bit to the sort of to the design and the plan, you did say some the sort of planning around the streetscape and so on were part of the process, even before the fire.

PENNEY: Right.

JAYAMAHA: I hope I am sort of interpreting that correctly. Did anything change or was this sort of the original plan? I noticed flagstones are down now and it looks very nice.

PENNEY: It's changed substantially, actually. And, you know, as I said, the initial effort was really just to clean up what was there. Well, once we started ... you know, we focused first on getting the temporary Market and getting everybody set up. Once that was done and the focus shifted to rehabilitating the original Market building, there began a more intensive and more broad public involvement process. And

the Eastern Market Citizen's [Community] Advisory Committee was the lead on that effort. And, you know, and in all fairness, things had probably not been discussed to the degree that they could have been before and so some issues were reopened. And there was a desire to go a little bit farther and do a little bit more investment. And, frankly, with the level of investment going in in the building, it didn't by comparison seem like so much then to put in a little bit extra. And the money then became available to do a little bit of beautification on top of just the cleaning up of the streetscape. So really, one of the late decisions in the project was to switch from just a regular asphalt street to the stone pavers that are there. And it was one of those decisions that I think many people agonized over and we went back and forth on. And we talked about the danger of utilities coming in and cutting them, which will be a danger, and we do worry about. We looked at how much of the street already needed to be torn up because of the electrical work to accommodate the Market building. And at the end of the day we came to a decision and were able to go ahead and upgrade to that material and I think, by all accounts, it's absolutely beautiful now. It really is. It was a wise investment and I am glad it is the way it went.

JAYAMAHA: Absolutely. In terms of sort of getting back again a little bit sort of to your personal view, being a Hill resident, and also I mean of potentially sort of what you imagine Eastern Market, considering all the work that you personally have put into it and everybody else involved. We have this idea about the second life of the Market, once it moves back, once everybody, the merchants, move back to the main building. Potentially do you see in terms either growth or differences or changes do you have any sort of thoughts about the second life of the Market?

PENNEY: Well I think we're all very excited to see what happens. There was certainly plenty of apprehension to begin with that the spirit of the Market would be lost. That that sort of dark and almost dank atmosphere in the old Market was part of what made it what it is and if it was made too light and too clean and too airy, that somehow people would not feel like it was the same Market that it had been. And with all honesty, when we put the merchants into the temporary Market, many of them really didn't like how bright it was. Now, I think the customers almost universally said, "Yes, this is wonderful, having all this light in here." There was some concern from the butchers, for instance, that they thought "Well, my meat does not look as attractive under all this daylight," and even, "Could the ultra-violet rays be harming the quality of the meat if left too long there?" So, many of these issues that you don't really know how to anticipate how people will react when they get there, it changed, because circumstances were such that people were forced into a situation they didn't have any control over. And now moving back into the Market I think people perhaps are open to some different changes that they may not have been otherwise. So, moving into the Market, I know it will be beautiful. Looking at it from the outside, it's just stunning and it really is breathtaking to look at the refurbishment and the roof improvements and see how it's

coming together so beautifully and I know that inside its going to be every bit as beautiful. So, I don't think there is a single down side to that part of it.

JAYAMAHA: Absolutely. You sort of made a reference about the ultra-violet rays and I did read recently saying that has also been taken into consideration. I think the windows ... there's something with the window panes. Again, I am not too sure how familiar you are with all of that.

PENNEY: I'm not with that, but that makes sense ...

JAYAMAHA: But I think there have been some improvements that have been put in place to accommodate all those concerns. But again, from a little bit about ... sort of from your experience, are there any unique characteristics or some the sort of the pieces that were of historical value that were incorporated into the new design, into the new building? I do have a little bit of awareness, but it would be great if you have any sort of thoughts or insights on that that you could share with us.

PENNEY: The only real involvement I had in talking about the design of the Market was that we talked a lot about the floor plan when we were looking at how to build the temporary Market. And when we talked with the architects and they discussed how difficult it was going to be, because they had already begun the discussions of who got what area and that people were changing configurations. And they explained how difficult that was to negotiate and to barter with each of the merchants because, you know, let's face it, everybody wanted to make sure that they got at least what they have now, as any good business person would. So, we took that and applied that to our design. The one criteria we set very clearly was that the new Market would be as close to the dimensions of the existing Market as possible and everybody would get exactly the same footprint of their market [stall]. The designers had very clear instructions not to give anybody more or less. They were to have exactly the same. Because we didn't want to spend months bartering back and forth with the merchants. As long as everybody got what they had started with, we sort of eliminated the whole process of having to go to them and seek their desires and needs and there was no question about it. So I do understand that in the new Market, the configuration will be slightly different and I think that was a substantial effort for the designers.

JAYAMAHA: I see. And lastly, are there any other thoughts you'd like to share again, both at the personal or professional level in terms of what the Market means for District and for the neighborhood or if you have any other thoughts on that before we wrap up.

PENNEY: Well, there's no question that when the Market burned down, we all learned how important it was, even beyond our neighborhood. And there was so much support and recognition of the need to rebuild the Market from, not just from people from within the city. We got emails from people in other

cities and other states and even other countries, occasionally saying how important it was to see this put back in place as quickly as possible. So, if there was any question about how core the Market was ... is to the fabric of the city, I think we quickly found out that it's every bit as important as anybody would have suspected. You know, I think the fact that we were able to sustain these merchants through this time and still take the time to thoughtfully and carefully restore such an important historic building is really something that I'm proud to be part of and for particularly the Office of Property Management and the Mayor's Office and the decisions that they made to handle it the way it was handled, I just think it was a very admirable. And there was some courageous decisions made and I really applaud those that championed those decisions.

JAYAMAHA: Wonderful. Thank you very much. Thanks so much for your time Ms. Penney and thanks for agreeing to the interview again.

END OF INTERVIEW