



GSA National Capital Region

November 30, 2017

Mr. David Maloney
State Historic Preservation Officer
for the District of Columbia
1100 4th Street SW
Suite E-650
Washington, DC 20024

Attn: Anne Brockett

Re: William Jefferson Clinton (formerly Ariel Rios) Federal Building – WPA Mural

Dear Mr. Maloney:

In September 2007, the U.S. General Services Administration wrote to inform you of our undertaking to respond to concerns about and possibly remove the mural *Dangers of the Mail* by Frank Mechau at the William Jefferson Clinton (formerly Ariel Rios) Federal Building. Complaints regarding the depiction of American Indians and calls for the mural's removal resulted in our initiation of a Section 106 consultation.

After extensive public consultation with parties expressing many concerns from a range of positions, GSA decided to temporarily screen the mural in place while developing and implementing a comprehensive interpretive program that has included all 22 New Deal murals in the building. The three-part program, which was reviewed by the consulting parties, consists of wall-mounted panels adjacent to each of the murals, web content (<http://bit.ly/2B7oa3j>), and regular public tours. The panels were mounted in April 2015 with non-staining reversible adhesive, selected in consultation with your staff. The interpretive program has been successful, in our view, with GSA staff giving 30 tours of the mural in the fiscal year just ended.

Seeking a permanent resolution of the undertaking that addresses the concerns of all consulting parties, GSA has decided to design and install a custom-designed curtain, described below, that would be placed in front of the mural. Therefore, we return to your office with this letter with a more specific and updated refinement of the undertaking definition, which originally envisioned the possible removal of the mural, and we seek your concurrence. The undertaking is the installation of a permanent curtain mounted to a frame around the mural on the flat plaster wall, along with the three-part interpretive program already implemented.

U.S. General Services Administration
301 7th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20407
www.gsa.gov

The curtain installation, unlike the tall free-standing panel screen on the floor of this upper elevator lobby, would reopen the lobby to full pedestrian movement and would not itself affect the reading of the oval shape of the lobby or the view of the paver pattern in the marble floor. The curtain would also improve the experience during building tours by allowing visitors (when the curtain is opened) either to stand back to view the mural in context or to stand closely in front of the mural to examine it.

The proposed curtain, a custom design, would be made of a durable, high-quality, fluid-moving metal mesh material designed to be opened and closed by visitors so that the mural could be viewed along with its pendant mural in the lobby and in the context of the other murals in the building as originally intended. Attached for your review are the fabricator's drawings for the mounting brackets and rods upon which the curtain would hang. The curved wall of the lobby is taken into account by the proposed design. The curtain would be mounted to the flat plaster wall by two custom-fabricated curved rails running the horizontal length of the mural and located above and below the mural frame. The rails would be connected to the wall by three small brackets screwed into the plaster wall. They could easily be removed and the plaster patched should the curtain be removed or replaced in the future.

Suspended between the two rails, the curtain would be composed of two sheets of powder-coated bronze metal mesh. This material would provide the required opacity while still allowing airflow to the mural to avoid the creation of a micro-climate around the mural, which would be harmful to its long-term preservation. The screen curtain would be attached to the top rail by a series of grommets that would allow the curtain to be opened easily by sliding it to either side of the mural. The bottom rail would provide protection for the mural by ensuring that the curtain would not touch or abrade the mural surface when in motion.

GSA believes that this solution is the appropriate measure to take to address the going concerns about the content of the mural while also addressing the equally strong concerns about removing the mural itself from its historic artistic and architectural context. The mural, with the curtain closed as the default position, would be fully screened from the view of employees and visitors who don't wish to see the mural. The mural can continue to be viewed *in situ*, however, by employees or visitors who wish to do so. It can be studied by scholars alongside the building's other WPA murals. The architectural and spatial qualities of the elevator lobby will be retained. The curvature of the lobby wall is taken into account in the design of the curtain rails and the curtain itself is of a material selected for the properties described above. The temporary paneled screen that has awkwardly impeded movement across the lobby and obscured the spatial character of the lobby will be removed. The interpretive panels have been in place for more than two years and have been well received and traffic on our website has increased as a result of the interpretive information placed on it, resulting in a robust tour program by appointment.

We have determined that the undertaking will have no adverse effect on the character-defining features of the Clinton Building and the qualities that qualify it for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The curtain and interpretive panels are fully reversible, are consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, will leave all historic murals in their original locations, and will continue to allow increased public access and interpretive information for the building-wide mural collection.

Please review the attached information about the permanent mural curtain, for which we seek your concurrence with our determination of effect. Following the installation about the curtain, GSA will consider this undertaking to be concluded. Please contact GSA's Regional Fine Arts Officer, Kristen Fusselle, at kristen.fusselle@gsa.gov or 202-573-5626 if you would like additional information to complete your review.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Nancy Witherell", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Nancy Witherell
Regional Historic Preservation Officer

Attachments