



CITY OF NEW YORK
MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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LOWELL D. KERN
Chair

JESSE R. BODINE
District Manager

April 9, 2021
Sarah Carroll, Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
David N. Dinkins Municipal Building, 9th Floor North
1 Centre Street
New York, NY 10007

Re: Rooftop Generator Proposal, Starrett-Lehigh Building, 601 West 26th Street, Manhattan

Dear Chair Carroll:

On the recommendation of its Chelsea Land Use Committee, following a duly noticed public hearing at the Committee's meeting on March 15th, 2021, Manhattan Community Board 4 (MCB4), at its regularly scheduled Full Board meeting on April 7, 2020, voted, by a vote of 38 in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstaining, and 0 present but not eligible to vote, to recommend denial of an application to the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) for the installation of visible mechanical equipment, including a generator, on the 18th floor roof of the Starrett-Lehigh building. The proposed rooftop location is not consistent with the historical design of the building.

Background

The Starrett-Lehigh Building is Chelsea's most prominent 20th-century landmark. Located at 601 West 26th Street, it is an individual New York City landmark within the West Chelsea Historic District. In 2000, the LPC approved a master plan for the installation of mechanical equipment on the roof. The plan allocated space for a generator in a largely view-shielded location on the 18th floor roof, roughly equidistant from the north and south parapets, and immediately west of the 20-story building segment and its water-tank cluster. (The cited floor levels are based on the proposal's building-elevation drawings, as its roof plans appear to be mislabeled.) Unfortunately, the approved master plan drawings are unavailable at LPC due to COVID-19 protection

measures, and any master-plan limitations on the generator height are not known. However, the plan's placement suggests an intent to minimize its visibility.

Description of Proposal

The applicant now proposes to change the location of roof-top equipment. A generator, a load bank, and a conduit would be located to the northeast-side of the 18th floor roof. The generator is over 50 feet long parallel with the north facade, over 17 feet tall, over 28 feet deep, and set back 16 feet from the north parapet. This equipment would be east of three higher water towers and painted a cream color.

According to the applicant, the generator is intended to be used during summer high-energy demand time to take the building off the grid to relieve Con Edison. It would also be used during a blackout. A number of individual generators in the building would be eliminated and consolidated in the new generator. Some of these generators are in the flood plain; many make disruptive noise.

We recommend denial of this proposal to add a generator and other equipment to the 18th floor roof of the Starrett-Lehigh Building on the basis concerns listed below.

Deviation from Original Design Intent

Historically, the building's rooftop equipment, including original water tanks, has been strategically concentrated on the north side of the building's 20th floor roof, visually continuing the three-story vertical emphasis of five paired-window bays on the building's north façade from the 18th to 20th floors, immediately below the tanks. This contained, vertical façade treatment, which contrasts with the building's overwhelmingly horizontal fenestration, occurs again on the south façade for the full height of the building, in east-west alignment with the smaller, upper-floor section on the north. Here, penthouse levels rising above the 20th floor shield the water tanks and other equipment to the north from view. This gives the dominant, flowing horizontality of the rest of the building a clean roofline. Its critically important figure-ground relationship with the open sky is left continuous, like the signature ribbon windows below. This was clearly a fundamental design intention of the original architect. Thankfully, it has been preserved for the ninety years since the building's construction.

Deviation From 2000 Master Plan

According to the applicant's architect, the 2000 master plan approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission called for perpetuation of the above-cited compositional strategy, with the exception of an area of the 19th floor roof to the west of the water-tanks about midway between the north and south façades which was designated for a future generator. The architects could not say what height was allowed for such a generator by the master plan; given its shielded, central location, minimal visibility from ground level was apparently intended. The architect stated that the master plan's generator space was no longer available — for the unconvincing reason that it had been leased to a building tenant.

Negative Impact on Skyline

The applicant constructed a mockup of the envelope for proposed rooftop equipment. Our review of this rooftop mockup finds that the proposed construction would be clearly visible from both north and south; see photos of views from Eleventh Avenue at West 28th and West 29th Streets; Eleventh Avenue between West 29th and 30th Streets between Eleventh and Twelfth; and West 24th Street between Eleventh and Twelfth Avenues. The mockup can also be seen from the West Side Highway, the High Line, and the Hudson River Park. This visibility would not be mitigated by a background of roof bulkheads or taller neighboring buildings; it would unacceptably detract from the building's originally intended fluid skyline.

Necessity Concerns

The applicant's architect stated that the proposed generator and load bank would support not just code-required emergency systems but operational continuity for certain tenants, and would consolidate generators currently distributed throughout the building, to address flood plain and noise issues. We note that this would also free up rentable floor area. We note that some of these are elective considerations of profitability rather than true need, and do not justify the adverse visual impact of a rooftop generator with a profile over seventeen feet tall and fifty feet long. The generator's function could be accommodated within the building below roof level.

MCB4 Recommendation

MCB4 recommends denial of this application and urges the applicant to pursue a less intrusive solution. We suggest locating equipment within the building below roof level. MCB4 has been pleased to work with the applicant on a number of applications and has been impressed with the applicant's respectful approaches to preserve the Starrett-Lehigh Building's historic integrity. We look forward to reviewing a revised solution for the generator and related equipment and ask LPC for the opportunity to do so.

Sincerely,



Lowell D. Kern
Chair
Manhattan Community Board 4



Betty Mackintosh
Co-chair
Chelsea Land Use Committee



Paul Devlin
Co-chair
Chelsea Land Use Committee

Enclosure

Photos of mock-up of rooftop generator at Starrett-Lehigh Building, 601 West 26th Street



West 28th and 11th Avenue



West 29th and 11th Avenue



Eleventh Avenue between West 29th and 30th Streets



West 24th Street between 11th and 12th Avenue