



CITY OF NEW BEDFORD

JONATHAN F. MITCHELL, MAYOR

July 29, 2025

By Email: paul.walden@pbrb.gov

Paul Walden

Executive Director, Public Buildings Reform Board

1800 F Street, NW

Washington, DC 20405

Re: New Bedford Customs House

Dear Director Walden:

Last week my staff received a "Google alert" about a press release from the Public Buildings Review Board announcing that the Board had scheduled a hearing tomorrow in Boston to discuss the potential closure of the United States Customs House in New Bedford, a facility that has served Greater New Bedford for 190 years. The Customs House is among six buildings in Massachusetts that are under consideration for closure, the others of which are in the Boston area. The press release did not offer a reason for the Customs House's inclusion on the list.

Given the lack of adequate notice, the remoteness of the hearing from New Bedford, and the preliminary nature of the hearing, my attendance, along with that of various stakeholders in the facility, is impractical. Without knowing precisely why PBRB is considering the Customs House's closure, I submit this letter which explains in broad terms why it should remain open. I presume that if the building is not removed from the potential closure list, there will be a fair opportunity for the City and regional stakeholders to be heard on the matter.

New Bedford is the urban hub of a region of approximately 250,000 residents with extensive federal interests. Most significantly, the Port of New Bedford is America's highest grossing commercial fishing port and the epicenter of commercial fishing on the East Coast, with five times the landings of the next largest port. New Bedford also is home to the largest cluster of seafood processors in America. Together these two industries make New Bedford a significant player in America's food supply, and there are hundreds of businesses here that are subject to direct federal regulation. The scale of this activity has grown in recent years, as the East Coast's fishing industry continues to consolidate here. That is why the possible relocation of NOAA personnel from across New England to New Bedford has been under active discussion, which would ultimately result in a larger federal workforce here.

NOAA is hardly the only federal agency present in New Bedford. Because of the intensity of maritime activity in the Port, the Coast Guard and the Army Corps of Engineers have offices here. The Port's emergence as a leader in the offshore wind industry implicates other agencies with maritime responsibilities, particularly the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management. More than twenty New Bedford seafood processors are subject to USDA oversight, and Customs and Border Protection is responsible for cargo entering the port, along with the operation of the City's foreign trade zone. Moreover, like other population centers, many thousands of residents in Greater New Bedford rely on Social Security, Medicare and other benefits. The Internal Revenue Service and the Drug Enforcement Administration also have offices in the City.

Most of the federal presence in New Bedford is housed in the City's two federal buildings: the Hastings Keith Federal Building and the Customs House. Despite the growing need to enlarge NOAA's presence in New Bedford, in the last year the federal government has identified *both* buildings for closure. The General Service's Administration has proposed to close the Hastings Keith Federal Building on the grounds that it requires extensive renovations, for which funding is not available.

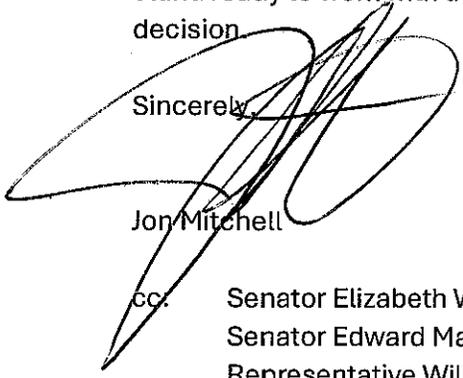
While we continue to disagree with GSA's conclusions about the Keith Building, the Customs House is a different story. For starters, it was entirely renovated in the last decade. Unlike federal facilities of similar vintage, it is now as good as new. The building also is architecturally and historically significant. Designed by Robert Mills, the architect of the Washington Monument, the Customs House was built by the Jackson Administration and originally served New Bedford's whaling industry at its height. It is situated in the Whaling Historic National Park, next to the site of the recruiting station of the famed Massachusetts 54th Infantry Regiment.

The closure of both of our federal buildings would have significant consequences in our region. Moving federal agencies into disparate privately owned buildings could impede their ability to interact with one another, and thereby reduce the collective efficiency of their operations. It also could inhibit public access to federal services, compared to a one-stop arrangement at a centralized location. Removing personnel from a downtown building with walkable access to retailers and restaurants could diminish the facility's economic benefits. And the shuttering of a city's federal building – much less both of them – would represent a loss of prestige to the city.

At a time when trust in government, particularly the federal government, is arguably at an all-time low, reducing the federal government's connection to the residents is about the last thing the federal government should be doing in a region that is not part of a major metropolitan area. That the federal government is proposing to eliminate both of New Bedford's federal buildings at once is difficult to justify as a cost-saving measure, and it runs counter to the needs of effective federal governance and the City's interests.

It is not evident to us what weight, if any, the PBRB gave to these considerations. Nevertheless, we stand ready to work with the Board and the state's Congressional delegation to arrive at the right decision.

Sincerely,



Jon Mitchell

cc. Senator Elizabeth Warren
Senator Edward Markey
Representative William Keating
Greater New Bedford state legislative delegation
New Bedford City Council