

USN Text Amendment Hearing
DC Zoning Commission
January 6, 2011
Testimony by Shalom Baranes, FAIA

Good Evening. My name is Shalom Baranes and my firm has been working with Akridge for the past several years as the architect for the air rights project over the railway tracks.

I have to say that this is probably the most complex and challenging project we've ever undertaken here in the District. From an urban design standpoint, the project offers an extraordinary opportunity to knit together several neighborhoods that have been severed from each other for the past century. The railroad tracks and the H Street overpass have separated the North Capitol Street neighborhood from the emerging H Street NE neighborhood, while creating a pedestrian no man's land along H Street.

This project will populate both sides of this stretch of H Street with a variety of uses, including retail, residential and commercial, making the stroll east of N Capitol Street a much more pleasant urban experience. Additionally, this project will also make Union Station completely accessible from the north, allowing direct access to the retail and the trains from H Street. This will ensure the economic viability of the station as both a transportation and retail hub.

The key to this type of large scale development in the middle of the city is that it be designed in a way that duplicates the existing grain, or scale, of the neighborhood. Doing so involves developing the site with a series of uses, and with separate moderately sized buildings rather than very large, deep buildings measuring over one million sf each. This type of mixed use development requires a network of open spaces for both vehicles and pedestrians across the site, and if one is to achieve the appropriate density, it also then requires designing buildings with a reasonable number of habitable floors with natural light. This means measuring building heights from the top of the platform above the railroad tracks, and not from the dark regions below the street levels.

The proposed zoning amendments will essentially allow building measurements to be taken from the ground floor of each building, just as they are everywhere else in the city. Standing on a street or sidewalk anywhere in the vicinity of this project, a pedestrian will experience the same height and bulk he or she might encounter anywhere else in the center city. Buildings here will feel as if they're gradually rising with the street topography. This is how many of the buildings in this neighborhood were measured and constructed for many years, with no apparent detriment to the horizontality of the skyline. Wisconsin Avenue south of the Cathedral, Sixteenth Street near Meridian Hill and North Capitol Street near the Old Soldier's Home are three of many locations in the city where we see streets with similar slopes to H Street and buildings whose heights mirror the topography.

While providing a backdrop to Union Station, I don't believe buildings constructed over the railroad tracks will be experienced as part of the federal ensemble of Columbus Circle. It will be important that as seen from the Circle, these buildings appear simple and not overly articulated in their massing. They will be sited a minimum of 450 feet back from Union Station's primary façade and as such, will be experienced more as part of the distant H Street neighborhood than as part of Columbus Circle. As the public approvals process is described in the zoning proposal, these are all design considerations that will be reviewed in great detail as the project advances.

A mixed use development over the exposed 14 acre railway yard behind Union Station will heal a severe wound in the center of our city. We have an unprecedented opportunity here to reinforce established neighborhoods in a manner that reflects the most progressive planning principles of our time.....including stitching together existing neighborhoods, creating active streets inviting to pedestrians, and developing a model project with regard to sustainability and transit oriented development principles. This project will require that we design buildings which exhibit best-in-class characteristics with regard to design excellence in both architecture and engineering.

Creating a zoning district that specifically addresses the unique aspects of this site by allowing some buildings to rise to the heights proposed in this amendment will create the flexibility required to design an architecturally distinguished project incorporating adequate open space. I therefore urge you to adopt the amendment as envisioned by the Office of Planning. This concludes my comments and I'd like to thank you for this opportunity to address the Commission.

ZONING COMMISSION
District of Columbia

CASE NO. 09-21

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EXHIBIT NO. 30