

**ZONING COMMISSION FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
PUBLIC HEARING FOR THE PURPOSE OF CONSIDERING:**

Case No. 09-21 (Text and Map Amendment to
Create and Implement the Union Station North District)
January 6, 2010

Statement of William Wright

My name is Bill Wright, and I live on 12th Place NW. Thank you for considering my testimony, which is based on research for my dissertation about the terminal's place in Washington.

"Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" features the most common perspective of Union Station: Jimmy Stewart looks from the building towards the Capitol. Yet the terminal's architects, its neighbors, its protectors, and millions of others have taken a broader view, one that recognizes the station as the heart of the Capitol complex's vital northern border.

I urge you to **protect a century of work by retaining specific height limits** for the air rights buildings. The proposed policy is right to call for development sensitive to its surroundings, but that is not enough. Amorphous language dramatically increases the chances that generic office buildings will lurk behind the terminal, rather like teenagers fooling around in the back of a family portrait. Please **eliminate any possibility that outsized development will permanently deface one of Washington's defining places.**

Union Station helped make the capital, in the words of *Harper's Magazine*, "worthy of the nation." Because the railroad dominated 19th century travel, a terminal highlighted a city's economic, cultural, and political prominence.

In the late 1800s, Washington had two inadequate stations. Too small to serve large numbers of passengers, they hurt the city's economy. They also depressed travelers with their cramped interiors and ugly surroundings: billboards, second-class hotels, and saloons.

Dramatic improvement came from the Union Station Act, which **balanced the interests of the railroads, Congress, and the community.** When the terminal opened in 1907, increased capacity meant more jobs, and visitors now had the inspiring welcome experienced by Mr. Smith.

Planners, railroad engineers, and government officials integrated the station into the neighborhood by:

- **Limiting its elevation** so it deferred to the Capitol;
- **Protecting residents** by controlling commercial expansion into adjacent areas;
- **Defining a clear northern boundary** through the Post Office and the Marshall Building; and
- **Preserving impressive views** by establishing Columbus Plaza and extending the Capitol Grounds.

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Recent changes have restored Union Station's place in Washington. The 1988 rehabilitation made it again a glorious gateway to the capital and a center of community life. It fueled the economy by encouraging office and retail activity that does not diminish the terminal.

"Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" ends before Jimmy Stewart heads from the Capitol for his trip back to the Midwest, so moviegoers never see how beautifully Union Station closes the area. But millions have, and **it would be tragic if the proposed amendment permits out-of-scale commercial construction to damage forever this unparalleled scene.**

Thank you.