June 29, 2022

National Capital Planning Commission
401 9th Street, NW
Suite 500N
Washington, DC 20004

Testimony Regarding Washington Union Station Expansion Project
NCPC file number 7746

The Coalition for Smarter Growth is the leading organization in the Washington DC region dedicated to making the case for smart growth. The mission of our 25-year-old organization is to advocate for walkable, bikeable, and transit-oriented communities as the most sustainable and equitable way for the Washington, DC region to grow and provide opportunities for all. We’ve recently been awarded the Urban Land Institute’s Changemaker Award, and have been recognized by the Council of Governments with their Regional Partnership Award and three times by the Washington Business Journal in their Power100 most influential players in the region.

We’ve partnered with other organizations in advocating for major expansion in frequent intercity rail service, and have long monitored the planning for the future of historic Union Station. When we last commented on the FRA’s plans for Union Station in January 2020, we affirmed our strong support for expanding rail service and the station, but shared significant concerns about the proposed retention of thousands of above ground parking spaces which undermined the entire design and facility. Therefore, we are very pleased to see that the proposal for 1600 spaces has been reduced to about 400 to 700. We urge selection of the lower end of the range, since the focus for this downtown station should be on transit, pedestrian and bicycle access, as well as pick-up and drop-off.

We are especially pleased to see the removal of the above ground parking structure and the placement of the parking and much of the pick-up and drop-off at the lowest underground level. This opens up the opportunity for the amazing train concourse with much improved access to the trains, bus station, and pick-up and drop-off. We approve of the effort to bring good natural light into the facility and like the north-south green axis through the Burnham Place development and the integration with the new H Street bridge.

We like the location and design of the single level bus station, and we concur with the vehicle access points. We ask you to ensure that the ramp on G Street is designed to have minimal footprint and impact on the pedestrian environment, and that the vehicle access point from First Street NE does not endanger ped/bike access along the sidewalks and bike trail – it likely requires a signal.

We ask that you ensure that the upper east-west aligned pick-up and drop-off roadway allows for safe ped/bike access across the roadway through well-marked crossings, traffic calming, and
on scene safety monitors. Bicycle access to the station is important and the plan should include a well-located, secure, modern, and easy to use bike station similar to those in Europe that can accommodate thousands of bicycles.

Please ensure that there is good access from both H Street and Columbus Circle to high-frequency local bus service with stops positioned to minimize walking distance into the station.

We ask that you restore seating to both the Main Hall of the historic station and to the new concourses. People need comfortable places to sit while awaiting their trains and buses, and good seating contributes to a positive experience while using transit -- helping rail service compete with driving.

Finally, please ensure that the historic Main Hall remains an active part of the rail service operations. It must not become like a museum. Ideally, with the continued use of Columbus Circle, improved bike/pedestrian and direct bus and Metrorail transit access, as well as the foreseen growth in train ridership we will see full use of both the new and old concourses.

Thank you for your attention to this 100-year plan for our region’s premier transportation hub. We are excited by the vision presented to you in this updated plan and urge your approval with appropriate recommendations for the issues we have highlighted.

Stewart Schwartz
Executive Director