Dear Director Marootian,

On January 9, 2019, at a duly noticed, regularly scheduled monthly meeting of ANC 6C, with a quorum of 6 out of 6 commissioners and the public present, the Commission voted 6-0 to transmit this letter expressing our disappointment with Union Station Redevelopment Corporation’s failure to take meaningful action to mitigate traffic backups (and related safety concerns) associated with the Union Station pickup/drop-off lanes.

As you recall, ANC 6C first wrote to DDOT on this overall topic in May 2017. You are also aware that we designated Commissioner Eckenwiler (6C04) as the ANC’s point of contact, as well as of the two meetings he attended with DDOT staff in 2018 to discuss our concerns and potential methods for remediation. At the first of those two meetings, Commissioner Eckenwiler noted the need for improvements in two general areas, 1) the physical infrastructure (signage, road-surface striping, flexposts, Park-It wheel stops, etc.) and 2) traffic management and direction practices by USRC and its lessee.

This letter focuses exclusively on the second of these topics. As was made clear at the March 2018 meeting, USRC’s efforts at the time to manage traffic so as to eliminate chokepoints and reduce backups into Columbus Circle were unacceptably feeble. At many busy times of day, there were no staff outside directing traffic, and the two center lanes (intended primarily for buses) in front of the station were not being used as a safety valve/overflow at times of peak congestion.

Unfortunately, USRC’s efforts almost a year later remain subpar. Even when staff are physically present outside, they often provide little or no guidance to arriving drivers at the key chokepoint where the lanes diverge. (At times, they can be seen conversing idly with each other as backups mount.) We appreciate that these staff lack any ability to force noncompliant drivers to follow their direction; however, the more fundamental problem appears to be that staff often give no such directions in the first place.
Management of the drop-off lanes—and, indeed, of the bus lanes when used for overflow traffic—also remains unsatisfactory even when directives are given. Our May 2017 letter noted the tendency of arriving drivers to stop at the east end of the lanes instead of proceeding to available drop-off points in the middle or western sections. In our view, USRC’s outdoor staff do not work consistently to push such drivers further west, with congestion and backups into the Circle recurring as a result.

We see similar problems in the overflow use of the bus lanes. Drivers should be encouraged to treat those lanes as they would an airport drop-off zone, i.e., right lane to stop and discharge or pick up, and left lane for through traffic. Unfortunately, USRC staff often make no effort at all to guide these drivers, with the result that many drivers stop in the left lane even when there are clear spaces ahead to the right. This substantially reduces the overflow lanes’ usefulness in reducing backups.

ANC 6C has expressed its dissatisfaction to the head of USRC, Beverley Swaim-Staley, but found her unwilling to acknowledge the extent of the problem or USRC’s ability to better perform in addressing these longstanding concerns. Among other things, we note that the cell-phone area for longer-term waiting in the station’s garage off H St. is not at all communicated to passengers and drivers. (Ms. Swaim-Staley has noted more than once that this information is on the station’s website. We respectfully disagree that this mechanism puts drivers on notice at all.) If USRC hopes to prevent pickup drivers—whether private or for hire—from waiting in front of the station, it needs to convey that clearly to drivers through signage, including directional signs in the lanes in front and at the H St. garage entrance.

We re-raise these concerns for several reasons. Most importantly, the chronic congestion in the drop-off lanes endangers public safety in multiple ways. Our May 2017 letter explained the hazards to pedestrians (using obstructed crosswalks) and cyclists (prevented from using the westbound Columbus Circle bike lane by backed-up drivers blocking the intersection). Over the past 20 months, we have also seen repeated instances of ambulances and fire engines being stuck in traffic and substantially delayed in reaching the front of the station because of congestion. In addition, we remain concerned about the box-blocking behavior by drivers turning left off the Circle, which impedes the safe and free flow of traffic on public streets.

Accordingly, we urge you to take up these concerns with USRC to impress on them the need for more energetic and rigorous traffic management efforts. In the meantime, we look forward to working with you and your staff on short-term improvements to the physical infrastructure under DDOT’s control.

Thank you for giving great weight to the views of ANC 6C.

Sincerely,

Karen Wirt
Chair, ANC 6C