Statement of Commissioner Christine Healey, 6C01
On behalf of Advisory Neighborhood Commission 6C
Concerning Washington Union Station Expansion Project – NCPC File Number 7746
National Capital Planning Commission
January 9, 2020

Commissioners, my name is Christine Healey. I am an Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner for 6C01 and I am here to speak on behalf of ANC 6C. Our commission covers the neighborhoods of northwest Capitol Hill, Near Northeast, and NoMa. The historic Washington Union Station is a crown jewel within ANC 6C. Those of us who live in ANC 6C have an intimate familiarity with this landmark as we walk to the Metro Red Line, drive around Columbus Circle, bicycle on the Metropolitan Branch Trail, or catch an Amtrak train to Philadelphia, a Bolt bus to New York City, or a MARC train to BWI.

ANC 6C is well aware that Union Station is an extremely important multimodal transportation hub, not just for the residents of ANC 6C but also for Metropolitan Washington, and indeed the entire mid-Atlantic region. Because of our daily experience with the station, we are also well aware that the station does not now provide an optimum experience for Amtrak passengers or other transit users. ANC 6C supports expanding and improving the station. At the same time, we want to ensure that the ultimate project succeeds in providing a world-class transportation center worthy of the nation’s capital and the residents of Washington, D.C. It is highly important to ANC 6C that Union Station be well-integrated with the nearby neighborhoods, and its expansion not cause undue burdens on the residents, businesses or planned development in the area.

The stated goals of this proposed multi-billion dollar project which you are considering today, proposed by the Union Station Redevelopment Corporation (USRC) and Amtrak, and led by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), are to improve the station’s functionality, enhance the customer experience, and meet increased demand for transportation services. In addition, the project is supposed to include preservation and maintenance of the historic building as well as sustain the station’s economic viability and its integration with adjacent neighborhoods, businesses and planned development.

The project has been a long time in the making, and it will probably be a long time before it is finished. By one count, planning has been underway for more than ten years. The Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Section 106 process alone has been going on for more than four years. It is difficult to remain focused on a project over such a long period of
time, but ANC 6C and individual commissioners have weighed in with objections and grave concerns during the process, most recently through letters sent in 2018 and 2019.

In weighing in on the proposed project, we have been frustrated by the lack of underlying data available in the process even while determinations are seemingly being made. For example, the implications for the narrow streets of the nearby historic district and the traffic flow issues are dependent upon a traffic impact study, something we are told will not be made public until the draft EIS is released, but we question why this is being held back given its criticality at this stage of the process. In addition, Power Point slides, including those since November 2019, are not self-evident or self-explanatory and do not indicate the underlying information and analysis that has been taking place to produce them. We do, however, appreciate that the USRC reached out to ANC 6C in December to open a dialogue and we hope this will be a fruitful avenue of communication.

ANC 6C has had grave concerns that the preliminary Action Alternatives developed by the FRA in the EIS process would significantly and needlessly harm the station and the surrounding neighborhoods. With respect to these preliminary Action Alternatives, we did not see any that met the goal of a successful integration of the expanded station with either the adjacent established neighborhoods or the planned development of the Railroad Air Rights known as the Burnham Place project. While Preferred Alternative A-C released in November addresses some integration concerns for the three established nearby neighborhoods over the earlier alternatives, it still falls short of adequately addressing our concerns. Moreover, Preferred Alternative A-C is emphatically opposed by the sponsor of the proposed new nearby neighborhood of Burnham Place.

Union Station is in the center of the District in a vibrant and growing urban neighborhood, yet even the new Preferred Alternative A-C appears to place too great an emphasis on accommodating private automobile usage over local mass transit, walking and biking. It also significantly overbuilds dedicated parking for intercity and charter busses during periods when they could best be stored or located elsewhere. This is most obvious in the planned parking garage and bus facility. Other major Amtrak stations are reported to be doing without customer parking. The need to accommodate parking and bus slips at Washington Union Station should be carefully scrutinized to ensure that the projected need is rigorously derived, especially as the construction of an unnecessarily large above-ground parking garage/bus facility would sacrifice the opportunity to develop vibrant public spaces on the site, even if the garage were seemingly “masked” by development in the potential federal air-rights development space.

Furthermore, we have been and are very concerned about the issues of station access and circulation for private cars, for-hire vehicles, and local, charter and intercity buses at the expanded Union Station. As anyone approaching Union Station by vehicle today knows, station access and circulation is already a serious problem. This is not just an inconvenience for drivers; it detracts from our efforts to build a livable, walkable community. Whatever alternative goes forward needs to incorporate realistic pick-up and drop-off locations. Our concern has been that the expanded Union Station would be surrounded by a snarl of cars and buses, creating a barrier to access for the residents of the surrounding neighborhoods and leading to an increase in traffic
on the narrow streets of the Capitol Hill historic district. Again, the ANC’s concerns are not adequately addressed by Preferred Alternative A-C.

At this inflection point for this critically important project, we urge the Commission in your review to emphasize the priorities of enhancing a historic landmark, creating active and well-designed public spaces, and reducing dependencies on private vehicles.

Union Station is and should be a national gateway to Washington, D.C. This is not just an investment in infrastructure but an opportunity to create both a great public space that people will want to visit as well as a world class transportation center that can be a model for the country and the world. We urge you to recognize the potential for this project and to guide its development at this crucial time. Thank you.