

**NATIONAL CAPITAL PLANNING COMMISSION**  
**THURSDAY, JANUARY 6, 2011**  
**PROPOSED ACTION ITEM CP19: Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital:**  
**District Elements – Comprehensive Plan Amendment Act of 2010**

Statement of William Wright

My name is Bill Wright, and I live on 12<sup>th</sup> Place NW. Thank you for considering my testimony, which is based on research for my dissertation on 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. They know the station is the heart of the Capitol complex's vital northern border.

By allowing buildings to lurk behind the terminal like teenagers fooling around in the back of a family portrait, the proposed Comprehensive Plan amendment (CH-2.1.7) will damage a century of work. The Commission should remain opposed to the amendment, which will **permanently undermine one of Washington's defining places.**

Union Station helped fulfill a longstanding goal to make the capital, in the words of *Harper's Magazine*, “worthy of the nation.” Because the railroad dominated 19<sup>th</sup> century travel, a terminal highlighted a city's economic, cultural, and political prominence.

In the late 1800s, Washington had two embarrassing stations. Both hurt the city's economy because they were too small to serve large numbers of travelers. They also damaged its reputation: they had cramped interiors and were surrounded by billboards, second-class hotels, and saloons.

Dramatic improvement came from the Union Station Act, which **balanced the interests of business, Congress, and the community.** When the terminal opened in 1907, increased capacity boosted the city's economy, and visitors now gained, as one guidebook wrote, “a proper attitude towards the importance of Washington.”

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

- **Limiting its elevation** so it deferred to the Capitol;
- **Establishing impressive views between two landmarks** by creating Columbus Plaza and extending the Capitol Grounds;
- **Protecting residents by controlling commercial expansion** into adjacent areas; and
- **Defining the northern boundary** with the Post Office and the Marshall Building.

Recent changes have restored Union Station's place in Washington. The 1988 rehabilitation made it again a glorious gateway to the capital, an important federal element, 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 **the proposed Comprehensive Plan amendment would have the tragic effect of permitting out-of-scale commercial construction to damage this unparalleled scene.**