

**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 at 2253 12th Place NW. Thank you for considering my testimony, which comes from 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 designers, its neighbors, its protectors, and the millions who pass by have a broader view. The station is at the heart of the Capitol complex's compelling northern border.

By allowing new buildings to lurk behind the terminal like teenagers fooling around in the back of a family portrait, the proposed map and text amendments will damage the work of more than a century, permanently undermining the respect and inspiration offered by 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 19th century travel, a terminal was a city's “hallmark,” highlighting its economic, cultural, and political prominence.

In the late 1800s, Washington had two small, embarrassing stations. Both hurt the city's economy through their inability to serve large numbers of travelers. They also damaged its reputation: surrounding them were second-class hotels, saloons, and billboards.

The solution was the Union Station Act, which balanced the interests of the railroads, Congress, and the community. When the terminal opened in 1907, increased capacity boosted the city's economy and gave visitors, as one guidebook wrote, “a proper attitude towards the importance of Washington.”

Architects Daniel Burnham and Company, railroad engineers, Congress, and city officials also recognized the building was part of a neighborhood by:

- Limiting the station's elevation to ensure it deferred to the Capitol.
- Establishing Columbus Plaza and extending the Capitol Grounds to allow impressive views between two landmarks.
- Protecting residents by limiting commercial expansion into adjacent areas.
- Using the Post Office and the Marshall Building to define a northern boundary.

Recent changes have restored initial hopes for Union Station. The 1988 rehabilitation made it again a glorious gateway to Washington and a center of community life and inspired new office space that strengthens the economy without diminishing the terminal.

“Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” ends before Jimmy Stewart heads from the Capitol for his trip back to the Midwest, before the audience can see how beautifully Union Station closes the area and a trip to Washington. It would be a tragedy if the current proposal allows commercial construction to deface a scene that has inspired millions.