ADVISORY NEIGHBORHOOD COMMISSION 3E
TENLEYTOWN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY PARK FRIENDSHIP HEIGHTS
c/o Lisner-Louise-Dickson-Hurt Home 5425 Western Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20015
www.anc3e.org

Resolution Regarding Historic Landmark Application #06-03:
Western Bus Garage 5230 Wisconsin Avenue, NW, Square 1657, Lot 24

WHEREAS:

1. Background – Historic Preservation in the ANC 3E Boundaries

We share the goal of preserving key elements of the historic fabric of our community. We are concerned, however, that the process of doing so sometimes, intentionally or unintentionally can stifle the goal of meeting the needs of future generations and can be a vehicle used to promote an agenda that is hostile to meaningful development of an area that we believe could benefit from such development.

In recent years, ANC 3E has expressed concern that historic preservation considerations have been elevated in such a way that they unduly drive planning for key infrastructure investments. We have on several occasions observed that the mere fact of application appeared to be treated as de facto designation, resulting in deference to the preservation as a value overriding all other values in the planning process.

2. The Western Bus Garage In That Context

In August of 2005 the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) issued an RFP to redevelop the Western Bus Garage. The Tenleytown Historical Society (THS) had been in existence since 1988 and, to its credit, had sponsored numerous applications and conducted various surveys of sites in the area of potential historical significance as of the issuance of the WMATA RFP in 2005. It had, as of that time, taken no steps to designate the Western Bus Garage for 17 years. Three months after the WMATA RFP was issued, THS filed a landmark application for historic designation of the Western Bus Garage on November 8, 2005. There is thus at least an appearance that the application in this case may in part be motivated by a desire to forestall the mixed use development of a site that sits on the same block as a Metro Stop.

3. The Western Bus Garage Application on the Merits

The application appears to be grounded fundamentally on three claims. The first relates to the site's long-time role in the transportation network. The second relates to the architect. The third seems to relate to the quality of the brickwork.

Transportation

It is the case that the site has been used for transportation purposes for some time. But it is hard to see the relevance of the fact that it was used as a streetcar barn when nothing remains of the street car barn that predates the current bus garage. In the meantime, the block itself and surrounding area will remain central to transportation uses regardless of what is done with the garage itself as there is a Metro stop there and it is a central area used by many buses serving both Maryland and the District.

Moreover, while the application goes to great lengths in describing the evolution of transportation uses at this site and in the Wisconsin Avenue corridor dating back to 1862 ,if approved this application could end or severely limit that evolution.

Indeed, one thing we are learning is that the kind of aboveground bus garages built in much of the 20th Century, like this one, can create health hazards with diesel fumes spreading into nearby neighborhoods. Underground bus garages with air filtration systems are safer and healthier. . Similarly, the noise from public address systems can be contained in an underground garage, but can be a nuisance in above ground ones as it has been for neighbors of the Western Bus Garage for years. Yet we have heard from individuals with knowledge about the designation process and WMATA's construction needs that designation could make it impossible or cost-prohibitive to convert the current garage to an underground facility if the site is designated. It would be a shame if in an effort to preserve a purportedly historic façade we took a step that could make it harder to achieve a healthier transportation configuration based on what we know today compared to what we knew when the Western Bus Garage was built

The Architect

Even according to the landmark application the architect of this project – Arthur Heaton-- designed hundreds of buildings and homes throughout Washington DC, in particular, the National Geographic Society, and many of these buildings are still standing. It is clear that this project does not reflect his finest work. In any case, again according to the landmark application, significant irreversible alterations have already been made to the bus garage.

The Facade

The application devotes much of its emphasis to the simple brick façade, but at base a simple brick façade is still just a brick façade. There is nothing about the brick used that is particularly noteworthy. Similar brick to what was used here is still commonly available and frequently used in new construction. In any case, even if there were a desire to preserve the brickwork façade on the 44th Street side of the structure, that façade could easily be incorporated into an eventual mixed use development on the block and we would encourage a developer to do so. The application points out that other walls of the building were party walls, and admits that the front façade is the only architecturally interesting aspect of the building.

4. Future Needs

This Western Bus Garage sits adjacent to an important commercial corridor (and effectively on top of a Metro stop) and in an area in which, in recent years, significantly greater development has occurred just north of the District border in Maryland than within the District. This site should be the subject of significant development to serve the community and City. Indeed, its current limited use makes no sense and creating impediments to the evolution of the site and surrounding area makes less.

As an example, the smaller lots in the hundred block of Wisconsin Avenue immediately to the north of the lot containing the Western Bus garage are assessed by the District of Columbia Office of Tax and Revenue at $166,850,000.00 (Chevy Chase Pavilion, 95,644 SF) and $91,880,400.00 (Mazza Gallery, 83294 SF) and the Western Bus Garage (164,140 SF) lot as currently used is only assessed at $35,039,870 and in addition to providing lower property tax revenue to the District is providing no sales tax revenue and also not contributing to transit ridership.

Furthermore preserving the party walls around the bus garage will preclude restoring the visual right of way of Ingomar Street through this site and hamper any attempt in a potential future development to site any new buildings in such a manner that the visual impacts can be minimized as much as possible,

particularly to residents of Ingomar Street or those approaching the site on Ingomar Street. Preserving the exterior walls also reduces the likelihood that a direct route through the lot to the Jenifer Street entrance to the Friendship Heights Metro will be possible and makes it more likely that the approach along Wisconsin Avenue will continue to be a visually unattractive area.

Additionally the usage of this site as a transportation facility for more than one hundred years makes it likely that any redevelopment of the site will necessitate substantial and expensive environmental remediation and combined with the preservation of the bus garage might render this site prohibitively expensive to redevelop. WMATA has also budgeted $50,000,000 to modernize the bus garage, money that would be better spent on a brand new underground garage at this site or another site but WMATA has not budgeted funds to acquire an alternate location for a new bus garage.

A well thought out plan could result in a much better use of the land in this area, including strengthening its place in the 21st Century transportation network for our City and region and could strengthen the economy and quality of life for residents in our area and City. Rigid invocation of historic preservation concerns effectively to save a wall of one of many buildings designed by a prolific architect, could stymie the realization of such a possibility.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT:

1. ANC 3E objects to the designation of the Western Bus Garage as an individual landmark. As indicated above, the justifications in the application are weak. At best the structure could be a contributing building, were it part of an historic district, but virtually al lof its context has been destroyed, and the rationale for its designation does not rise to the level of individual landmark.

2. ANC 3E would not object to a designation limited *strictly* to the façade on 44th Street. Although the case for designation of the façade is, as noted, relatively weak, we believe it is at least colorable. Moreover, we believe that preserving the façade would serve the stated goals of preservationists while not unduly hindering the remediation and renovation of this site to serve the broader community's goals.

3. ANC 3E urges specifically that the hearing on designating the building as a landmark be postponed until there is a more defined development concept for the site, as is typically the case with landmark applications. Further, even if the building as a whole is designated, and it should not be, the ANC urges that the HPRB take into account in any future considerations relating to the site that importance the site can play in the local economy and allow for substantial deference to any planned use of the site that preserves the façade on 44th street and that contributes to strengthening and making more neighborhood friendly the reliance on the area in general as a transportation hub.

4. ANC 3E urges generally that for future projects the HPRB should make clear to the SHPO and its staff, as well as relevant agencies, that a mere application for designation should not be equated with designation nor does it mean that all elements of that application are of equal merit or supportable. Further, efforts should be made in the planning for important infrastructure projects not only to preserve buildings and site plans of a certain age, but to balance the imperatives of historic preservation with the needs of future generations.

ANC 3E approved this resolution at its meeting on September 13, 2012, which was properly noticed and at which a quorum was present. The resolution was approved by a vote of 4-0-0. Commissioners Jonathan Bender, Matthew Frumin, Tom Quinn and Sam Serebin were present.

ANC 3E
By Matthew Frumin, Chairperson