VIA OVERNIGHT MAIL

October 3, 2007

Ms. Amanda Burden, Chair
City Planning Commission
22 Reade Street
New York, NY 10007-1216

Dear Chair Burden and Members of the Commission:

On behalf of the New York Building Congress, please accept this letter in lieu of testimony at the October 3 City Planning Commission public hearing on Columbia University’s proposal to establish a new special zoning district, the Special Manhattanville Mixed-Use District, and change the underlying zoning from manufacturing districts to mixed-use districts in a portion of West Harlem (“Manhattanville Proposal” or “Proposal”).

The Building Congress is the City’s largest and most diverse coalition serving the design, construction and real estate industry, involving 1,500 members from 400 constituent organizations. Part of our mission is to evaluate major government initiatives and promote productive capital spending. Our members are keenly interested in well-planned development and related mass transit investments that improve New York’s economic health and quality of life.

New York City has long enjoyed its status as the business and intellectual capital, drawing the brightest, most skilled people from all over the world who want to live and work here. With the increasing popularity of other cities, like London and Shanghai, however, New York faces growing competition for attracting the talent upon which our economy largely depends. To maintain its competitive edge, New York needs to ensure that it offers the best infrastructure, services, cultural facilities, and education and institutional resources. Columbia University’s Manhattanville Proposal significantly furthers steps toward this goal.

For over 250 years, Columbia has been a valuable asset to New York, contributing substantially to the City’s intellectual, cultural and economic vitality. One of the most esteemed academic institutions in the world, Columbia attracts the highest-caliber faculty members and students, conducts groundbreaking research in science, medicine and the arts, and provides New Yorkers with important community health care, education and youth service programs. With its more than 14,000 employees, Columbia also accounts for over 10 percent of State-wide employment in higher education and is the seventh largest non-governmental employer in New York City. Columbia spends about $2.4
billion annually, including $1.25 billion in payroll, and about 70 percent of those funds are spent in the greater New York metropolitan area.

Columbia has reached a tipping point, however, and must grow to meet its existing and projected needs, including accommodating emerging academic disciplines and research fields, so that it can maintain its position as a leading university. While competitors like Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, Yale, Princeton and Brown Universities have developed and are actively engaged in long-range campus planning and expansions, Columbia has been constrained by the age and size of its existing facilities and ad hoc development that falls woefully short of projected space requirements.

The Manhattanville Proposal would allow Columbia to undertake a more comprehensive development strategy for expanding and modernizing its facilities and curricula, enabling it to sustain its long tradition of academic excellence. In contrast to the current zoning, which is not conducive to economic growth or redevelopment, Columbia’s proposed zoning and land use changes would maximize the use of a scarce resource—land—to benefit the greatest number of people. An underutilized light-industrial area of West Harlem would be transformed into a vibrant, mixed-use community that includes approximately 6.8 million square feet of space for academic, office and residential buildings, while creating open space, retail, cultural and community facilities. According to its stated design objectives, Columbia would also preserve certain aspects of Manhattanville’s history, promote human-scale urban design that honors the past, revitalize West 125th Street by creating a lively streetscape with ground-floor retail and landscaped open spaces and reconnect West Harlem to the Hudson waterfront.

This transformation in Manhattanville is expected to stimulate an enormous amount of economic activity, including 6,000 permanent local jobs, representing a diverse population of new hires. Over the next 25 years, full construction of the Proposed Plan would also generate an average of 1,200 construction-related jobs a year, $11 billion in local economic activity and approximately $430 million in tax revenues for the City and State.

Though some concerns about the Proposal have been raised, we are hopeful that Columbia and the community will work together to resolve them, without imposing such onerous conditions on Columbia that the Proposal becomes too costly to implement. Columbia has already shown good faith by addressing concerns raised by Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer and committing, among other things, to support the establishment of a West Harlem Special District, contribute $20 million to an Affordable Housing Fund, achieve a minimum of LEED v.2.2 Silver Certification design for academic and residential projects in the project area, develop new public parkland, fund $500,000 for playground and schoolyard enhancements and $11,250,000 over 25 years for the renovation of the West Harlem Waterfront park and implement a construction mitigation plan. Columbia has also agreed to accommodate potentially displaced residential tenants in the same or better quality housing in the neighborhood that will increase the overall affordable housing stock in the community.
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All New Yorkers stand to gain by keeping premier academic institutions, like Columbia, in New York City and helping them to flourish in an increasingly competitive world. Columbia’s Manhattanville Proposal is a comprehensive plan to meet that goal in a way that integrates and benefits the community. The Building Congress supports this important Proposal, and we urge the Commission to approve it.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Richard T. Anderson
President

cc: The Honorable Herman D. Farrell, Jr., New York State Assembly
    The Honorable Robert Jackson, New York City Council
    The Honorable Bill Perkins, New York State Senate
    The Honorable Eric T. Schneiderman, New York State Senate
    The Honorable Scott M. Stringer, Manhattan Borough President
    The Honorable Keith L.T. Wright, New York State Assembly