Good evening. My name is Christopher Jones and I’m Vice President for Research for Regional Plan Association, a private, nonprofit research and planning organization serving the greater New York metropolitan region. I am here to express Regional Plan Association’s strong support for the proposed Manhattanville in West Harlem Rezoning. This action will allow Columbia University to fulfill its role as a leading academic institution that makes a significant contribution to the economic, cultural, and intellectual vitality of New York City.

The need for Columbia University to expand is indisputable. In a knowledge-based global economy, New York City is increasingly reliant on its institutions of higher learning, from City University’s two and four-year colleges to world-renowned research universities like Columbia. Because of its success in attracting high-achieving students and faculty, it has simply run out of room to compete with comparable universities that have far more space per student. And it makes sense for Columbia to expand to the area north of its main campus, where it can create a contiguous campus with modern facilities.

The action will also facilitate the revitalization, improvement and redevelopment of the Manhattanville section of West Harlem by allowing greater density and a wider variety of land uses, within the context of the surrounding neighborhood. As with any action of this scale, there are legitimate concerns for how redevelopment will affect the lives of community residents. On balance, the jobs, facilities and public realm improvements of the plan should benefit the surrounding community as well as the city at large. However, we encourage Columbia, the Community Board and other stakeholders to continue discussions that address these concerns.

One action that would do much to alleviate the potential for residential displacement in the surrounding area is Borough President Scott Stringer’s proposal for a West Harlem Special District. This comprehensive rezoning plan for much of West Harlem would help preserve the neighborhood and ensure its stability as plans for Columbia University’s expansion move forward. Through contextual and inclusionary zoning and other actions, this action will help protect affordable housing, small businesses and the physical and social character of the area. To advance these goals, the City should create a West Harlem Special District, from 125th Street to 145th Street, west of Convent Avenue.

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