

THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY

July 16, 2014

STATEMENT OF THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY AT THE PUBLIC SCOPING MEETING REGARDING THE PROPOSED DRAFT SCOPE OF WORK FOR THE PREPARATION OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT FOR REZONING VANDERBILT AVENUE

Good day Chair Weisbrod. I am Andrea Goldwyn, speaking on behalf of the New York Landmarks Conservancy. The Landmarks Conservancy is a private, independent, not-for-profit organization, founded in 1973. Our mission is to preserve and protect historic resources throughout New York.

Nearly two years ago, when we spoke at the scoping session on the Midtown East rezoning, we raised concerns that preservation was completely left out of the plan, and questioned other aspects of the proposal. It's unfortunate that many months, many reviews, and many meetings later, little has changed.

The restoration and reuse of New York's historic buildings has been an unqualified success. Preservation is an economic catalyst, creates jobs and attracts tourists; it encourages sustainability by reusing existing materials and infrastructure; and it makes our city vibrant and unique. Despite this, the draft EIS barely acknowledges that there are four buildings along Vanderbilt Avenue that are eligible for listing on the State and National Register of Historic Places, two of which the Landmarks Commission is considering for designation. We agree that change and growth are inevitable in New York, and that new development can stimulate the economy, sometimes resulting in tremendous architecture. This proposal, however, almost entirely ignores the historic buildings that already grace Vanderbilt Avenue, and give this part of the City its character.

These are fine buildings with soaring masonry facades enlivened by decorative details. They were designed by significant architects such as Warren & Wetmore, James Gamble Rogers, and George B. Post. Some were part of historic Terminal City, which rightly recognized Grand Central Terminal as a focal point. Any new plan for this area should consider how they can be reused and supported. Otherwise, we risk losing the special sense of place they create and the graceful relationship they have to Grand Central, in favor of a wall of anonymous glass towers that could be found anywhere in the world, with no connection to New York, nor to one of the nation's most important landmarks.

Our Public Policy Committee received a briefing on One Vanderbilt which focused on whether the proposed design has a harmonious relationship with Grand Central. That would be difficult to find, as a building of 1,300-plus feet will overwhelm and shadow the landmark. The architects presented a design at the ground floor that attempts a relationship, using some sympathetic materials and exposing a view of the Terminal, but we feel that the visual connection between the two buildings could be even stronger. A simplified base, pulled further back than proposed, would be a better backdrop and provide a clearer view. We do not usually advocate for facadism, but wish that the developers had considered a scheme that reuses the existing façade of Warren & Wetmore's 51 East 42nd Street, which could make an ideal entrance to the new public waiting room along 43rd Street, or at the very least was of a character that did not compete with Grand Central Terminal for attention.

Regarding GCT itself, the City created the Grand Central Subdistrict to expand opportunities for the Terminal to transfer its air rights. The owners of those air rights are rightly concerned that they will now be set aside in favor of those that the City is making available, thus significantly diminishing a value that the City has supported.

Overall, the plan offers no compelling rationale for putting bulls-eye targets on these landmark-quality buildings. Is there an updated study showing the need for several 30 FAR towers, in one of the City's densest areas? While One Vanderbilt will add transportation improvements, it will also add thousands of workers into the area. Finally, the draft EIS lacks specifics about how the transportation bonus for One Vanderbilt was determined, and how bonuses for any future developments would be set.

If fully implemented, this plan would irreparably damage one of New York's great historic commercial zones and greatly lessen the context and significance of Grand Central Terminal for future generations. The blend of new and old is what keeps New York vital and unique. That principle should be a starting point for revitalizing this significant area, not an afterthought.

Thank you for the opportunity to express The Landmarks Conservancy's views.