Testimony before the Transportation & Infrastructure Committee
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings & Emergency Management
by Chip Akridge
Chairman
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Madame Chairwoman and members of the Committee, my name is Chip Akridge and I am the founder and chairman of Akridge, the Washington, DC-based company which owns the air rights adjacent to the north of Union Station. As you know, we were the winning bidder for this 15-acre property in a competition conducted by the GSA in 2002. Since then, we, along with our financial partner, Leucadia National Corporation, have spent a substantial amount of time and resources on plans and ideas for a new mixed use development in the air rights above the rail yard.

In the course of this comprehensive planning exercise for our private development, called Burnham Place, we have also devoted substantial resources to the rehabilitation -- rescue if you will -- of the intermodal transportation facilities at this "crown jewel" in the nation's inventory of grand historic structures.

We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this hearing which you have called one year to the day following a hearing you conducted last year on the future of Union Station. We believe that in the past year, there has been genuine momentum on this project, and that is primarily due to your support and focus. We think it is fair to say that no one in the Congress has done more than you to advance these efforts to modernize Union Station and take it to the next level.

Union Station is the entry to the city for every walk of life. The Wall Street executive arriving on Amtrak from New York. Congressional staff taking the Metro to Capitol Hill. Commuters from Baltimore and Manassas aboard MARC and VRE trains. The student bicycling from Gallaudet. And, yes, the tourists aboard buses from Minnesota and Florida and Oregon and Tennessee. All of these converge at and rely upon Union Station.

The strategic importance of Union Station is what attracted our firm to this development opportunity. A more efficient, pleasant and safe intermodal transportation facility at Union Station is important to the success of Burnham Place. It is also critical to the City, the region and the entire nation, and this has motivated our partnership with DDOT and our desire to help facilitate public improvements for the station.

While the historic halls at Union Station are as grand as they come, the state of the adjoining intermodal transportation center (ITC) is really not a very pretty one. Tourists passing from the historic Main hall to the existing rail waiting areas must wonder if they have fallen down a rabbit hole. Not only do the finishes of the concourse area give no witness to the architectural treasure that is Union Station, but the area is congested, unsafe, inefficient and generally unworkable.

The ITC is, to be blunt, a dismal reflection upon the grand facility which houses it, and is a frustrating disappointment for the citizens who use it daily.

Originally used solely for intercity rail service, Union Station now serves over 100,000 passengers per day via 14 modes of transportation, in addition to thousands of visitors and shoppers. The station has not kept pace with this rapid growth. For example, during rush hour, woe is the commuter who is trying to navigate through the congested Amtrak or MARC concourse areas to reach Metro. Equally cramped are the Amtrak passenger boarding queues leading to the train platforms. Throw in the tourists trying to use the food court, and you have a frustrated mix of users all trying to move at cross purposes in the same space.

This is not a mental picture we are conjuring. This is reality, and it does not comport with the history of this landmark, or with its importance to modern day uses. As this Committee knows, Union Station has been rescued before. In 1981, after falling into disrepair and suffering a roof collapse, the station was closed to the public. Following public-private investment of almost $200 million, Union Station reopened in 1987, fully restored.

The time has come to likewise shore up and modernize the intermodal center at Union Station. The current heavy over-utilization of the ITC show no signs of abating. In fact, ridership on all modes at the station is growing fast. Add that to intercity bus, high speed rail, Streetcar and other transportation uses coming in the future, and it is clear that the time to act is now.

Akridge's development of the air rights presents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to address these challenges. The construction of our concrete deck and connection to the north end of the station provide the ideal time to concurrently undertake the required modernization of the ITC. Just as the federal government has historically stepped up to rescue and refurbish this landmark facility, so will federal support and resources be required to modernize its ITC.

Allow me to note, Madame Chairwoman, that the upgrades urgently needed at Union Station will require substantial federal dollars, as was the case more than two decades ago when the station was rescued from neglect and restored to its intended grandeur. However, based on the number of citizens who depend on the facility, as well as the numbers projected to use it in the future, and given the importance of the station to regional and national security, it is a very modest investment.

In that regard, the following ideas have been developed and requests have been submitted for consideration in the surface transportation authorization legislation:

I. Union Station Concourse Renovation Project – $54.8 million is requested to upgrade and expand the existing Union Station concourse and renovate the northern station entrance. This project would alleviate severe passenger congestion with northern expansion of the existing concourse which serves subway, commuter rail, Amtrak and other station visitors. It would also provide increased vertical transportation capacity between intercity and commuter rail (Amtrak, MARC and VRE) and subway service (WMATA). Also, the expansion and renovation of the north station entrance would provide more efficient access to the existing 2,300 car parking

garage, the rental car facility, tour buses and the proposed future Greyhound terminal. An added and critical benefit with the expansion and reconfiguration of the existing concourse will be vast improvements in the ability of public safety officers to handle emergency situations.

II. Union Station New North-South Concourse Project – $20 million is requested to construct a new concourse which will further lessen congestion in existing rail concourse areas by doubling the space available for passenger transfers among the various modes at the station. This project would connect directly to the existing concourse and provide passenger access to the lower level tracks which serve Amtrak trains and all VRE trains. This new concourse will also substantially improve air quality in the immediate passenger boarding areas through improved ventilation systems.

III. Union Station Intercity Bus and Metro Access Project – $40 million is requested to construct a new facility so that intercity bus service can be incorporated into the Union Station complex. This project also includes the creation of a new entrance for Metro passengers on 1st Street NE, below the H Street overpass, and construction of a connecting walkway to the existing ticketing and entrance area. A second new entrance for Metro passengers would also be built on the H Street NE overpass adjacent to the new intercity bus terminal. Currently, intercity bus passengers making transfers from Metro and other modes at Union station must walk outdoors with their luggage for about seven minutes in order to reach the existing Greyhound station. Not only will this project improve access to the station for all Metro riders, but it will be a vast improvement for intercity bus passengers who will be able to make safer, seamless transfers.

IV. Union Station H Street Connectivity, Safety & Security Project – $25 million is requested to structurally reinforce and repair the H Street overpass to accommodate planned intercity bus service and street car service. This project also includes better access for bicyclists to Union Station, and alleviation of the challenges for new streetcar service posed by H Street overpass grade change. Another component of this project is the construction of a connector road between Massachusetts Avenue and H Street to provide a critical north-south emergency egress route for the U.S. Capitol complex and surrounding neighborhoods in order to avoid the difficulties experienced during the evacuation efforts of 9/11. Also, implementation of hardening and other blast-proof features would improve security of potentially vulnerable portions of the station.

In undertaking large complicated projects such as this one, it is always instructive to look at the "before" and the "after." I have brought with me today some images to share with the Committee. I think you will agree that there is a sharp contrast between the unacceptable current conditions, and the efficient, safe and attractive proposed modernizations.

Madame Chairwoman, as you know we are committed to the long term success of Union Station. As a local development firm with more than 30 years of experience here, we have participated in

the redevelopment of the City. From the Homer Building, completed in 1990, to Gallery Place in 2004, and now the Southeast, Southwest and Northeast quadrants where we have projects in the pipeline totaling more than ten million square feet, we have seen the District of Columbia become a world class city. And a world class city needs a world class intermodal transportation center which can be a model for our entire nation. That is a vision of Union Station which we know you share and we again want to thank you for your relentless pursuit of a Union Station ITC which not only relieves the current congestion but which also paves the way for future growth and new transportation modes.

With that, Madame Chairwoman, I would be glad to answer any questions you or Members of the Committee may have.