Dear fellow member of the Columbia community:

I want to report that New York’s City Planning Commission today voted to approve with modifications Columbia’s proposal to rezone 17 acres of the old Manhattanville manufacturing zone of West Harlem for academic mixed-use. This is an important step forward in the extensive public review of the University’s long-term plan for a flourishing center of teaching, research, and scholarship in upper Manhattan.

We are grateful that the City Planning Commission, under the leadership of chair Amanda Burden, has given such careful consideration to how our proposal can be improved and move forward in the best interests of both the University and the local community. This is not only because the Commission’s decision is an essential element of the public land use review process, but also because the independent judgments of the Commissioners about how to balance preservation of our City’s unique urban fabric with the need for wisely planned growth are so widely respected. The Commission’s modifications to our proposal include:

* Modifying the use and reducing the scale of the proposed building at the northeast corner of the project area from academic research to university housing, to make it more consistent with the residential blocks to the north and east;

* Modifying the use and reducing the proposed scale of a building on the eastern end of the block that is now primarily the MTA’s Manhattanville Bus Depot, to ensure a smoother transition of physical scale from campus to surrounding communities; and

* Widening the walkway leading to the large square of publicly accessible open space between 130th and 131st Streets, thereby making that large square even more welcoming to all members of the local community.

These modifications are intended to promote the vitality of the Broadway corridor and to help make the plan’s open space network an asset for University affiliates and the broader community.

The Commission also voted today to approve the Community Board’s 197(a) plan for some 964 acres of Community District 9, not including those provisions that relate to Columbia’s proposed 17-acre zone. The Commission noted that it is possible to support both of these proposals, as modified, and that they are largely consistent in their goals.

You may also recall that as part of his official endorsement of Columbia’s plan in September, Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer proposed his own thoughtful zoning proposal for maintaining the character of upper Manhattan neighborhoods. Through his efforts, the University committed to develop and maintain new public parkland at 125th Street and Twelfth Avenue and to provide $20 million in seed capital for a revolving loan fund to create and preserve approximately 1,100 units of affordable housing within Community District 9.
We have also committed to take a series of further steps to address local concerns about affordable housing, an issue that affects our entire City and region. Columbia has now made a commitment to meet better the projected housing needs of University employees that may result in the adjacent area from the new jobs we create. By providing nearly 1,000 units of housing in the area for University affiliates, Columbia can help ensure that our own long-term academic and job growth minimizes the pressures on the local area’s stock of rental apartments and responds directly to concerns about secondary displacement by the year 2030.

In addition, we have agreed to commit $4 million to expand Columbia’s existing support for legal aid services to tenants in Manhattanville, including protection from unlawful eviction or harassment. Taken together with the affordable housing fund and our public guarantee that the relatively small number of residents occupying approximately 130 apartments within the expansion site will have high-quality, affordable replacement housing in the community, the University is making a significant contribution to address the challenge of affordable housing locally.

We have also made a commitment to green building design and construction. Specifically, we have committed to meet the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Silver standard in new University buildings. Our urban design plan for Manhattanville was selected earlier this year for a new “smart growth” pilot program sponsored by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC). In addition, Columbia, along with eight other New York City universities, joined as Challenge Partners in Mayor Bloomberg’s PlaNYC 2030 in a commitment to reduce our entire carbon footprint by 30 percent by 2017.

Much work remains to be done. Now that the City Planning Commission has approved Columbia’s proposal with these modifications, our rezoning application proceeds to the New York City Council for consideration over the coming two months. We look forward to responding to the Council’s questions and to working with its members.

As I have stated before, in any major public decision, especially one that concerns the future of Manhattan’s scarcest resource – land – there will always be a diversity of thoughtful and sometimes passionately felt positions. How we respond to these discussions and challenges will be as important as anything else we do in the process of creating a new campus for Columbia. Wherever possible we have tried to listen carefully to the needs and aspirations of our neighbors and to integrate these thoughts and ideas into the planning process. At the same time, we have tried to make the case as strongly as possible for the reasonable needs of Columbia, an institution with a singular history of service to the public good and with an equally bright future. To date this has been a highly beneficial process, and we have every reason now to expect it to continue in that way.

We continue to negotiate with the West Harlem Local Development Corporation on a Community Benefits Agreement that will help determine how the University will expand
its partnerships with and investments in the people who live and work in West Harlem. We look forward to reaching common ground on a variety of new commitments bringing together campus and community in mutually beneficial ways.

As ever, it remains my firm belief that New York City needs thriving universities in its midst, including a thriving Columbia, as a critical source of intellectual, cultural, scientific, and medical creativity. But the City also needs flourishing universities because they provide the range of good, moderate-income jobs that are the backbone of the City we have had and the City we want. We are, therefore, glad and proud that the City Planning Commission has endorsed the value of Columbia’s carefully planned long-term growth to all New Yorkers.

I will report back to you on the next steps in this important public review process before the City Council.

Sincerely,

Lee C. Bollinger