



**Senate TESTIMONY**  
**June 24, 2022**

My name is Alexandros Washburn, and I'm the director of the Grand Penn Community Alliance, a group which shares the same objective as all of you: the transformation of Penn Station and its neighborhood into a world class transportation hub and destination.

I started my career working for Senator Moynihan, and I'm the guy he sent to New York to build the Farley project that now bears his name. Later, I was the Chief Urban Designer at the New York City Department of City Planning. With overlapping government authority, three transportation agencies and countless local and regional stakeholders, I certainly understand the extreme complexity of the task at hand. However, it is our firm belief that the current plan relies on false assumptions and therefore is fatally flawed. It should be scrapped now, before it perpetuates the urban planning trauma that the demolition of the late, great classical Penn Station inflicted on the City of New York decades ago.

Much has been written about the shortcomings of this plan, including its reliance on commercial office towers in a changing work environment and its lack of economic transparency. But its greatest weakness, in our mind, is its unquestioning acceptance of the continued presence of Madison Square Garden above the transit hub. This arena has moved several times in its history and has no special claim to this particular site. Most importantly, the Garden relies on a unique zoning special permit which will expire exactly one year from today. Without the City's explicit approval, the Garden as we know it will cease to function.

Nine years ago, I was at the Department of City Planning when the previous ten year extension to the special permit was negotiated. The extension's explicit purpose was to give MSG time to plan a move and therefore free Penn Station to once again rise above ground and into the sun. It was negotiated in good faith, and we worked hard with the Garden to understand their operational needs. Indeed, being above Penn Station poses enormous and costly challenges to operations, something I learned when MSG let me play roadie for a night and help set up the stage for a rock band's performance. What a convoluted process to get from the trucks at the street to the stage 3 stories above the station!

Now is the time to implement a better plan, one that allows for a monumental public space and an inspiring train station, as well as the next move for Madison Square Garden. Yes, MSG has moved five times. It used to be on Madison Square. And yes, it used to have

a roof garden. MSG's next location should be somewhere a truly spectacular arena can be built. In fact, the MSG corporation has already identified the site for such an arena, a groundbreaking 21<sup>st</sup> century arena which they call "The Sphere". Unfortunately, the site is in Las Vegas. New York gets bupkis.

While we know others have thought about where else the Garden could go in New York, there has never been a serious, governmental review of the alternatives. There are serious safety concerns, costly operational deficiencies, and even something called by transit planners the Bruce Springsteen effect, when a show coincides with a commuting time peak and temporarily stresses the passenger movements in the station to the breaking point.

We need a serious, honest and transparent review of the options for moving the Garden. A matrix of pluses and minuses that looks at all factors from transit access to tax breaks. This is not a can to kick down the road, but an actionable catalog of possible sites and the political, financial and engineering costs and benefits to each compared with being on top of Penn Station.

There is no way around the physical fact that Penn Station cannot function properly with Madison Square Garden on top of it, and Madison Square Garden cannot function properly with Penn Station beneath it.

Governor Hochul has said that the new Penn Station should be a spiritual experience. But if MSG doesn't move, the only spiritual experience of the station is purgatory, trapped forever between the tracks below and the arena above.

Let me for a moment be an optimist, and hope that a serious review of the options finds a place nearby where MSG can eagerly build the world's best and most profitable arena. What then for Penn Station?

Budgetarily, a new Penn Station will cost much less to build when you can access construction materials from above. Functionally, Penn Station will no longer be constrained in height or access to the street. And spiritually? Well, it will be open to the heavens.

As we have said before, the railroad company didn't demolish Penn Station in 1964 so much as decapitate it. The guts of the original Penn Station are still there in the basement and can efficiently provide the foundation for an inspiring 21<sup>st</sup> Century revival of the landmark above. Relocating the Garden will make the transit improvements far less costly and open up the site to sorely needed public space improvements that could rival Bryant Park. [See the Fly-over](#)

Working for Senator Moynihan taught me a lot. But he would not approve of me being an optimist unless I had the political will behind me to make it happen. He knew that any public project is subject to a private feeding frenzy. "Penn Station is a fat dolphin swimming in a sea of sharks," he would tell me. To survive, you need a plan.

That's what worries me. No plan. The current plan is no plan at all because it relies on false assumptions and therefore is fatally flawed with only an optimist's hope that a developer will pick up the check. It should be scrapped now, before it perpetuates the urban planning trauma that the demolition of the late, great classical Penn Station inflicted on the City of New York decades ago.

We need a plan, and it must start with moving Madison Square Garden. Today marks the countdown clock to exactly one year left to the day for before the Special Permit expires. Let us use that time wisely. Let us get that plan in place.

Thank You,

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