Testimony on the NYU 2031 Building Plan
City Planning Commission
New York City

Lawrence M. Mead
Professor of Politics and Public Policy
Department of Politics
New York University
19 West 4th Street, #209
New York, NY 10012-1119
Phone: 212-998-8540
Fax: 212-995-4184
E-mail: LMM1@nyu.edu

25 April 2012
I am a Professor of Politics and Public Policy at New York University, where I have taught since 1979. I support NYU 2031, the university’s plan to expand its facilities at its main campus at Washington Square.

The reason is simple: NYU needs more space if it is to become a great university, a goal it has rapidly approached in my time here. These signs of crowding are obvious to me:

- **Classrooms:** I sometimes have had difficulty finding a usable classroom for my courses, because the classroom schedulers simply ran out of space.

- **Offices:** The Politics Department, where I work, has moved three times since I joined it in 1979, each time because it outgrew its old quarters. Our current offices—the best we have had—may also prove too small.

- **Faculty housing:** One of NYU’s great attractions for faculty is the chance to live in Washington Square Village or Silver Towers, only minutes from one’s office, thus avoiding all the hassle of computing. But getting these apartments has become increasingly difficult. I have moved three times within these complexes as my family grew, and each time it was a struggle. Demand is too great. Supply must increase.

Also, I have held visiting positions or spent sabbaticals at several other schools at the level to which NYU now aspires—Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and the University of Wisconsin at Madison. I have also visited many other colleges and universities to give talks or attend conferences. None of these other schools faced space limits as tight as NYU’s. Of course, some of them were in less congested settings. One must make some allowance for NYU’s location in the most densely built city in the country. But even Columbia, our uptown peer and rival, has a vastly bigger campus than ours.

I don’t necessarily endorse every detail of the NYU plan. The recent reductions in the proposed buildings that the administration has accepted may be politic. But the basic case for more facilities strikes me as incontrovertible.

Some regret the loss of open space that would follow from the new buildings planned for the garden that lies between the two Washington Square Village buildings and for the current site of
Coles Sports Center. I also regret that loss. I walk across the garden every day to my office. But this cost is less than opponents claim. The Washington Square Village garden is in fact little used. When I cross it I seldom see more than two or three other people, and often none at all. Other areas near these buildings, such as the plaza around Silver Towers, are far more frequented.

I also admit the disruption that construction would cause, but this too is overstated. There has already been a great deal of construction in and around the Washington Square campus in my time here. Various university buildings, including the current site of my department, have been built or rebuilt, forcing faculty to move, and few people have complained. The student center was torn down and replaced with a larger building. The law school has built several large edifices. The university’s new power plant next to Warren Weaver Hall was recently built right outside my office window, and the noise was oppressive for only a couple of days. Why is the proposed new construction so different? We already deal with more noise than most people just by living in New York. The new construction would probably not add materially to that. The mitigation measures the university has proposed strike me as generous.

The opponents of the plan would be more credible if they offered a feasible alternative, but so far I have heard none. Some say the university should build elsewhere in New York, but new facilities away from Washington Square would be less useful than what is proposed. The university has already built several student dormitories on 3rd Avenue and 14th Street, at some distance from the Square. To get to class, many students have to board buses, whereas faculty get to walk from Washington Square Village or Silver Towers, which are far closer. It is reasonable to develop those inner locations more intensively.

Some critics suggest that they have not been consulted. It is true that the NYU administration has little tradition of consulting with faculty on university policy. But that is because the administration has seemed to need little oversights in recent decades. It has developed NYU into a world-class institution, bringing enormous benefits to faculty and students alike. The quality of
leadership at the top has been exceptional. Administrators at NYU are the most able I have encountered, including at the other schools mentioned above.

Due to that capability, few faculty have sought involvement in university issues. Instead, they have tended to their research and teaching. The building plan is the first issue I’ve seen to provoke a serious difference between administration and faculty in my entire time here. And yet on this issue consultation has been extensive. The faculty may not be persuaded, yet the administration has made its intentions clear for several years.

Some critics also say that the university cannot afford this expansion. I have not seen the cost and revenue numbers, nor would I be competent to assess them. I do find it plausible, as the administration claims, that much of the cost would be offset by a reduced need to rent space in buildings that NYU does not own. I also note that financial management at NYU has been excellent. The university has avoided mistakes, allowing it to weather the recent financial crisis with a minimum of disruption.

Opponents would also be more credible if they denied the university’s need to grow. Only one of my colleagues has suggested this. Others tacitly accept a need to expand, but they seek to avoid the costs. Faculty already have a good situation. They get to do their work while the university improves around them. They want that progress to continue, but they also seek to avoid any inconvenience. That is inconsistent. That is not an argument the commission should endorse.