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To: The Honorable Members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment & Public Works
From: Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, Mayor, Baltimore City
Date: April 28, 2011
Re: Baltimore City Federal Courthouse: Management, Renovation and Construction Issues

Senator Cardin and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to testify today before the U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak about the City's need for a new federal courthouse building as well as the role that the courthouse plays in Baltimore's economic development plans. This is the second time in the past month that I have had the pleasure of testifying before a Congressional Committee here in Baltimore. These field hearings are extremely beneficial so that you can see and hear what is happening on the ground, outside the confines of Washington.

The Garmatz Courthouse was built decades before any of the modern safety and security design standards for federal buildings were established. Lessons learned from the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11 need to be incorporated in the building design and function, including: structural engineering that allows for a "progressive collapse" in the event of a bombing; sufficient security setbacks from neighboring streets; and courtroom design that keeps defendants separated from juries, witnesses and attorneys. Additionally, infrastructure in the present courthouse is failing. Judges, marshals, lawyers and support staff are forced to work in a precarious environment with frequent plumbing mishaps, electrical failures and a lack of access to technological improvements.

Baltimore wants and deserves a first-class federal courthouse. It is my understanding that Baltimore City has been on the list for a new courthouse for over a decade, but no action has been taken by the General Services Administration (GSA). Plans for construction of a new courthouse are no further along than when the building made GSA's list and major improvements needed for safety, security, energy savings and infrastructure have been neither executed nor planned.

The Courthouse is the center of Baltimore's prominent legal community and the City where both the State's law schools are located. The federal judiciary in Baltimore has a long tradition in U.S. Admiralty Law stemming from the Port of Baltimore's centuries old role as an international import and export hub for the nation. In recent years, the Baltimore Courthouse has hosted:

- Important mutual funds investment litigation
- High-profile gang trials
- Proceedings in the Microsoft anti-trust case, and
- In 2010, more than 2,700 civil and criminal cases

Furthermore, for the last several years I have lauded our U.S. Attorney's work with Project Exile prosecutions. This is a great program and I have a vested interest to make sure that the infrastructure is present to aid our goal of getting the most violent offenders off of our streets.

Federal courthouses define the status of the towns and cities where they are located. Millions of commuters, residents and tourists walk past this building every year. What they walk past now is this building's unwelcoming and anonymous Pratt Street façade. Most people passing by will hardly notice the entry-less "back" of the building facing Pratt Street, one of the City's busiest streets. Nor will they wonder who owns the building, what work goes on inside and what purpose it serves. The awkward alignment of the building makes it easy to overlook the solitary statue on the Pratt Street lawn that honors Baltimore's native son and one of our nation's greatest legal minds, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall.

By contrast, the previous federal courthouse built in 1932, has been re-cycled, first as Baltimore's central post office and now as a part of the State's Circuit Court system. The structure was renovated by the State in 1990, and remains part of the downtown landscape and legal community. We are realizing the ancillary benefits of that structure but not of the current courthouse.

I had convened the "Downtown Task Force" and just recently issued a report that outlines strategies to strengthen Baltimore's downtown. That vision that the task force laid out was for Downtown to become an ever-evolving mixed use neighborhood, which includes: business, a diverse population of residents, hotels, thriving retail and restaurants, and expanding anchor institutions. There would be no greater anchor institution than a new federal courthouse.

Where we sit now is a gateway to the West side redevelopment and a development project known as the "Superblock" is planned just a few blocks from here. I am committed to see the realization of the Westside and the "Superblock" and all of the benefits that it will offer our City. A new courthouse in this vicinity would be a hub for the Westside and Baltimore City as a whole. This means jobs, construction, commerce as well as a host of other economic and social benefits that will permeate as a result. My motto is "Better Schools, Safer Streets, Stronger Neighborhoods." I believe a new federal courthouse can help promote all of those things.

Therefore, I urge the GSA and the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts to consider plans to build a new federal courthouse in downtown Baltimore. My office, the legal community and downtown business leaders stand ready to work with GSA and our Congressional delegation to move forward with plans to improve the Baltimore Federal Courthouse. I hope that you keep these issues in mind as you move forward with any future plans.

I thank Senator Cardin for inviting me to testify today and look forward to answering any questions you may have.