

BEFORE THE
SECURITIES & EXCHANGE COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20549

In the Matter of the Petition of:)
COUNCIL OF INSTITUTIONAL INVESTORS) Admin Proc. File No. ____
) Release No. 34-898
) File No. SR-NYSE-2019-67
)

**BRIEF OF PETITIONER COUNCIL OF INSTITUTIONAL
INVESTORS IN OPPOSITION TO MOTION OF NEW YORK
STOCK EXCHANGE LLC TO LIFT THE AUTOMATIC STAY**

Submitted by:
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Petitioner Council of Institutional Investors (“CII” or the “Council”) hereby asks the Commission to deny the motion by the New York Stock Exchange LLC (“NYSE”) to lift the automatic stay of an Order issued by the Division of Trading and Markets pursuant to delegated authority, *Order Approving a Proposed Rule Change, as Modified by Amendment No. 2, to Amend Chapter One of the Listed Company Manual to Modify the Provisions Relating to Direct Listings*, Exchange Act Release No. 89684 (Aug. 26, 2020), 85 Fed. Reg. 54454 (Sept. 1, 2020) (the “Order”). The stay was triggered pursuant to Rule of Practice 431(e) by the Council’s Notice of Intention to File Petition for Review of that Order.

As will be argued more fully below, the Exchange’s argument rests on a fundamental legal error, namely, that the standards for deciding whether to *impose* a stay pending judicial review should be used when deciding whether to *lift* an administrative stay that seeks to give the Commission time to consider the merits of the petition. In this brief the Council will explain why, under the “public interest” standard that is properly used in such cases, the stay here should remain in effect until proceedings on the Council’s petition for review have concluded.¹

The nature of the proceedings.

The Order review makes it easier for private companies to bypass the need for an “initial public offering” (“IPO”) if they want to go public and list their shares on the New York Stock Exchange. Exchange rules currently offer an alternative to

¹ We note that the Council is today filing its petition for review, in the event that the Commission may wish to consider the stay motion and the petition simultaneously.

an IPO, *i.e.*, a “direct listing,” which allows existing shareholders of a private company to sell their existing shares to the public, thus reducing the role of underwriters and avoiding post-IPO lockups on the ability of company insiders to sell shares. The Order would liberalize the Exchange rules on direct listings by allowing private companies to sell their existing shares to the public, thus making the direct listing option more attractive to companies.

The Council’s petition for review seeks plenary review of one important facet of that Order, namely, the question of whether purchasers of shares in a direct listing authorized by the Order may invoke the protections of Securities Act Section 11, which protects purchasers against material misstatements or omissions in a registration statement.

Under the Commission’s Rules of Procedure 430 and 431(e), the filing of a notice of intent to file a petition for review automatically triggers an administrative stay of an order issued under delegated authority. The purpose of such a temporary stay is to permit the Commission to consider fully the arguments made in the petition.

Argument

1. NYSE misstates the test for lifting an administrative stay.

The Exchange argues that the Commission should *lift* the stay using a multi-part set of factors that agencies and courts use in deciding whether to *impose* a stay

at the request of a party who is seeking judicial review of a final agency decision.² The Exchange is looking at the issue through the wrong end of the telescope. The factors cited by the Exchange are simply not relevant when the issue is whether to lift an administrative stay that exists to give the Commission time to review a non-final staff determination made under delegated authority. Indeed, the Exchange cites no case where the Commission has applied a multi-part test to decide whether to lift a stay.

Orders issued pursuant to delegated authority are interlocutory in nature. They become effective only if the right to seek Commission review is declined or is

² The Commission has identified the factors to be considered in deciding to stay a final order pending judicial review as follows:

1. whether there is a strong likelihood that a party will succeed on the merits in a proceeding challenging the particular Commission action (or, if the other factors strongly favor a stay, that there is a substantial case on the merits);
2. whether, without a stay, a party will suffer imminent, irreparable injury;
3. whether there will be substantial harm to any person if the stay were granted; and
4. whether the issuance of a stay would likely serve the public interest.

Order Preliminarily Considering Whether to Issue Stay Sua Sponte and Establishing Guidelines for Seeking Stay Applications, Exchange Act Release No. 33870, File No. SR-MSRB-94-2, 1994 WL 117920 (Apr. 7, 1994), cited in *In the Matter of American Petroleum Institute*, Exchange Act Release No. 68197, 2012 WL 5462858, at *3 (Nov. 8, 2012).

NYSE does cite this 1994 order, but states – incorrectly – that the order added a fifth factor, *i.e.*, “whether lifting the stay would preclude meaningful review of the challenged order.” NYSE Memorandum at 6. Passing the fact that these standards for imposing a stay do not apply here, NYSE is correct that in one case the Commission did lift an automatic stay and observed in passing that doing so would not preclude review of a petition for review. That order, which we discuss below at p. 5, did not use a four- (or five-) part analysis, but asked solely if lifting an automatic stay would be “in the public interest.”

not pursued by the requisite deadline. Exchange Act § 4A(c), 15 U.S.C. § 78d-1(c). Such orders are not “final agency action” that are subject to judicial review under the Administrative Procedure Act (“APA”), 5 U.S.C. § 704. A party that wishes to challenge such an order cannot seek immediate judicial review, but must first file a petition for review with the Commission. Rule of Practice 430(c).

The point is important because an automatic stay does nothing more than give the Commission the breathing room necessary to consider and to make an informed decision about the merits of a staff decision. The Commission’s rules are clear that in considering a petition to review an order made under delegated authority, the Commission must consider any errors of fact or conclusions of law and – of particular importance here – whether the order presents a “decision of law or policy that is important and that the Commission should review.” Rules of Practice 411(b)(2), incorporated into Rule 431(b)(2). The Order in this case unquestionably raises important policy decisions and has frequently been referred to as a “game changer” in terms of providing access to U.S. capital markets.³

There is a world of difference between an administrative stay that exists to give the Commission time to consider an important policy issue as opposed to a stay pending judicial review, which a losing party is seeking to forestall the immediate

³ *E.g.*, Posner, *NYSE Proposal for Primary Direct Listings*, Harvard Law School Blog on Corporate Governance (Jan. 2, 2020), available at <https://corpgov.law.harvard.edu/2020/01/02/nyse-proposal-for-primary-direct-listings/>; Huff, *Arnold & Porter Discusses SEC Approval of NYSE Direct Listing Proposal*, CLS Blue Sky Blog (Aug. 31, 2020), available at <https://clsbluesky.law.columbia.edu/2020/08/31/arnold-porter-discusses-sec-approval-of-nyse-direct-listings-proposal/>

impact of a final agency decision rendered after plenary consideration by the agency. Final agency decisions enjoy a presumption of regularity and compliance with all applicable substantive and procedural laws. *FTC v. Invention Submission Corp.*, 965 F.2d 1086, 1091 (D.C. Cir. 1992). The four-part test cited by the Exchange were developed to help decide whether to overturn a presumptively valid final agency decision while a case is being litigated. Viewed in that context, it is understandable why an agency or court would consider the first three factors cited by the Exchange, *i.e.*, the “likelihood of success on the merits,” any “imminent, irreparable injury” to a party and any “substantial harm” to third parties. However, those factors have little relevance to administrative stays.

Interestingly, the Exchange fails to cite a single case where the Commission has used that four-part test to decide whether to lift an administrative stay. The exchange does cite two orders where the Commission decided to discontinue an automatic stay, but those decisions rested on a consideration of what would be “in the public interest.” NYSE Memorandum at 6 & n.8. To be sure, the “public interest” is the fourth element of the Exchange’s four-part test, but it is a standard that does not require the highly individualized considerations that affect whether a stay should be entered in the first place. And in any event, and on the merits, the factual differences between those two cases and this one are significant.

• In *Options Clearing Corp.*, Exchange Act Release No. 75886, File No. SR-OCC-2015-02, 2015 WL 5305989 (Sept. 10, 2015), the Commission decided first to grant the petition and then to lift the stay, finding that there was a “compelling

public interest” in “strengthening the capitalization of a systemically important clearing agency, such as OCC” versus the petitioners’ concerns about “potential monetary and competitive harm” to themselves. The Commission also concluded that lifting the stay would not preclude “meaningful review” of the order.

• In *Institutional Networks Corp.*, Exchange Act Release No. 25039, File No. 3-6926, 1987 WL 756909 (Oct. 15, 1987), the petition for review challenged the sixth extension of a pilot program for sharing information between a U.S. self-regulatory organization and a U.K. stock exchange. At the time the petition was filed, the pilot program had been in effect for 18 months, and the Commission determined that it would not be “in the public interest” to continue the stay, which would mean disrupting existing market operations to the detriment of investors. The Commission noted that the parties had been operating in accordance with the delegated determination and that the Commission could consider the merits of the petition for review without disrupting existing operations.

In short, if the Exchange’s motion is to be decided on the basis of the Commission rulings cited by the Exchange, the only pertinent inquiry is whether lifting the stay would be “in the public interest.” And the answer to that question is clearly “no.”

2. The “public interest” warrants maintaining the stay pending the Commission’s consideration of and disposition of the petition for review.

In considering the “public interest” in connection with this motion, a variety of considerations come into play. On balance the Council believes that the changes and the risks under the Order are so significant that the Commission should

maintain the stay in effect while it conducts a proceeding on the adequacy of investor protections under a new, significantly liberalized direct listing regime.

Ironically, the significance of the Order is made clear by the NYSE motion itself, which states what is at stake here:

The proposal would, *for the first time*, provide a company with the option of selling shares to raise capital in the opening auction upon initial listing on the Exchange without a firm underwritten offering.

NYSE Memorandum at 4 (emphasis added). Such a change raises .extremely significant policy issues for companies and investors alike. The Order allows private companies to sell shares directly on the New York Stock Exchange without providing the investor protections required by IPO regulations. More specifically the Order would allow a company “to sell shares itself in the opening auction on the first day of trading on the Exchange in addition to, or instead of, facilitating sales by selling shareholders (a “Primary Direct Floor Listing’).” Order at 4.

This is a huge change, one that has prompted a number of observers to see the Order as potentially a significant “game changer.” See n. 3, *supra*. It is easy to understand why. Companies that opt for direct listings could now avoid the need to retain underwriters in anything other than an advisory capacity thus reducing the costs of going public. In addition, a traditional IPO usually has a “lockup” period of up to 180 days after the IPO, during which time management and major shareholders may not sell their shares. There would be no such limitation with a direct listing, and therein lies the problem.

Section 11 of the Securities Act creates liability if there are material misstatements or omissions in connection with securities offered in a registration statement, in which event any person purchasing “such security” may sue. Courts have generally read the words “such security” to require that a plaintiff must trace his or her purchase to a specific registration statement. In the seminal case in this area, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit upheld a settlement involving claims that arose under registration statements issued in 1961 and 1963, and the settlement limited recovery to claimants who could trace their purchases to the 1963 offering. *Barnes v. Osofsky*, 373 F.2d 269 (2d Cir. 1967). The court (per Friendly, J.) concluded that the phrase “such security” should be read narrowly, with a right of recovery limited to securities offered pursuant to a specific registration statement, and not a broader reading that would cover securities that are generally available in the marketplace.

Section 11 liability thus requires proof that an investor purchased shares pursuant to a registration statement, and tracing ownership is generally not an issue as to shares purchased at or shortly after an IPO. Problems typically arise, however, after any lockup period expires, at which point shares can enter the market from multiple sources, and an investor buying shares after that point cannot trace his or her share purchase to the registration statement. *E.g., Krim v pcOrder, Inc.*, 402 F.3d 489 (5th Cir. 2005).

Traceability problems will be worsened by the Order under review. The Order facilitates – and encourages – listings of company-owned stock in addition to

listings of shares held by company shareholders under the current direct offering rules. As the petition argues in more detail, the existing direct listing regime has raised questions about the availability of Section 11 remedies if an investor's shares cannot be traced to shares sold pursuant to the registration statement. Those problems would be exacerbated by the listings allowed in the Order under review.

The issue has come into sharp focus on a pending case in which the Ninth Circuit is being asked whether Section 11 investor protections are extinguished when a direct listing authorizes the simultaneous sale of shares from two sources: shares sold pursuant to the registration statement and shares sold by insiders holding shares under a Rule 144 exemption from registration.⁴

The Order under review exacerbates the concerns raised in that case, because the Order will make it possible for many more shares to be directly listed and sold without the protections offered by IPO regulations.

This is a significant change, and it is particularly "in the public interest" for the Commission to grant the petition and review the issue, particularly as the loss of investor protections in this fashion was not a factor addressed in when the

⁴ *Pirani v. Slack Technologies, Inc.* 445 F.3d 367 (N.D. Cal. 2020), also available at http://securities.stanford.edu/filings-documents/1071/STI00_19/2020421_r01x_19CV05857.pdf. The Ninth Circuit order agreeing to hear the case on an interlocutory basis is available in *Pirani v. Slack Technologies, Inc.* No. 20-16419 (9th Cir., July 23, 2020), Docket No. 1.

The NYSE memorandum downplays the importance of this Slack litigation because the district court ruling allowed the plaintiff's Section 11 claims to proceed. Only in a footnote does the NYSE grudgingly acknowledge that the future of that ruling is in doubt since the district court certified that decision to the Ninth Circuit, which has agreed to hear the case. NYSE Memorandum at 8 & n.13.

Division on Trading and Markets decided the 2018 direct listings order. *Order Granting Accelerated Approval of NYSE Proposed Rule Change Relating to Listing of Companies*, Exchange Act Release No. 82627 (Feb. 2, 2018), 83 Fed. Reg. 5650 (Feb. 8, 2018). The importance of Commission review is further underscored by the fact that the absence of Section 11 investor protections is a key selling point raised by advocates of direct listings. The law firm that handled the first two direct listings of shareholder-held shares (Spotify and Slack) advises actual and potential clients that direct listings have the “potential to deter private plaintiffs from bringing claims under Section 11 of the Securities Act of 1933” and cited this fact as “an important advantage” of direct listings.⁵ The memorandum added that “few (if any) purchasers will be able to trace their stock to the challenged registration statement” when “both registered and unregistered stock are immediately sold into the market in a direct listing.”⁶

Neither the Order nor the NYSE motion disputes this interpretation, although the Exchange dismisses the Council’s concerns as “insubstantial.” NYSE Memorandum at 7. We disagree, but motions practice is not the forum to resolve the issue. The Exchange concedes that the Order will, “for the first time, provide a company with the option of selling shares to raise capital in the opening auction upon initial listing on the Exchange without a firm underwritten offering.” NYSE

⁵ Latham & Watkins, *Complex and Novel Section 11 Liability Issues of Direct Listings*, Corporate Counsel, at 1 (Dec. 20, 2019), available at <https://www.lw.com/thoughtLeadership/section-eleven-liability-direct-listings>

⁶ *Id.* at 2.

Memorandum at 4. It is surely in the public interest to let the Commission assess the adequacy of investor protections before ushering in that brave new world.

Arrayed against such a significant loss of investor protections are the arguments raised by the Exchange for letting the Order take immediate effect while the petition for review is pending. The Exchange frames its arguments in terms of the four-part standard that we have demonstrated does not apply here. That said, we take the specific points raised by the Exchange that are relevant to a “public interest” determination and demonstrate that none of these factors, whether taken separately or as a whole, is sufficient to overcome the public interest in allowing the Commission to consider the issues raised by the petition before letting a major regulatory change take effect.

The Exchange begins by stating the obvious, namely that “potential issues and investors could and would eagerly utilize the Primary Direct Floor Listing process if the automatic stay were lifted.” NYSE Memorandum at 14. NYSE points to favorable press coverage of the Spotify and Slack openings (which of course is no indication of how well a stock will fare over the long run), support from this rule change from investment banks, and the fact that the Exchange has engaged in discussions with potential issuers with aggregate private valuations exceeding \$100 billion. NYSE Memorandum at 15-16.

This reaction is eminently predictable and could be expected as to any proposed rule change that would allow companies to save millions of dollars on underwriter fees and to let insiders avoid lockups. Such yearnings do not, however,

offer a sufficient reason to short-circuit the Commission’s processes for an orderly review of a significant change affecting the market.

The Exchange is particularly unpersuasive when it resorts to sloganeering about the need for speedy approval in light of “the current climate,” “market volatility,” the “SPAC boom” (in which special purpose acquisition companies are currently providing an alternative to IPOs), the “coronavirus pandemic” and the upcoming presidential election. NYSE Memorandum at 15-16.

First, the demand by private companies for immediate direct listings may be lower than was perceived earlier this year. One reason could be the fact that the Order rejected the NYSE’s proposal to give companies making a direct listing additional time to meet the Exchange’s initial listing distribution standards. The upshot of this change could be significant. As one law firm memorandum observed last week, the result of that deletion is that “only a fairly select group of private companies would be eligible for primary direct listings on the NYSE.”⁷

This observation is buttressed by the fact that of various private companies poised to go public, including Silicon Valley tech “unicorns,” only two – Palantir and

⁷ Morrison & Foerster, *PE & VC Exits: U.S. Direct Listing Rules In Flux*, at 3, available at <https://www.mofo.com/resources/insights/200904-investor-exits.html>.

The standards cited in the article are: (1) the company must have, at the time of listing, at least 400 shareholders who each own at least 100 common shares and (2) either (a) the company must sell at least \$100 million in market value of its shares to the public in the direct listing, or (b) there must be freely tradeable company shares outstanding with a market value of at least \$250 million upon the direct listing.

Asana – appear to be relying on a direct listing to go public.⁸ Moreover, a California-based investment advisor last week published a note advising clients that a number of tech IPOs were already in the works and that while the pandemic “stunted the typical deal flow,” the “drought is expected to end after Labor Day, as a flurry of tech companies from the Bay Area unveiled plans to go public at the beginning of last week, with many more expected to come in the weeks ahead.”⁹

The pendency of a presidential election two months from now is no reason for speed. As a practical matter, filing a registration statement, getting it declared effective and getting it listed in a matter of weeks can be challenging, and the Exchange offers no reason to believe that an immediate lifting of the stay will result

⁸ Salmon, *A Tale of Two Direct Listings*, Axios (Aug. 27, 2020), available at <https://www.axios.com/asana-palantir-direct-listing-stock-market-88096fa4-8e83-4c76-b5f8-16bc9dcd4c97.html>.

⁹ Evergreen Gavekal, *Chasing Unicorns: IPOs to Watch in 2020* (Sept. 4, 2020), available at <https://blog.evergreengavekal.com/chasing-unicorns-ipos-to-watch-in-2020/>. The article notes as well that the first half of 2020 witnessed the failed IPO of WeWork, which “soured the prospects of many fledgling Silicon Valley unicorns that made big promises, but failed to produce profits while burning cash at an alarming clip with a murky path towards profitability.”

Looking at the two potential direct listings cited above, we note that Palantir’s registration statement has not been without controversy, and that company may not be an exemplar of what direct listings have to offer. Crichton, *In amended filing, Palantir admits it won’t have independent board governance for up to a year*, Tech Crunch (Sept. 3, 2020), available at <https://techcrunch.com/tag/palantir-technologies/>. The Council recently expressed concerns about Palantir’s multi-class stock structure with limited voting rights for public investors, among other things. Letter from Amy Borrus, Executive Director, to Chairman Peter Thiel et al. (Sept. 3, 2020), available at https://www.cii.org/files/issues_and_advocacy/correspondence/2020/CII%20letter%20to%20Palantir%20Technologies.pdf.

in an outpouring of direct listings between now and November. As for the supposed closing of the IPO window before presidential elections, the facts do not bear this out. An article by PwC's U.S. IPO services leader is worth quoting on this point:

Given these forces at play, many market participants have been advising IPO candidates to avoid the second half of 2020. Is this caution warranted? In our view, no. History shows those concerns are overdone. Historical IPO volume has been largely unaffected in previous election years, with the exception of biotech/pharma which has been hurt by political saber-rattling on drug prices

* * *

Based on our analysis of past elections and IPO activity, companies generally shift their IPO timing forward or backward by a week or two to avoid pricing the week of an election, but they don't decide to stay private due to elections. In fact, in 2000 and 2004, nine IPOs priced during the election week, although it appears the last three elections saw a more conservative approach, with no pricings in election week. The data shows slightly more active weeks ahead of an election and solid activity in the weeks following an election, notwithstanding the challenges of the holiday season truncating the Q4 IPO calendar.¹⁰

In short, there is no need for a rush to judgment. There are sound reasons for the automatic stay rule, which gives the Commission the time it needs to consider serious and far-reaching issues. In this case, the public interest warrants careful consideration of the important investor protections issues presented by the Order in question. The stay should remain in effect until the Commission has definitively ruled on those issues.

¹⁰ Ethridge and Cutler, *Myth-busting – going public during election years*, PwCs Deals Blog (March 4, 2020), available at <http://usblogs.pwc.com/deals/election-year-ipos/>

Conclusion.

For these reasons, the Council of Institutional Investors respectfully requests that the Exchange's motion to lift the stay should be denied.

Respectfully submitted,



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Dated: September 8, 2020

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that on this 8th day of September, I caused copies of this petition for review to be filed electronically at Secretarys-Office@sec.gov, with copies sent by overnight courier to Vanessa A. Countryman, Secretary, Securities and Exchange Commission, 100 F Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20549 and also caused this petition to be served by electronic mail upon Paul S. Mishkin, Joseph A. Hall, Marcel Fausten Daniel J. Schwartz and Lindsay Schare at paul.mishkin@davispolk.com, joseph.hall@davispolk.com, marcel.fausten@davispolk.com, daniel.schwartz@davispolk.com, and lindsay.schare@davispolk.com and by overnight courier to Davis Polk and Wardwell, 450 Lexington Avenue New York, N.Y. 10017.



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CERTIFICATE OF COMPLIANCE

I hereby certify that this brief in opposition complies with the word count limitation in 17 C.F.R. § 201.154(c). Excluding tables of contents and authorities, as provided by 17 C.F.R. § 201.154(c), but including cover pages, case captions, and signature blocks, the brief and motion together include 4,134 words. The undersigned relied upon the word count of this word-processing system in preparing this certificate.



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)	

NOTICE OF APPEARANCE

Please take notice that Jeffrey P. Mahoney hereby appears as counsel for petitioner Council of Institutional Investors in this matter. The contact information for both petitioner and the undersigned are:

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Dated: September 8, 2020

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that on this 8th day of September, I caused copies of this petition for review to be filed electronically at Secretarys-Office@sec.gov, with copies sent by overnight courier to Vanessa A. Countryman, Secretary, Securities and Exchange Commission, 100 F Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20549 and also caused this petition to be served by electronic mail upon Paul S. Mishkin, Joseph A. Hall, Marcel Fausten, Daniel J. Schwartz and Lindsay Schare at paul.mishkin@davispolk.com, joseph.hall@davispolk.com, marcel.fausten@davispolk.com, daniel.schwartz@davispolk.com, and lindsay.schare@davispolk.com and by overnight courier to Davis Polk and Wardwell, 450 Lexington Avenue New York, N.Y. 10017.



Jeffrey P. Mahoney