Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony. I am Roland Lewis, President and CEO of the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance. The Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance (MWA) is a coalition of over 640 businesses, community and recreational groups, educational institutions, and other stakeholders committed to transforming the New York and New Jersey Harbor and its waterways to make them cleaner and more accessible, a vibrant place to play, learn and work with great parks, great jobs and great transportation for all.

MWA has been an advocate and supporter of expanded ferry service in New York City for many years. We applaud New York City for starting the East River Ferry and we are excited about its success. The value of ferry service to New York City cannot be overstated. Ferries can relieve overcrowded mass transit systems, serve to evacuate people during emergencies and can connect waterfront communities. The City has invested billions of dollars in a revitalized waterfront through park investments, water quality improvement, capital infrastructure and ferry terminals. The missing link is to connect and leverage these investments to make ours a true waterfront town with robust, affordable and reliable water-based mass transit.

As we are all aware, the first year of the East River Ferry operation is projected to boast two times the estimates of ridership. To build on this success, we must study it. We need to
determine who is using the service, for what purpose and in what numbers. This data will improve the City’s ability to advocate for continued funding of the service and will improve the City’s ability to make decisions about future service lines. It will also show how much the ferry service is competing with nonsubsidized excursion and tourist ferry services. MWA therefore suggests conducting a demographic ridership survey, collecting information about the proportion of riders who are commuters versus tourists, whether riders come from within or outside of the City and from which neighborhoods are riders originating.

There is already a substantial amount of anecdotal evidence that the East River Ferry Service has played a role in boosting the local economy. This includes the ferry service bringing patrons to Brooklyn Flea and Smorgasburg in Williamsburg as well as increasing transportation options for residents thereby increasing value of waterfront real estate. Other ventures that have benefited from the East River Ferry Service are the Brooklyn Roasting Company which launched their mini coffee bars aboard the ferries.

Success stories of the East River Ferry’s role in local economic development, increasing real estate values and increasing access to the waterfront neighborhoods along the East River will be highlighted during a panel session at the MWA’s Waterfront Conference on May 18th. The panel will also explore what expanded ferry service will mean for both New York City and New Jersey and how the goal of ferry expansion can be accomplished in terms of funding, curbing pollution from transportation in the region and increasing the benefits of service for local communities.
Anecdotal evidence should be coupled with quantitative evidence of the economic benefits that local communities have realized as a result of the new ferry service. This task of producing a quantitative assessment fits naturally into the role of the New York City Economic Development Corporation (EDC) as it is the organization responsible for the East River Ferry Service. The MWA recommends that a quantitative analysis become part of an ongoing process of cataloguing and documenting the success of the ferry service to be carried out by the EDC.

In order to ensure the accuracy, effectiveness and ease with which the EDC can establish this process of documenting the benefits of ferry service, we propose that a Ferry Advisory Committee for each stop along the East River Ferry route be instated. Each informal committee would be made up of a small number, no more than four regular riders, and would help communicate the needs of local riders to the EDC. Each committee would report directly to the EDC and provide consolidated information regarding community requests such as changes to scheduling, infrastructure at landing sites and amenities. Ensuring the satisfaction of the communities using the ferry service is essential to its future success and for this reason the committees can serve an essential role in continuing ferry service and for the necessary investments and subsidies. The Washington State Ferry system's Ferry Advisory Committees provides an excellent model for this task.

Every form of mass transit in our city relies on an operating subsidy and ferries are no exception. In relative terms, ferry subsidies are a modest investment. A steady subsidy is needed in order to provide more frequent service and expansion while bringing the price down to a more competitive level. On the capital funding side, water transit is a New York bargain – no tracks to
repair or roads to resurface – the water is ready made for transport. A five borough ferry system would be a boon to our over congested roads and rails and a key to the economic development of our waterfront. Ferries need long-term predictable public investment to succeed.

The success of the East River service is an indicator that more benefits can be achieved through investment in waterborne transit. But as we celebrate the early progress we must be mindful of the obstacles overcome: the current service has a price point higher than other forms of transit such as subway and bus; the amenities at the dock locations are often Spartan at best; there is no integration of the ferry into the MTA system – you can’t transfer and connections are nonexistent; and the provisional nature of the subsidy is not an inducement to change community habits. These are all solvable challenges and the fact that the service has succeeded despite these hurdles is compelling evidence of the viability and necessity of subsidized, frequent, comfortable, reliable and scenic waterborne transit to bolster our dynamic and growing city.

More resources are needed to bring the benefits of ferry service to the New York City waterfront and to provide the City and it residents with the opportunity to travel on the expanse of blue highways that surround the City. We can do this through expanded service, maintaining the subsidy, lowering the price point, improving amenities and integrating the system into the mass transit system.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.