Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony. I am Roland Lewis, President and CEO of the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance (MWA). The MWA is a coalition of over 700 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.

New York City is in the midst of a tremendous waterfront renaissance. Long-neglected waterfront spaces across the city’s 520-mile coastline are transforming into sprawling waterfront parks and vibrant neighborhoods, while dormant waterfront industries are showing new signs of economic vitality. As you are all aware, the New York City Regional Economic Development Council has designated a diverse set of 15 high-growth-potential districts as ripe for public investment. As funding is funneled into waterfront neighborhoods, and real estate developers continue to covet waterfront land, it is critical that we work to ensure that New York’s coast remains a multifunctional asset rich with economically viable industry, publicly accessible open space, and recreational opportunity.
New York’s maritime port—the largest on the East Coast and the third-largest in the United States—sustains 279,200 jobs, generating $12 billion in annual wages and more than $5 billion in tax revenues to state and local governments (panynj.gov). Accordingly, in planning for the increasingly desirable New York waterfront, it is critical to maintain ample space for economically viable waterfront industry that, as indicated by its name, can only be sited on waterfront land. For instance, in 2004, in spite of vocal opposition from the preservation community, the city permitted IKEA to demolish the Red Hook Graving Dock—a ship servicing facility that employed roughly 100 people—and the surrounding historic buildings to open the site for a new store and a 1,400-car parking lot (http://saveindustrialbrooklyn.org/red_hook.html). It is essential that, going forward, the city refrain from turning its back on its industrial heritage and respect the needs of thriving businesses.

In addition to preserving waterfront industry, the city’s commitment to public waterfront access—as the Department of City Planning laid out in Vision 2020—must be honored in any new coastal developments. Where possible, commercial, industrial, and residential developments must incorporate public access to the waterfront to ensure the democratization of the city’s shoreline. For example, while the rezoning of the Williamsburg and Greenpoint waterfront has attracted a great deal of luxury residential development along the East River, new public spaces have opened waterfront land to all neighborhood residents. This model should be expanded upon for future developments with enhanced design guidelines for easier connectivity to upland communities, multifunctional piers that allow for on-water recreation and the docking of historic ships, and environmental educational programming opportunities for youths.
In order to facilitate easier access to waterfront public spaces, citywide ferry service must be expanded and enhanced. Not only will an extensive, interconnected ferry network link waterfront destinations across the five boroughs and the larger New York Metropolitan Area, but ferries can also help the city to achieve a number of other critical goals such as a reduced carbon footprint, relieved congestion on roads and public transit, advanced emergency management, and, by bringing new foot traffic into waterfront neighborhoods, economic development and job creation. To make way for the expansion of ferry transit, developers should be incentivized to include the infrastructure necessary to support ferry transit such as docks, ramps, and shelters.

Rife with spectacular potential for growth, New York City’s waterfront has reached a critical moment. Haphazard development that neglects sound planning principles and precludes public access will prove detrimental to communities and diminish the potential for a healthily diversified economy.

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