Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony. I am Harrison Peck, Manager for Ferry Transit Policy Advocacy at 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.

It is undeniable that Hurricane Sandy made a reality the kinds of disaster scenarios previously imagined only in sci-fi cinema: water rushing into the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, roofs of taxi cabs piercing through rising floodwaters, subway tunnels transformed into underground canals. Sandy reminded us that as New Yorkers we indeed are an island people, and in the wake of the Superstorm our transportation infrastructure came to an utter halt. In times like these, it is important to glean what lessons we can to plan for the future.

What became clear in the days following Superstorm Sandy—as well as other emergency events including the 2003 blackout, the 2005 transit strike, and 9/11—is that a redundant transit system is a resilient transit system. With roads, tunnels, subways, and commuter rails out of
commission, ferries quickly became the unsung heroes of urban mobility, restoring service soon after Sandy’s passage and witnessing an immediate ridership spike. NY Waterway restored trans-Hudson service on October 31st, the day after Sandy tore through the region, while the Staten Island Ferry came back online two days later on November 2nd. On the other hand, most commuter rails did not resume service until November 8th; the Battery Tunnel did not reopen to traffic until the 13th; and the subway, though various lines resumed service gradually throughout the week following the storm, did not see a system-wide resumption until November 16th. These weeks after Sandy reminded us that, in spite of the MTA’s astounding capacity to revive our flooded transit system, ferries and their landside infrastructure are the mode of transit that are naturally most resilient to extreme flooding. And, owing to the critical transit redundancy they provide, they managed to get parts of the region moving again almost seamlessly.

As you know, the NYC Economic Development Corporation (EDC) and the NYC Department of Transportation took note of this and, using FEMA funding, contracted with private ferry operators (Seastreak and New York Water Taxi) to run temporary service to hard-hit neighborhoods on the Rockaway Peninsula and Staten Island. These new routes restored mobility to residents of otherwise inaccessible neighborhoods and allowed them to, as much as possible, start to return to their normal lives. And while the city must be commended for responding to the transit paralysis with new ferry service, imagine if these routes had already existed: rather than having to take the time to secure FEMA funding, plan new routes, and construct temporary landings—a process which took two weeks in Rockaway and nearly a month on Staten Island—an interconnected, five-borough ferry network could have provided virtually uninterrupted transit service to residents across the city.
In short, year-round ferry service—in addition to providing a quick, comfortable, and scenic commute—can arm the city for emergency situations, both evacuating those in need from inaccessible neighborhoods, and providing uninterrupted service in the absence of other transportation options.