Testimony of Roland Lewis, President and CEO

New York City Council, Committee on Waterfronts
re: An Update on the City's Comprehensive Waterfront Plan: Expanding Public Access

March 28, 2014

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. I am Roland Lewis, President and CEO of the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance (MWA). The MWA is a coalition of nearly 800 community and recreational groups, educational institutions, businesses, and other stakeholders committed to restoring the New York and New Jersey Harbor. MWA looks forward to working with this Committee in the coming year to make our waterways cleaner and more accessible, a vibrant place to play, learn, and work with great parks, great jobs and great transportation for all.

MWA is proud to have championed the legislation that called for New York City to create the Comprehensive Waterfront Plan (Vision 2020) and corresponding Waterfront Action Agenda, its three-year implementation plan. Now, three years since the issuance of the plan and in the early stages of a new administration, is the right time to reflect on our accomplishments and assess what remains to be done. There are eight pillars to Vision 2020 that inform the Waterfront Action Agenda:

1. Expand public access to the waterfront and waterways
2. Enliven the waterfront with attractive uses
3. Support the working waterfront
4. Improve water quality
5. Restore and protect natural waterfront areas
6. Enhance the Blue Network of public waterways
7. Improve governmental oversight
8. Identify climate resilience
These efforts are in many ways complementary, though we believe that the topic discussed today, opening public access along the water’s edge in all five boroughs, is an important component of restoring New Yorkers’ sense of ownership and stewardship of our waterways, our most precious shared resource. The Waterfront Action Agenda called for the following investments to improve waterfront access:

- Expand and improve existing waterfront parks ($200 million+)
- Develop or acquire over 50 acres of new waterfront parks ($40 million+)
- Develop waterfront Greenways and esplanades ($120 million+)

Yet MWA believes that improving and increasing public access to our water means more than just providing skyline views and passive recreation for new residents of luxury towers. It means providing resources for park maintenance and operations in economically challenged neighborhoods that may not otherwise be able to support private financing models. It means expanding our definition of access to include community-based and educational programming that allow New Yorkers young and old to engage the water in new ways – to touch the water to learn about the habitats we share and the history of the city we love. It means providing new routes for waterborne transit in the city’s transit-poor waterside communities.

The proposed expansion of the “Blue Network” called for, among other things, an improvement of the NYC Water Trail and five-borough commuter ferry service, to deepen the public’s connection to and use of the waterways. MWA is proud to be a partner with the Parks Department as part of our Open Waters Initiative to restore on-water connections in waterfront communities, where a regional network of Community Eco Docks that ring the harbor, including the first built last fall in Bay Ridge, will soon provide platforms for outdoor environmental classrooms, on-water recreation, and maritime educational programming. Because of the efforts of the Parks Department, along with Council Member Vincent Gentile and numerous community
organizations, you can now get from the “Bay” to the “Ridge” and the “Ridge” to the “Bay.” Though the Chairwoman’s district, along the North Shore of Staten Island, is encircled by water, there are regrettably few access points where that community can interact with the water. We look forward to working with Council Member Rose to change that by expanding the Eco Dock program to Stapleton.

MWA has also worked in partnership with NYCEDC as part of DockNYC, a program to streamline permitting and management at six city-owned vessel berthing sites across the city. In just one season of operation, this program has brought 151 transient dockings by historic, research, educational and recreational boats – more than doubling the visits from the previous year – and 17 tenants, up from 10 the previous year. DockNYC will also be hosting the Tug and Harbor Day festival at Homeport Pier this year and is working with NYCEDC to increase the capital improvement program at all these sites. This is a terrific start, but it is just the beginning.

Our great city grew to prominence in large part because of our maritime activity, and this heritage should be recognized and preserved, wherever possible. Yet as we re-open the water’s edge to parks, natural areas, and passive recreation, there remain too few sites throughout the city for historic ships to dock safely. It is critical for the City to support these vessels with infrastructure, management, and coordination to continue developing our city’s community of historic ships. Though we were once undoubtedly this nation’s greatest port city, each year the Tall Ships Challenge, which welcomes many historic ships at ports throughout the country, brings its events – and resultant tourism dollars – elsewhere, because New York’s maritime facilities cannot adequately accommodate visiting ships.

MWA is working closely with experts in the design, engineering, and environmental science communities as well as City, State and federal agencies to author a comprehensive set of
Waterfront Edge Design Guidelines (WEDG) to ensure that development along the water’s edge enhances ecology, promotes resiliency, provides equitable public access, and encourages maritime use. This unique collaboration between government, non-profit groups, consultants, and other stakeholders has resulted in a set of guiding principles, or core values, for best design practices for the waterfront edge. We are encouraged that preliminary conversations with developers of waterfront projects such as Two Trees Management, at the Domino Sugar site, have responded favorably to building infrastructure for maritime use. For example, the simple and cost-effective provision of bollards, cleats and gates along existing bulkheads or newly constructed piers can unlock miles of waterfront to communities and provide safe egress points for mariners in distress in case of emergencies.

MWA stresses the importance of a sustained commitment from this administration to continue to monitor and implement the Comprehensive Waterfront Plan. We are at a crossroads of a profound transformation of our City, as millions are beginning to embrace the water that surrounds us. Our alliance is delighted to call upon strong partnerships at all levels of government, and we look forward to carrying this important work forward with all of you for “smooth sailing” in the years to come.