The Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance (MWA) is a bi-state coalition of over 800 community and recreational groups, educational institutions, businesses, and other stakeholders committed to restoring and revitalizing the New York and New Jersey waterways. Our advocacy efforts include a focus on establishing a ferry system that is extensive, affordable, frequent, reliable, and integrated with other mass transit options.

**Ferries must be a part of our region’s transportation solution.** As demand for housing soars, our existing core neighborhoods cannot keep pace, and new development is transforming industrial districts along the waterfront. These rising neighborhoods are starved for mass transit, and residents of many waterfront districts, such as Astoria – which is abuzz with the possibility of new ferry service -- or the Rockaways – which is fighting to keep its own lifeline to Manhattan – have long suffered arduous, nearly two-hour commutes. Yet the city may soon find itself with hundreds of thousands of people in new, high-density developments and few transportation choices.

**New York has tested maritime transportation and found the water welcoming.** Though the waterways that once carried 100 million riders a year into Manhattan’s business district but were all but forgotten in the last century, they are more alive than ever with transit, as thousands of New Yorkers per day ride the Blue Highways to work, to school, or to market. The East River Ferry, for example, launched in June 2011, quickly doubled ridership expectations; the service was extended to at least 2019 in response to enormous demand.

**We need a plan to integrate ferries into the larger transportation network.** As traveling by boat becomes a part of our everyday habits, and an important component of how we move about the region, ferries still remain largely disconnected from rail and surface transit. Ours is now the second-largest ferry system in the world, behind only Istanbul, but it is the only major system in which ferry routes and schedules are not integrated into the broader public transit network. This means transfers to other modes of transportation are often inconvenient, limiting the viability of multi-modal trips and increasing the total cost of travel.

**There are common-sense steps we can take right now.** Earlier this year, MWA issued a policy paper that proposes fifteen steps toward better connecting ferries with public transit. Those recommendations include changes that can be implemented quickly, such as adding ferry stops to public transit maps and extending bus routes to ferry landings, as well as longer-term measures such as developing a system for allowing integrated fare payment and free or discounted transfers between modes.

**Coordinated oversight is not unprecedented.** In California’s Bay Area, the Water Emergency Transportation Authority (WETA) was established to unify all regional ferry service. Spurred by the threat of earthquakes, and supported with dedicated revenue from bridge surcharges, WETA now operates as San Francisco Bay Ferry, and is authorized by the State of California to operate a “comprehensive San Francisco Bay Area public water transit system.” This consolidation has helped the region not only improve service and coordinate better inter-modal and upland connections, but also strengthen emergency response plans. As New York reconsiders new methods of raising toll revenue for transit, ferries must be a part of that equation.
We cannot wait until disaster strikes again. Ferries have played an essential role evacuating New Yorkers in times of emergency or helping them navigate our metropolitan archipelago during post-crisis system outages. During 9/11, the blackout, transit strikes and Superstorm Sandy, ferries helped take New Yorkers to safety and played an essential role in helping commuters when other options were unavailable. We must work now to deepen our ties between the ferry network and the city’s rail and road transit systems. As we continue to re-engage with all the cultural and economic benefits the waterways that surround us can offer, we urge this Committee, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and the Transportation Reinvention Commission, as well as the State of New York to look to the Blue Highways as a vital component of our transportation system. We urge members of this Committee to review our recommendations and welcome continued discussion about how MWA can help bring together key stakeholders across the industry and in waterfront communities.