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 waterways have been revitalized with active recreation, environmental education, and waterborne transportation, but the harbor has for centuries been a vital conduit for commerce and an engine of economic development. Yet administrative burdens too often prevent safe, necessary water-dependent projects from going forward expeditiously.

Since our inception in 2007, MWA has been a leading advocate for the needs of maritime businesses. Our advocacy has spanned several issues and programs, including:

- Permitting reform for waterfront projects
- Waterfront Edge Design Guidelines (WEDG) certification program
- DockNYC for reactivating vessel berthing sites for maritime use
- Dredging on smaller shipping channels and improving dredged materials management
- Raising the Bayonne Bridge to allow passage of higher-capacity ships
- Waterfront Platform for NYC to educate elected leaders and voters, supported by Mayor de Blasio

The port supports nearly 280,000 jobs and $37.1 billion in economic activity in our region. Indeed New York’s economic ascendancy is inextricably linked to the harbor and the growth of the shipping industry, and the working waterfront continues to be a source of good jobs for everyday New Yorkers and a critical part of a diversified economy. Over 90% of goods imported into the US arrive by water, and our region’s seaports handle approximately 15% of this volume. Every single gallon of gasoline and home heating oil moves through the area by ship or barge. While the industry has expanded over the past generation to bring much of the region’s container and terminal operations to New Jersey, many of the support facilities that make our ports run smoothly are located here in New York.

Keeping our maritime facilities in a state of good repair has economic as well as environmental benefits. Without tugs, barges, repair facilities and other maritime support businesses, the shipping industry could not function, forcing more trucks onto our already-congested highway system. Waterborne goods delivery is ten times more efficient than truck freight, and our tug and barge fleet prevent 3.1 million truck trips per year. But maritime businesses need to undertake regular maintenance, including bulkhead repair and dredging, to keep their capacity up to date, and our transportation and shipping network competitive. And although regulatory programs are administered to mitigate or eliminate impacts to the environment, while allowing reasonable and necessary development to proceed, obstacles remain that impede prompt and efficient discretionary approval for many such water-dependent projects.

Navigating the waterfront permitting process can be confusing and time consuming. Our ability to design a shoreline that incorporates an active working waterfront has been impeded by the waterfront permitting system. It is a complicated, non-transparent, process that stymies even the most sophisticated land owners and waterfront developers, as more than 14 federal, State and local government agencies have regulatory oversight over the New York Harbor. While environmental protection regulations must be upheld, the process can and should be improved. With support from the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, MWA launched a study and a series of task force meetings to review the permitting process, provide consolidated information for applicants, and make recommendations for reform.
The “One-stop-shop” is a direct result of recommendations made from MWA’s permitting review, and will improve the vitality of the region’s waterfront. A user-friendly, web-based permit review process will allow small business owners to make necessary improvements to maritime facilities in months, rather than years, allowing potential applicants to focus on their jobs, rather than piles of paperwork. MWA is committed to working with NYCEDC and other City officials to strengthen State and federal agencies’ commitment for this permitting reform.

Many elected leaders have signed on to protect and preserve the working waterfront. In 2013, MWA issued a five-point Waterfront Platform for New York City, endorsed by over fifty candidates for public office – and nearly thirty current elected officials, including Mayor Bill de Blasio as well as Chairwoman Rose and Council Members Garodnick and Vallone of this Committee. That platform called for strengthening the working waterfront by:

- Developing a “one-stop-shop” for permitting assistance
- Continuing the revitalization of New York Container Terminal (NYCT)
- Completing reactivation of South Brooklyn Marine Terminal (SBMT)
- Creating a trading system for exchanging credits from waterfront areas for wetlands restoration
- Reform bridge tolling policies that disadvantage New York-based maritime operators
- Improve and expand Brooklyn waterfront rail system
- Improve and diversify management of dredged materials

Some of these efforts are underway. In addition to the “one-stop-shop,” MWA supports NYCEDC’s work to develop a pilot wetlands mitigation banking system, known as MARSHES, to preserve New York City’s wetlands areas while providing better flexibility for the use of active industrial sites along the waterfront. Yet this project is still in need of an initial investment to ensure that ecological restoration can be completed before credits are purchased. MWA has also joined the Move NY coalition to rebalance tolls on river crossings. Not only will this plan reduce congestion and improve transit – including additional commuter ferry service – but will also rationalize the cost structure for cargo movement.

MWA is leading the way forward with best practices for waterfront development. Early next year, MWA will issue a comprehensive set of Waterfront Edge Design Guidelines (WEDG) for industrial and maritime use as well as parks, natural areas, and commercial and residential projects. This effort, a collaboration with experts in the design, engineering, and environmental science communities as well as City, State and federal officials is a voluntary rating system designed to ensure that development along the water’s edge enhances ecology, promotes resiliency, provides equitable public access, and encourages maritime use. The program includes credits for avoiding environmental impacts, exceeding mitigation requirements, and using mitigation banking. WEDG will be a tool for maritime businesses to better understand and process permitting applications.

Shipping, marine transportation and maritime businesses are the economic engine of the city and provide thousands of jobs to New Yorkers. MWA calls on this Council and the administration to continue promoting key programs and facilities to ensure the viability of the working waterfront and preserve good jobs and infrastructure that must not be lost.