Testimony of Roland Lewis, President & CEO
New York City Council Committee on Waterfronts and Committee on Economic Development
Oversight Hearing
re: Examining the Use of Mitigation Banking for Waterfront Restoration
February 27, 2015

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 are alive with active recreation, environmental education, waterborne transportation, and economic activity.

**MWA has long been a strong supporter for establishing a wetlands banking system**, especially as a tool to help maritime businesses expand their operations by providing a predictable, environmentally sound way to compensate for necessary shorefront maritime improvements. MWA supports Economic Development Corporation’s program to develop a wetlands mitigation banking system, known as MARSHES, to restore 68 acres of the Saw Mill Creek wetlands, an area in northwestern Staten Island fouled by illegal dumping, choked by invasive weeds, and partially filled in over the years. The wetlands degradation worsened during Superstorm Sandy, but once restored, the healthy Saw Mill Creek ecosystem will protect hundreds of nearby businesses by absorbing floods and storm surge.

**MWA’s comprehensive review of the waterfront permitting process in 2010 proposed the creation of a wetlands banking system** to “aggregate permit compliance and ongoing maintenance, reduc[ing] failure rates and non-compliance… and allow[ing] mitigation to occur simultaneously with development, as opposed to waiting for development to proceed and then establishing mitigation measures.” An idea bandied about locally for years – championed by the Environmental Protection Agency and put into practice elsewhere around the country – wetlands mitigation banking is an idea whose time has come.

**This innovative concept enjoys strong support from our elected leaders across the city.** As part of MWA’s five-point Waterfront Platform for New York City and corresponding voter guide published in 2013, MWA asked candidates for office to support a new wetlands banking program. Proponents included then-candidate Mayor Bill de Blasio, who “support[ed] innovative measures that enable us to account for negative externalities – such as the loss of wetlands – and provide the funds necessary to invest in large-scale restoration projects” and then-candidate Comptroller Scott Stringer, who “support[ed] piloting a market-based wetland mitigation bank in NYC which promises to protect our precious shoreline (boosting our resiliency in the process) while enabling public and private economic development to proceed.” Other supporters, including those serving on these Committees, included Chairwoman Rose, Council Members Gentile, Menchaca, and Miller.

**The funding of the wetlands mitigation bank and the start of the innovative MARSHES program is a win-win-win for the City** – the restoration of ecologically important wetlands, increased resiliency for Staten Island, and a much more efficient way for maritime businesses to carry out environmental mitigation as they negotiate the permitting process. This project is also consistent with the goals of PlaNYC, the sustainability plan for New York City, which recommended “establish[ing] a mitigation banking mechanism for public projects” in an effort to “better achieve ecological goals of replacing loss wetlands while making it easier for public institutions and private developers who are attempting to comply with environmental requirements.”

**MWA strongly supports the MARSHES initiative** and looks forward to working with NYCEDC to ensure that this project can deliver environmental, economic, and resiliency benefits to all New Yorkers.