With the water cleaner than it has been in generations, people are rediscovering recreational pleasures such as swimming, boating and fishing. But major challenges remain.

- **Lack of information about safety and cleanliness**
- **Barriers of all sorts prevent access**
- **Insufficient funding for parks**
- **Fragmented public policy**

Solutions? Turn the page...
WATERFRONT PLAY

For years the inhabitants of the metropolitan region who had the means to do so made their way to places like Coney Island and the Jersey Shore for relief from the congestion and noise of the city. Most of the waterfront of the urban archipelago had become inaccessible in the 19th century, given over to the commercial and industrial enterprise that made the Port of New York and New Jersey the greatest in the nation, if not the world. Increasing industrialization and population growth brought pollution, so that generations gradually used the metropolitan waters for recreation less and less.

Happily, that picture is beginning to change as we reclaim the waterfront, now much cleaner thanks to landmark environmental legislation in the 1970s and 80s. But if progress is being made in turning the once inaccessible and often blighted shoreline into an agreeable place for recreation and mixed-use development, challenges remain. A complicated regulatory framework slows the process, as do inconsistent policies of local, state and federal agencies. Not least, planners can find themselves fighting social inertia. People fear outsiders and gentrification. Many have lingering fears of pollution. Have we forgotten how to enjoy the waterfront?

Waterfront Play: A Short History

The very concept of recreation in the city dates only from modern times and the emergence of a middle class with enough economic clout to expect some of the leisure-time pleasures once reserved for the rich. The greatest advance in recreational opportunity for New Yorkers, rich and poor alike, was the creation of Central Park in the 1860s, a visionary effort to counter the grid-iron street plan and compensate for a waterfront increasingly walled off by commerce and industry.

Battery Park served as Manhattan’s only significant public waterfront recreation area until the 1920s when Robert Moses built the system of parks and parkways that included the enormous Jones Beach State Park. There matters stood until more than a decade after the Second World War. With the advent of the environmental protection movement in the 1960s and 70s, and the decline of New York’s waterfront industries (including, above all, the Manhattan-based shipping industry), the stage was set for the eventual reclamation of the shoreline for mixed uses, including residential and recreational development.
Waterfront Play Today

A tremendous opportunity to plan diverse recreational activities at and on the New York/New Jersey waterways is at hand. Because the water is cleaner than it has been in many years, people are already rediscovering the joys of swimming, boating, fishing and simply finding refreshment in the vistas and fresh air. But there’s much more that can be done.

Great parks can be the jewels in the crown of a redeveloped metropolitan shoreline, but physical access to the waterfront and the water itself is key. The presence of the subway at Battery Park is one of the main reasons for its modern success as a waterfront destination, and so it must be for the region’s new shoreline parks and landings: if the subway is not nearby, other mass transit – specifically bus and ferry connections – must be set up so that people from upland neighborhoods can get there.

Visions for the city’s built edge are evolving. Not long ago, the Battery Park City esplanade was seen as the pinnacle of waterfront planning because it offered a safe, pleasant path for pedestrians and bicyclists. Today, however, forward-thinking waterfront planners are trying to offer opportunities to actually touch the water. Forsaking sheer concrete walls where appropriate, some of the latest waterfront designs feature natural elements such as marsh grasses, boulders and sand, or even steps that lead into the water. Docks are a fundamental part of waterfront design.

Continuous access along metropolitan waterfronts is a long-term goal in many places, one being achieved with big development projects such as Hudson River Park from the Battery to 59th Street, and the Brooklyn Waterfront Greenway initiative from Sunset Park to Newtown Creek. Along the East and Bronx Rivers, a South Bronx Greenway is being threaded between existing and new open spaces, and around a number of waterfront industrial sites. Smaller-scale projects to connect urbanites to their waterfront can happen with the creation of street-end parks, wading areas, wildlife-viewing platforms and boat launching or mooring sites.

In a busy city, many people will not be aware of opportunities for waterfront recreation and will need to be informed and encouraged. Clear signage and well-publicized

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4
programs for waterfront recreation and education, such as MWA’s annual “City of Water Day,” will help. Young people must be engaged with the planning and programming of new waterfront parks to encourage the stewardship of their generation and the involvement of their parents and grandparents.

The role of government agencies in waterfront management, funding, maintenance, and programming is not always clear, and this has led to missed opportunities. There are waterfront parks with no boat access, waterfront schools with no rowing or sailing programs, and waterfront neighborhoods with no docks or landings. The answer? Every city and state agency with waterfront holdings and programs should have a point person responsible for public waterfront needs, ready to address public transportation issues, coordinate funding and maintenance, and consider new uses that would encourage low- and no-cost public programming on esplanades, docks, greenways and landings.

Exciting new initiatives are bringing New Yorkers to the water. The NYC Water Trail now connects 160 square miles of rivers, bays, creeks, inlets and ocean in the five boroughs and is being expanded under the leadership of Dorothy Lewandowski, Borough Commissioner of Queens for the NYC Dept. of Parks and Recreation. In early 2008, the Greater New York YMCA began working with the Dept. of Education to provide free swimming lessons to second graders across the city.

With the diversification of waterfront play comes safety challenges. People must abide by the rules of the water, with recreational boaters taking particular care as they navigate the busy waters of the region. Local and state governments must enforce wake rules and be on the lookout for unsafe boating conditions. All people should have the chance to learn how to swim. As community leaders recognize the importance of the waterfront to the health and well-being of all citizens, policymakers need to capture the vitality and creativity of the waterfront community with new guidelines for environmental regulation, liability insurance, educational programs and other elements of waterfront management. Then the dream of lively, fun, healthy waterfront recreation within reach of all metropolitan residents may become reality.

“We should join hands with our environmental friends so that this isn’t really an either/or. It’s not just about play, it’s about stewardship. We’re a part of a New Ethic: the water is part of everybody’s life.”

- Rob Pirani, Regional Plan Association, November 2007
CALL TO ACTION

It’s not just about play; it’s about stewardship. It’s not just about getting to the waterfront; it’s about access to the water itself. These and other important principles were discussed and refined at meetings convened by the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance to discuss the future of waterfront recreation in the New York/New Jersey area. Practical solutions proposed by the Waterfront Play Task Force are below.

GET EVERY KID ON THE WATER AND IN THE WATER

We in the New York metropolitan area live on a series of islands and peninsulas, yet we have little connection to the water that surrounds us. The tides and currents that move the water daily, the aquatic flora and fauna that dwell in it, and the maritime industry and other businesses that use the “blue highways” are foreign to most of us, especially our children.

It is well-known that when people have a connection to a place they are more inclined to care for it. We must expand and multiply efforts that will get the next generation to embrace the harbor and waterways as vital resources in their lives. And we must ensure that the waterfront is open and available to all of our children, especially those from poorer communities with historically limited opportunities to learn from and enjoy the water.

SOLUTIONS

MORE WATERFRONT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Efforts such as the NYC Dept. of Parks and Recreation “Learn to Swim” program, the MWA Harbor Camp, the New York Harbor School, and dozens of other waterfront education programs are good first steps but there must be many more programs and institutions to serve this need.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION ADMINISTRATOR FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND WATERFRONT EDUCATION

More than 50 programs in the metropolitan region employ the waterfront as an open-air classroom for maritime, historic and environmental education. The New York City Department of Education and the many New Jersey school districts that border our waterways should each designate a person to guide curricula and ensure that these programs – now serving thousands of young people but with the potential to serve millions – have greater access to financial support.
LACK OF PHYSICAL ACCESS TO THE WATERFRONT AND WATER

Long fenced off from the people, the rivers’ edges are ready for the welcoming parks and public spaces now being planned. But how will people get there? Few mass transit routes today extend to water connections.

Other than the street extensions needed to link cars and buses to the waterfront, better multi-use paths for walking, running and cycling are needed. Existing zoning regulations call for a 40-foot-wide open space at the water’s edge, but in dense urban areas this is not wide enough to accommodate pedestrians, runners, bicyclists, fishermen and others.

SOLUTIONS

DESIGN THAT CONNECTS

• Plan for layers of connection that will get people to the shoreline safely by foot, bicycle, mass transit, boat and car.
• Make continuous access along the waterfront the goal where possible.
• Draw inspiration from current projects such as Hudson River Park and the Brooklyn Waterfront Greenway, which when completed will offer, respectively, 5 and 14 miles of waterfront access with multi-use paths, active recreation, docks, boathouses, marinas, natural areas, and more. As the designers of these two waterfront stretches understand, layers of use ensure a lively mix of people and activity.
• Start with simple town docks at selected street ends and as these new waterfront access points open, add them to the NYC Water Trail. Small-scale improvements in the near term will serve as models for the future.

MASS TRANSIT THAT LINKS LAND AND WATER

• Extend public transportation lines to the waterfront.
• Expand existing ferry routes to connect with public transit on land.
• Broaden Metrocard and SmartCard technology to include ferries.
• Expand operating subsidies to include ferry services.
• Provide start-up funds for new ferry routes.

Top, a kayak festival. Right, one of the city’s few town docks
LACK OF PUBLIC AWARENESS

Most children in the metropolitan area have never been on a boat. Many don't know how to swim. They've been told by their parents not to touch the water. Their teachers, concerned about safety or cost, are hesitant to schedule field trips though the waterfront presents rich opportunities for lessons outdoors.

Most adults in the New York/New Jersey metropolitan area, too, are disconnected from the water. They have lost the tradition of using the water for recreation because until now they have understood the shoreline to be dirty and inaccessible. The Public Trust Doctrine, which states that the waters and waterfront belong to all people, is not a widely known tradition.

SOLUTIONS

PRODUCE A PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

- Produce a marketing campaign linking public health to waterfront recreation and stewardship of the area's greatest natural asset.
- Identify existing and future public spaces, and ways to get to them.
- Create volunteer positions that will not only serve to educate but will also reduce the costs of maintenance.
- Produce events for waterfront parks that will draw people, especially first-time users, to the water's edge and teach them about the connections between land and water. The first City of Water Day, sponsored by the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance this past July, drew thousands of people to Governors Island, many of them unfamiliar with the waterfront but eager to hop in a kayak or join a waterfront walking tour.

ALLOW EVERY CHILD TO FEEL SAFE AT AND ON THE WATER

- Teach children to appreciate the water by incorporating swimming, water safety, and rowing and boating opportunities into all levels of curriculum.
- Along with physical education, lessons in science, economics, history, art and literature can be greatly enriched when the waterfront is used as a natural classroom.
- Invite the input of local youth and adults into the design and programming of parks and water access points.
- Produce educational programs about the water for all ages, in and out of school.
FRAGMENTED PUBLIC POLICY

A distinct agency that can prioritize waterfront decisions and cultivate cooperation among agencies and regulators either does not exist or does not feel empowered to lead. Myriad jurisdictions and overlapping layers of federal, state and local agencies at and on the water means complicated, sometimes contradictory, regulations. The lack of coordinated planning results in shoreline and community development that is not integrated: waterfront neighborhoods with no docks, waterfront parks with no boat access, waterfront schools that do not offer rowing or sailing. Because responsibility is fragmented, problems often are not addressed in a timely fashion: wakes wear out infrastructure, broken docks are not repaired, illegally blocked access persists.

SOLUTION CREATE A DEDICATED WATERFRONT AGENCY IN EACH CITY

Greater collaboration among agencies would save time and money. With this in mind, each city should create a lead agency to deal with waterfront issues.

- Designate a point person in each city and state agency with waterfront holdings to work with this lead agency. Such coordinated planning could mean, for example, that marine transportation investments would be linked to land use strategies, and docks and ferry landings would complement bus stops and bicycle paths.
- Create a waterfront version of NYC’s design review agency, the Art Commission, to ensure environmentally friendly and creative plans for waterfront edges and infrastructure, as well as safety and flexibility for a wide range of potential water uses.
- Update waterfront zoning.
- Increase required setback on waterfront sites from 40' to 60'.
- Update list of “as of right” waterfront uses and activities to reflect current uses such as waterfront greenways and esplanades, kayak and small boat launches and landings, historic ship berths, etc.
LACK OF FUNDING

The good news: according to a recent report from the Regional Plan Association (RPA), almost 700 acres and 58 miles of new waterfront parks and greenways are being created in the five boroughs of New York City. The bad news: maintenance of these new public spaces will require about $100 million a year in new maintenance and operating funds. At a time when the economy is sinking and there’s not enough money to properly maintain existing city parks, the thought of funding and maintaining future parks and public spaces at the waterfront is worrisome. Even if money is found to build new waterfront parks, we risk having a two-tier system, where some areas receive funding and some do not.

SOLUTION

PROMOTE THE RECREATIONAL WATERFRONT ECONOMY

- Build new marinas, docks and boat slips to attract more recreational boat traffic. Rental fees for dock spaces and boat slips can help cover waterfront maintenance costs.
- Expand the NYC Water Trail to a region-wide water trail, and promote eco-tourism.
- Create a targeted program to support and strengthen water-dependent businesses.
- Balance public and private responsibilities along the waterfront with local non-profit organizations to maintain public spaces and allow local communities to feel a sense of stewardship.

Challenges and Solutions for Maintaining Waterfront Parks

from the Regional Plan Association

- “because the current budget levels cannot support all park needs, those parks that rely solely on the budget for maintenance and management tend to have fewer amenities to offer users; those with public private partnerships tend to have more resources
- “the surest, most direct route toward improving parks, maintenance is to increase the Parks and Recreation general operating budget
- “A park administrator jointly responsible to community-based non-profit and to Parks & Recreation should be established in the most important waterfront areas to help coordinate these arrangements”
- “Building on the success of the Prospect Park and the Bronx River Alliances, as well as the Partnership for the Parks Catalyst Program, additional park administrators should be established in the other waterfront areas.”

A Letter from the President of the MWA

In an unprecedented series of meetings, hundreds of leaders of maritime organizations, government agencies and businesses came together over the course of a year to address issues relating to the stewardship and redevelopment of the New York and New Jersey waterfront. This is the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance.

Divided into six Task Forces, they shared their expertise and collaborated across boundaries, recognizing that timing is crucial. Critical land use, regulatory, and environmental decisions made now will determine the success or failure of efforts to reclaim the waterfront for public use, preserve the water-dependent businesses that underlie our quality of life, and nurture the recovery and health of our harbor estuary.

This is one of six policy papers drawn from hundreds of hours of discussion and debate and informed by a wide range of practical knowledge. These papers provide background on key issues and offer a series of challenges and solutions. Together they led to the Waterfront Action Agenda, which is forward-looking, as well as socially, environmentally and commercially responsible. Civic and political leaders take note: our waterfront is not what it could be. Following the prescriptions set forth in the MWA Waterfront Action Agenda, we can begin to realize our Harbor’s potential.

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