Testimony of Roland Lewis, President & CEO
Manhattan Community Board 1
Special Landmarks Committee
re: Howard Hughes Corporation LPC Presentation
December 12, 2014

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.

The South Street Seaport Historic District (SSSHD) was once, and can be again, the beating heart of New York’s harbor home to vital civic, commercial and maritime activity. Howard Hughes Corporation’s (HHC) proposal for the Seaport district does not respect the guidelines and principles of the Seaport Working Group, which call for a plan to maintain the historic character and sense of place of the Seaport, without adverse impact to neighborhood scale. Despite the fact that the proposed tower is outside the official boundaries of the historic district, the fact remains that the nearly 500-foot building will be an irreparable gash that blocks views of the East River and the Brooklyn Bridge (a National Historic Landmark), displaces the historic New Market Building, and disrupts the character of New York's most important maritime district by building over the water.

A vibrant Seaport should be the anchor of New York's maritime past - as well as the focal point of the region’s future maritime activity, with public access to the water, and water-dependent uses and programming that create a dynamic waterfront. The Seaport is more than just cobblestones and 19th-century charm, but instead a long-functioning waterfront alive with commerce, history, and education. Any proposed development in the Seaport district should expand maritime infrastructure for New York’s struggling fleet of historic and educational ships and be the region’s “welcome mat” for visiting vessels from around the world.

Marrying the maintenance of crucial civic infrastructure to the return on investment (ROI) of private firm further entrenches the deepening inequity of New York, continuing a dangerous precedent in which wealthy districts are maintained to higher standards and the rest of the city gets left behind. This proposal ensures that the most pressing question with respect to the public interests in the Seaport district are linked to HHC’s bottom line, rather than the City’s need to protect its vital historic assets. A sustainable business model for the Seaport district necessarily involves nurturing a commercial hub that represents the best of New York, respects the district’s historic and maritime character, and caters to tourists and locals, to capture the untapped potential for authentic commercial activity in the district. It also must include preserving and nurturing the South Street Seaport Museum (SSSM) as the cultural anchor of and living link to the district’s rich and distinctive history. This proposal falls short on both accounts.

The Seaport Working Group guidelines must form the basis for new development in the district, to realize its great potential for educational and community use, preserve its distinctive urban fabric, and produce other public benefits. HHC and its partners should go back to the drawing board and continue to engage local stakeholders and elected officials to ensure that its proposals complement, rather than compete with, the public interest.