Testimony of Roland Lewis  
President & CEO, Waterfront Alliance  
Office of the Manhattan Borough President  
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Re: Congestion

The Waterfront Alliance is a bi-state coalition of over 850 community and recreational groups, educational institutions, businesses, and other stakeholders committed to restoring and revitalizing the New York and New Jersey waterways. We have been the foremost civic voice for expanded waterborne transit, raising the call for new ferry service—and improved connections between ferries and upland transit modes—as a vital component of a comprehensive regional transportation network. Expanding our ferry network will relieve pressure from an already overburdened mass transit network, and increase our region’s preparedness to emergency system-wide shutdowns, as witnessed on 9/11, the 2003 blackout, and Superstorm Sandy, for the cost of a “rounding error” in typical transportation dollars.

The de Blasio Administration has announced a new Citywide Ferry Service (CFS), scheduled to expand waterborne transit to all five boroughs by 2018, and doubling the number of New York City neighborhoods with regular ferry service. In particular, the service will provide new transportation options for Manhattan districts along the East River with fewer transit options than their west side counterparts. The network adds new locations on the Lower East Side, Stuyvesant Cove, Roosevelt Island, at E. 62nd Street, and at E. 90th Street. With the Second Avenue Subway still years away from full operations, this is an important step for Manhattan’s east side. CFS will also increase connections for residents of waterfront districts such as Red Hook, Astoria, or Soundview to economic opportunities in Manhattan’s central business districts.

Ferries are not a substitute for subway service, but should be seen instead as a complement to a wider system, to serve targeted markets where other options are unavailable or insufficient. Many of New York’s best transportation planners intuitively understand this: the Move NY plan to rebalance regional toll charges to relieve congestion, and direct funds to roads, bridges and public transit, would also allocate a modest sum that could help defray the cost of the Mayor’s ferry plan. The Waterfront Alliance is a member of the Move NY coalition. That plan represents our single best option for seriously affecting congestion in Manhattan.

The City’s commitment to support the service with affordable fares equivalent to a subway or bus ride will be a critical component of its success. Going forward, we urge policymakers to implement a dedicated, sustainable source of operating funding, such as value capture or congestion charge revenue, in order to preserve its benefits beyond the five-year pilot window.

Yet for ferries to succeed, they must connect with that network, both physically and psychologically. In particular, the projected absence of free or discounted transfers to New York City Transit (NYCT) services will limit the CFS’ ability to serve low-income riders. We welcome continued discussion between CFS administrators and representatives from the Metropolitan Transit Authority to incorporate ferries as a one of many transportation services participating in a unified fare-payment system, which includes not only NYCT buses and subways but also the PATH rail linking New York and New Jersey; the Roosevelt Island Tramway; AirTrain JFK; and Westchester County’s Bee-Line Bus System.

Ferries’ relatively low barrier to entry is perhaps their single greatest advantage. There are no expensive tracks to lay, and new routes can be implemented quickly at a
relatively low cost. CFS will be delivered relatively quickly, and for modest public investment relative to other transportation projects. Its infrastructure can be moved to other locations if more suitable locations are identified. The proposed $55 million capital expense is roughly equivalent to the renovation of Williamsburg’s McCarren Park Pool, and its operating costs may total roughly $3 per passenger trip, competitive with subsidies for local buses and below subsidies for express bus and commuter rail services.

Ferries may also be a key part of both interim and long-term solutions for safely and efficiently moving commuters across the Hudson. This summer travelers stranded multiple times for hours on the train tracks to Manhattan needed no reminder that our infrastructure is crumbling, producing adverse consequences. There is a significant likelihood of one or both North River Tunnels becoming inoperable over the next 20 years, which would reduce trans-Hudson rail capacity to one-fourth its current level. Sources at NJ Transit say that in the event of a sustained tunnel failure, one-third of today’s train passengers will switch to buses, one-third will take ferries, and the rest will stay home.

Yet it is not unreasonable to expect that some would likely drive, thereby worsening Manhattan’s congestion problems. This is exacerbated by the fact that available on-street parking induces more private auto use than is currently optimal. Changing zoning to require parking maximums, rather than minimums, for new development, is a sensible step. And subsidizing ferry service also presents a pathway forward as part of a plan to mitigate the catastrophic effects of reduced trans-Hudson rail service. As New York officials begin to work with their counterparts in New Jersey to address these challenges, cooperation on expanding support for trans-Hudson ferry service will be a necessary part of that equation.