Testimony of Roland Lewis, President & CEO
New York City Council Oversight Hearing
Committees on Waterfronts, Transportation, Economic Development
September 21, 2015
Re: Citywide Ferry Service

INTRODUCTION

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.

Citywide Ferry Service (CFS) is an extraordinary step forward in the ongoing revitalization of our waterways. 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 proposed network will expand waterborne transit to all five boroughs by 2018, doubling the number of New York City neighborhoods with regular ferry service. This will increase connections for working families in waterfront districts such as Red Hook, Brooklyn; Astoria, Queens; or Soundview, Bronx 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. Their 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. Yet ferries are sometimes unfortunately perceived as “luxury” transportation options, commanding high fares when unsubsidized.

We agree with the Administration’s policy that ferries should be subsidized to serve everyone, like any other form of mass transit, so that all New Yorkers have reliable, affordable transportation choices. The City's commitment to support CFS with affordable fares equivalent to a subway or bus ride is a significant and cost-effective step toward transit equity in an increasingly unequal city. The proposed $55 million capital expense is roughly equivalent to the renovation of Williamsburg’s McCarren Park Pool, and its operating costs are projected to be competitive with subsidies for local buses and substantially below those for express buses and commuter rail. But that support is not yet secure in the long-term. We urge policymakers to identify and implement a dedicated, sustainable source of operating funding, such as value capture or congestion charge revenue, in order to preserve CFS benefits beyond the five-year pilot window.

COMMENTS ON CITYWIDE FERRY SERVICE PLANNING and IMPLEMENTATION

We recommend that NYC Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC) and the CFS operator, once selected, execute a robust public engagement process that provides a framework for user feedback both during the planning process and after
implementation. We are encouraged that the Administration is currently engaged in a public review for this project as part of the City Environmental Quality Review process, and it is a great start. We also support the launch of a public-facing microsite on NYCEDC's website as a single point of reference for questions and comments about CFS. We encourage CFS planners and its operators to ensure that this amenity is indeed not a “luxury service,” but reaches disenfranchised communities through outreach to Community Boards and tenants associations, as well as targeted marketing efforts, ensuring high ridership and a sense of community ownership.

We recommend setting clear metrics to define the success of CFS, which could support the implementation of its next phase and further ferry expansion throughout the region of the “solid line” routes included in the first phase of CFS. We recommend defining a clear process to implement the next phase of CFS, or the “dotted line” of a route that is proposed but not yet planned, which would serve Coney Island and Stapleton, Staten Island. We also look forward to working with the Administration and the Council to define a process for further expansion, filling in the “blank lines” not yet planned: this includes calls by members of the Council to expand service to northern Manhattan, as well as northeast Queens, and elsewhere in the Bronx.

We also recommend that other harbor users, both recreational and commercial, be consulted in the drafting of standard operating procedures for CFS, so that all users of our shared waterways can obey safe and fair “rules of the road.” NYCEDC is currently planning improvements for on-water recreational access at Stuyvesant Cove and Hallets Cove in Astoria, in addition to new CFS ferry landings at those locations. Those projects should be closely coordinated. Additionally, the proposed placement of the ferry dock at Sunset Park’s Brooklyn Army Terminal Pier 4 must be coordinated with planned infrastructure improvements there intended to serve historic, cultural, and recreational vessels for community programming.

We recommend working with those communities toward the creation of CFS riders’ committees. There are strong precedents, both here in New York, as well as across the country, of citizen participation toward improving transit service. The Staten Island Ferry Riders Committee provides a conduit between transit users and service operators, and has helped inform changes to scheduling and amenities. In Red Hook, for example, community members have expressed that Atlantic Basin would be a more accessible site for a ferry landing. We understand that security procedures for cruise terminal operations there present obstacles to year-round commuter service, but encourage the development of formal riders’ committees to create a forum to resolve potential long-term challenges such as these. Washington State’s ferry advisory committees or London’s River Concordant provide a broad sense of ownership, and accountability, in the communities served, and give people the power to shape and improve their system.

For ferries to succeed, they must connect with the wider transit network, both physically and psychologically. Although a ferry ride will cost the same as a bus or subway fare, there are no plans yet for free or discounted transfers, or even Metrocard payment. That may limit CFS’ ability to serve low-income riders. This is due to the Metropolitan Transit Authority’s (MTA) plans to replace the Metrocard with a new fare-payment service. We welcome discussion between CFS administrators and MTA representatives to incorporate ferries as one of many participants in a unified fare-payment system, which includes not only NYCT buses and subways but also the PATH rail; the Roosevelt Island Tramway; AirTrain JFK; and Westchester County’s Bee-Line Bus System. We encourage them to work to pilot the next generation of MTA fare payment, an idea already under discussion, as it is developed. We also encourage continued discussion with NYCDOT regarding possible improvements to bicycle and pedestrian networks, to improve safety and connectivity to new ferry landings.