Testimony of Roland Lewis, President and CEO  
New York City Council Oversight Hearing  
Committee on Waterfronts  
October 14, 2015  
Re: Update on the Development of Governors Island

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. Our waterways have been revitalized with active recreation, environmental education, and waterborne transportation, and the harbor has for centuries been a vital conduit for commerce and an engine of economic development.

Governors Island is the jewel of New York Harbor, and its ongoing transformation into a public space has been critical for restoring New Yorkers’ connection with their waterfront. Thousands of people have visited the Island in recent years for a growing slate of public programs, arts and cultural festivals, and other events. The stunning views of Lower Manhattan, Staten Island, Brooklyn, and, of course, Liberty and Ellis Islands, serve as a powerful reminder that we are indeed “island people.” As home to the New York Harbor School, New York’s maritime high school, the island is an educational center for future mariners and marine scientists, and home of the Billion Oyster Project, which educates students across the city about restoration and aquatic life, and which we recently honored as one of our 2015 Heroes of the Harbor.

The Waterfront Alliance is proud to anchor our signature public event, City of Water Day, each July on Governors Island. This year, nearly 30,000 people of all ages participated in City of Water Day throughout the harbor, reconnecting New Yorkers with the water that surrounds us, through educational boat tours, kayak lessons, and hands-on marine science lessons on Governors Island and at other waterfront locations in all five boroughs. We have enjoyed a rich and fruitful partnership with Governors Island. In its early years, City of Water Day drew the largest crowds to the island, and we are thrilled that more and more people have come to know and share the opportunities for passive recreation and active exploration the island offers.

We strongly support continuous ferry access to Governors Island as part of the Mayor’s new Citywide Ferry Service (CFS). Now open to the public seven days a week, challenges remain to ensure the island the island is as accessible as any other urban park. Disconnected from the region’s road and mass transit networks, Governors Island is served by ferry from lower Manhattan, and on weekends from Brooklyn Bridge Park. The Administration’s request for proposals (RFP) for citywide ferry service encouraged prospective operators to propose routes serving Governor’s Island along the South Brooklyn route. While negotiations with bidders are still ongoing, it is imperative that Governors Island be fully included as part of CFS, scheduled to begin in 2017. Regular ferry service would provide recreational access for residents of Sunset Park and Red Hook, neighborhoods with limited access to waterfront open space. It would also expand access to the Harbor School for a much broader pool of potential students, important for the sustained growth of our city’s maritime industry.

Governors Island has been an important component of the New York City Water Trail as an access point for recreational and educational non-motorized boating. A floating dock at the island’s Pier 101 until recently served as a landing site for paddlers—whether as a destination for exploring the island or a place to land safely if in distress—as well as public programs offered by Downtown Boathouse.
That dock has become disconnected, and funds for its replacement have been allocated by Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer. This August, in a letter to Trust for Governors Island President Leslie Koch, we wrote that we hoped to work with the Trust and user groups to “identify an appropriate design that accommodates multiple users [and] develop an operations plan” for the new human-powered boating dock. The Trust should convene stakeholders for the planning process as soon as possible so that there are no delays in restoring this important access point once funds are released. While we greatly thank our partners, including those at the New York Harbor School and HarborLAB, for helping to craft a temporary solution for access during City of Water Day, a permanent solution is essential to continuing to provide public access for boaters of all experience levels.

**We also call for a longer-term, comprehensive maritime plan for Governors Island**, to address how it connects with and complements the Harbor as a whole. It is critical to consider broader maritime access as park renovations proceed and the program of uses for underutilized historic buildings expands. The Harbor School, through the Department of Education, issued an RFP earlier this year for a “marine master plan” for marine engineering and structural assessment services. Responses were due in August 2015. This is an important step, but should serve not as an end unto itself. Rather, it must be a starting point for a larger conversation about how we can make necessary maritime infrastructure improvements to Governors Island in order to expand access to the island for all to enjoy. That plan may include consideration of the following elements:

- Renovation of Yankee pier to accommodate visiting educational and historic vessels, including:
  - A floating dock
  - New fendering
  - Utility connections
- Long-term engineering and programming analysis toward the rehabilitation and reactivation of Lima and Tango piers
- Expanded year-round or seasonal ferry service from additional locations
- Restored access for recreational boating at Pier 101, including protecting the cove from wake action
- Access to the “beach” on the east side of the Island that is visible at low tide

Together, we can continue to reconnect New Yorkers with their waterways, and the “oasis” of our Harbor, Governors Island. We look forward to working with elected leaders, Governors Island’s key stakeholders, community members, and experts in the maritime and coastal engineering community to address many of these issues and generate other ideas for increasing access. Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony, and I welcome any questions you may have.