Testimony of Roland Lewis
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New York City Council Committee on Transportation - Oversight Hearing
Re: Next Stop: Exploring Methods of Connecting Transportation Deserts
November 12, 2015

The Waterfront Alliance is a 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 raised the call for new waterborne transportation—and improved connections between ferries and upland transit modes—as a targeted, cost-effective complement to our bus and subway network to connect transportation deserts within our region. In the next 25 years, New York is projected to grow by almost a million people, and much of that growth will occur on the waterfront. Those neighborhoods often enjoy fewer transportation choices than inland communities. Of the 35 neighborhoods identified in the City’s One New York plan as both low-income and transit-poor, most could be served by expanded ferry service. Waterborne transit can and must be a part of a plan to ensure that all New Yorkers have equitable access to job centers and economic opportunities.

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. 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. CFS will be delivered relatively quickly, and at a dramatically lower cost per mile of service 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 a rounding error in public transit infrastructure terms, and its subsidies will be competitive with those for local buses and below those for express bus and commuter rail.

CFS will provide substantial travel time savings for a number of underserved neighborhoods, including Red Hook, Brooklyn; Astoria, Queens; Soundview, Bronx; and the Rockaway peninsula. With the Second Avenue Subway still years away from fully constructed, CFS also presents an important step for those on Manhattan’s east side, where there are fewer transit options than the west side. Commuters in lower-income neighborhoods served by CFS will save, on average, nearly 20 minutes per trip to lower Manhattan or east Midtown. That 40 minutes a day represents a substantial quality of life improvement to over-stretched commuters.

Expanded ferry service, combined with new Select Bus Service and bicycle improvements, provides an economically responsible option for significantly expanding economic opportunity for residents of transportation deserts. Yet for ferries to succeed, they must connect with the wider transportation 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 urge continued discussion between CFS administrators and representatives from MTA to incorporate ferries as a one of many transportation services participating in a unified fare-payment system, including not only NYCT buses and subways but also PATH rail; the Roosevelt Island Tramway; AirTrain JFK; and Westchester County's Bee-Line.

The City’s commitment to support the service with affordable fares equivalent to a subway or bus ride will be an essential component of its success. We urge policymakers to implement a dedicated, sustainable source of operating funding, to
preserve its benefits beyond the five-year pilot window. One option is the Move NY fair tolling plan, of which the Waterfront Alliance is a coalition member. It would rebalance toll charges to relieve congestion, and direct funds to roads, bridges and public transit. It would also allocate a modest sum that could help defray ferry operating costs. Ultimately, ferries will never be a substitute for subway service, but should be seen as an important tool for transportation planners in our island metropolis to serve transit-starved waterfront districts, where other options are unavailable, insufficient, or prohibitively costly.