Testimony of Roland Lewis, President & CEO, Waterfront Alliance
New York City Council Committee on Parks - Oversight Hearing
Re: Parks Without Borders
December 3, 2015

The Waterfront Alliance is a coalition of nearly 900 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 more and more New Yorkers are interested in getting not only to the water’s edge, but onto and into the water. As New Yorkers reengage with the water’s edge, public parks have been a vital component of that revitalization.

The objectives of The Parks Without Borders initiative are strongly applicable to many waterfront parks. Better placement and design (or the removal) of fencing and walls, and new gates, plantings, and water fountains may be necessary in both inland and waterfront parks. The parks that border Hallets Cove in Astoria, Queens offer a great opportunity, where a small beach is surrounded by three separate Parks. Improvements in gates and fencing can not only open up the parks, they can open up the waterfront. Council Member Costa Constantinides and Borough President Katz have allocated capital funding to NYCEDC for improved waterfront access. In Sunset Park, Bush Terminal Piers Park currently lacks a southern entrance and signage to connect it with the community, though there are plans in place to address these challenges. This initiative should serve as a reference point as these projects proceed.

This initiative should be seen as an important tool for not only improving upland amenities, but also for unlocking the waterways in waterfront parks. Parks with waterfront "borders," while providing sweeping views and passive recreational areas, in many locations do not facilitate full engagement with the waterways. New York’s 520 miles of coastline remain largely unwelcoming to many types of vessels, offering limited opportunities for communities to enjoy and utilize the waterways. The historic, educational, and cultural vessels that call the harbor home have very few places to berth, particularly outside of Manhattan. Piers are too often designed without maritime access in mind. The New York City Parks Department has led the way through the development of the New York City Water Trail for recreational boating. Despite significant progress, there are still numerous opportunities to identify and address capital improvements that increase the public’s growing call for on-water activity.

A new model for public waterfront access, Community Eco Docks, is the result of a partnership between NYC Parks and the Waterfront Alliance to plan, build, and program floating docks that unlock the waterways for people and vessels. Eco Docks reconnect residents with the city's maritime tradition; welcome kayaks, sailing ships, and historic boats; and provide floating classrooms for local schools and educational institutions. Thanks to the generous support of Council Member Vincent Gentile, the creativity and tireless effort of NYC Parks marine division, and the participation of the maritime and education communities, residents of Bay Ridge and surrounding neighborhoods have enjoyed free weekly programs and events at the Bay Ridge Community Eco Dock, which last year unlocked the waterways at American Veterans Memorial Pier at 69th Street.

Residents of Staten Island, the South Bronx, northern Manhattan, northeast Queens, and all across the city deserve these same opportunities. New York still needs a true regional network of waterfront access points, to break the "fourth wall" and exponentially increase the utility and enjoyment of the overall parks experience. The Waterfront Alliance looks forward to continuing to work with the Council, NYC Parks, and other civic partners to truly open New York’s waterfront borders to all.