Testimony of Roland Lewis, President and CEO
New York City Council Oversight Hearing
Committees on Environmental Protection and Recovery & Resiliency
December 14, 2015
Re: OneNYC – Review of the City’s Resiliency and Sustainability Plans

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. Yet despite all the benefits our waterways afford, Hurricane Sandy made our challenges strikingly clear: this region is extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and increasingly intense coastal storms.

Hurricane Sandy was an historic event, but it was not a worst-case scenario, and it will not be the last storm to strike this region. OneNYC’s coastal protection measures, which build on the work of the Special Initiative for Rebuilding and Resiliency (SIRR), were the subject of recent oversight hearing. We reiterate our call to action that although we have done an excellent job with available resources, we are making only a down payment on resiliency in the wake of Sandy. The City and the region’s response to the unprecedented challenges that climate change and Sandy set before us has been tremendous, with more than $20B awarded in New York and New Jersey for recovery, rebuilding, and improved protection from future storms. Yet the cost estimates presented in the 10-year SIRR plan do not attempt to give us a comprehensive picture of the price tag of long-term resiliency; coastal protection measures account for $3.7B of its $19.5B total.

We have found that there is a rough consensus among flood control experts that $25B–$30B of infrastructure investments could provide adequate risk reduction during a 1/100-year flood. However, Sandy is variously described as being somewhere between a 1/250-year flood and a 1/700-year flood.¹ Under higher projections for sea level rise, by the 2080s, a flood currently rated as a 1/100-year flood, with a one percent chance of occurring in any given year, may be something closer to a 1/8-year flood, with a 12.5 percent chance of occurring in any given year.² Thus $25B to $30B in near-term investments would likely provide inadequate risk reduction against another storm with the force of Sandy, with risks rising higher and higher throughout the 21st century.

Indeed, New York City cannot address its flood risks alone; ours is a national challenge, requiring cooperation with, and assistance from, State and federal partners. The de Blasio administration is leading efforts to study critical coastal resiliency initiatives in Hunts Point and Coney Island Creek, among others, and plan for a system of flood barriers on Manhattan’s east side, funded in part by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The City must continue to seek federal sources of funding; to that end, we strongly support its application for an additional $500 million from the National Disaster Resilience Competition, sponsored by HUD, to connect with the ongoing East Side Coastal Resiliency Project to more fully protect Lower Manhattan from flood events and storm surge.

¹ New York City Mayor’s Office of Recovery and Resiliency, 2015
² New York City Office of the Mayor. Mayor de Blasio Releases NPCC 2015 Report, Providing Climate Projections through 2100 for the First Time, 2015
The Waterfront Alliance also supports the many of the other goals of the OneNYC sustainability and equity plan, which builds on the important work outlined by the Bloomberg administration’s PlaNYC and incorporates additional initiatives designed to address growing inequality as well as regional challenges. We strongly support the Blasio administration’s new Citywide Ferry Service (CFS) as outlined in OneNYC, which will expand waterborne transit to all five boroughs by 2018, and double the number of New York City neighborhoods with regular ferry service. CFS will provide substantial travel time savings for commuters in underserved neighborhoods, including Red Hook, Brooklyn; Astoria, Queens; Soundview, Bronx; and the Rockaway peninsula. 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 transit-starved districts.

We strongly support OneNYC’s initiatives to “expand freight movement via rail and water where possible,” which includes the reactivation of the South Brooklyn Marine Terminal (SBMT), which is currently underway. SBMT is located within one of the city’s six designated Significant Maritime Industrial Areas (SMIAs), and has been an underutilized public asset that will serve a wide variety industrial maritime uses. Unlocking the value of SBMT as an active working waterfront site is an important step forward to sustaining an economically productive harbor. We encourage officials to pair this initiative with additional goals put forward by the OneNYC plan to join with us in partnership for a workforce development plan targeted toward career pathways in the maritime industry for local residents.