Testimony of Roland Lewis, President and CEO
New York City Council Legislative Hearing
Committee on Waterfronts
May 3, 2016
Re: Int. No. 507 Expanding the role of Waterfront Management Advisory Board

The Waterfront Alliance is a bi-state coalition of more than 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 the harbor has for centuries been a vital conduit for commerce and an engine of economic development.

The Waterfront Management Advisory Board (WMAB) has a critical role to play to advise the City of New York on waterfront planning and policy. From 2009, when it was re-established by City Council legislation, until late 2013, when it last met, the WMAB served to monitor progress on achieving the City’s Waterfront Action Agenda, the 130 priority projects enumerated Vision 2020: New York City Comprehensive Waterfront Plan. The WMAB has been a tool for City agencies to work cooperatively with waterfront stakeholders and civic organizations. It has provided leadership and vision to help transform New York City’s waterfront into a vibrant place that supports the needs of our residents, the sustainability of our environment, and the growth of our economy. The WMAB can help ensure that the commitments made by the previous administration are either carried forward or reconsidered and strengthened by the current administration.

We call on the de Blasio administration to seize this opportunity to work with the City Council to reconvene the WMAB, to advise on the implementation of key waterfront initiatives, including the coastal resiliency measures included in the OneNYC sustainability plan and the launch of Citywide Ferry Service set to begin next year. The WMAB must serve as a forum to address some of the other key challenges facing our harbor and waterfronts, including: expanding access to the waterways, protecting and preserving maritime industrial uses, and improving water quality. Moreover, the WMAB can be a focal point for generating solutions to improve governance of our waterfront. The aforementioned challenges cut across multiple, overlapping jurisdiction of City, State, and federal oversight. Our twenty-first century waterfront demands new and better governance that eliminates duplicative functions and provides better coordination and funding to maintain public waterfront infrastructure.

We support, with caveats, the expansion of the Board to include three new members of the private and non-profit sectors, an additional member of the City Council, and other agency-level ex-officio members. As currently constituted, the WMAB comprises twelve (12) members, appointed by the Mayor, and represent business and civic leaders and community advocates. Members must represent each borough and include “representatives of labor, the maritime industries, the transportation industries, the real estate industry, and the hospitality industries, as well as environmental and community advocates.” These guidelines, as well as the screening process for appointing new members, constrain the possibilities for membership on the board. We recommend that the legislation be revised so that these guidelines are considered advisory, rather than binding, ensuring that the broader community of stakeholders and water users can be represented. In particular, the community of water users—recreational boating clubs, historic vessel operators, and environmental educators, among others—must be considered for membership.
In order to take full advantage of its diversity of expertise, the WMAB should take an active role in shaping work in progress, rather than respond to presentations or plans that are more fully formed. From a process standpoint, that may require building capacity within the WMAB itself to meet more frequently than the semi-annual (once every six months) meetings now currently required under the law. The law currently permits the WMAB to create “committees or subcommittees consisting of at least one board member” but no such actions have yet been taken. The WMAB should create a number of subcommittees as well as a steering committee that serve on its behalf to advise administration officials in a more regular capacity. It would be impractical to assert that the WMAB as currently constituted could tackle every single issue facing our harbor and waterfronts. However, a few issue-focused subcommittees or working groups may help focus the activity of the WMAB on a series of key issues, not only to track progress, but to produce better outcomes.

The waterways do not adhere to political boundaries, and the WMAB should explicitly acknowledge this by taking a regional approach to waterfront management. In addition to senior representatives of City agencies serving as ex-officio members, representatives from State and federal agencies, including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Coast Guard, and the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation are invited to participate at WMAB meetings. The proposed legislation codifies this important step, by permitting “representatives of federal, state, or multi-state agencies, authorities, or other instruments to participate as non-voting members.” We support the inclusion of bi-state institutions such as the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, as well as other State, municipal, and civic representatives from New Jersey that have a stake in our shared waterways. Mayor de Blasio’s OneNYC plan sets out a series of goals for regional planning led by the City of New York.

We urge the Council and the administration to work together ensure that the WMAB can shape the future of our waterfront as an economic engine and environmental resource for all. If we fail to provide the WMAB with the necessary tools to leverage the expertise of a broad network of waterfront stakeholders, we will be missing a critical opportunity.