Public Testimony
New York City Council, Committee on Waterfronts
Re: Oversight - Improving Boater Safety in the City’s Waterways
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The Waterfront Alliance’s mission is to protect, transform, and revitalize New York Harbor and the surrounding waterways. We are a coalition of more than 900 community and recreational groups, educational institutions, businesses, and other stakeholders committed to restoring and revitalizing our waterways.

New Yorkers are rediscovering our maritime roots; these waters once teemed with ships, bringing passengers and products from around the world. The blue highways are now busier than they have been in generations. New York enjoys the third largest commercial port in the country. Even before a citywide ferry service expansion that will bring transit choice to waterfront neighborhoods across the city next year, we already have the nation’s largest fleet of urban ferries. Thanks to progress spurred by the Clean Water Act and capital improvements made by the City and the State, most of New York’s waterways are clean enough for recreational use. With new marinas opening, dozens of calls by large cruise ships, and hundreds of free paddling and rowing programs, it may be tempting to characterize our open waters as unregulated or unsafe.

Yet despite the tragic incident in August of this year in which a ferry boat struck a group of kayakers—which thankfully resulted in no loss of life—the fact remains that a long standing culture of safety reigns on the open waters, largely thanks to collaboration and communication among disparate user groups. For instance, most paddling groups use marine band radios to communicate with other harbor traffic. The vast majority of harbor users are vigilant about safety, respect the “rules of the road,” and have a track record to prove it. This stands in contrast to congestion and conflict on our city’s embattled streets, with pedestrians and cyclists and motorists competing for precious space. Despite progress made by Mayor de Blasio’s Vision Zero campaign for street safety, we have witnessed an uptick in traffic crashes and fatalities through 2016.

The U.S. Coast Guard Sector New York, the largest command in the country, play a central role ensuring safe navigation. The NYPD Harbor Unit diligently rescues people from our waterways to safety, including those ten kayakers last month. We look forward to reviewing the results of the Coast Guard’s investigation of that incident, so that similar incidents may be prevented in the future. Many street safety advocates rightly note that such diligence is sorely lacking for crashes involving motorists, pedestrians, and bicyclists.

The Coast Guard’s Harbor Safety, Navigation and Operations Committee, or Harbor Ops, is an unpaid task force that represents a broad cross-section of maritime users: pilots who guide ocean-going cargo ships to port, tug and
barge operators, commuter ferry captains, and recreational paddlers and rowers. They provide valuable management advice to the Coast Guard about events, activities, and procedures that affect harbor safety. They also discuss close calls, and how to prevent these from escalating into seriously dangerous situations. Earlier this year, a subcommittee of HarborOps organized the Captains and Paddlers Shared Harbor Tour, where over 100 mariners shared diverse perspectives and insights about how best to collaborate and continue safe practices. Last month, HarborOps reviewed a set of harbor safety guidelines produced by the Chicago Harbor Safety Committee (CHSC). These guidelines provide best practices through detailed references to existing regulations for several types of users of that region’s waterways.

Next year in this region, Mayor de Blasio’s Citywide Ferry program will bring five new ferry routes to increase transit choice for hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers. The Waterfront Alliance strongly supports this service expansion, and expect that safety will be the highest priority not only for millions of annual ferry passengers, but also for the countless other users of our waterways. Citywide Ferry routes will be operated by Hornblower NY, who enjoy a strong safety record. Last month, Hornblower and NYCEDC held a productive workshop with recreational users of the waterways to anticipate and address safety concerns at new landings and along new routes. Meeting participants discussed specific needs for lookouts on ferries as well as customizing ferry operating procedures to account for shared waters near kayak launches. Hornblower NY agreed to explore these issues as it develops its training and standard operating procedures (SOP).

There are nonetheless some positive safety reforms that can be implemented to improve our harbor. We recommend stronger enforcement of no-wake rules, too often disregarded by fast, irresponsible boat traffic. Such behavior not only creates dangerous conditions for other harbor users, but also exacerbates coastal erosion. Slower schedules and reduced speeds on point-to-point runs would allow more “give way” clearance in passing situations. New York State should also consider strengthening licensing and educational requirements for recreational boaters, common in several other states.

Our harbor is a magnificent resource, and the reason our city exists as a thriving coastal metropolis. Its increased use for recreation, transportation, education, and commerce is something to celebrate. Just as a mugging should not result in park closures, so should the rare serious accident not diminish the increasing use of our waterways. Such incidents should encourage more vigilance and communication allowing us all to employ and enjoy the waters that surround us. We look forward to continued participation and invite members of this Committee and staff to join future collaborative efforts to improve harbor safety, and hope that the Waterfront Management Advisory Board, set to relaunch early next year, may also serve as a useful forum to address ideas for maintaining safe use of our shared waterways.

We thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony, and welcome any questions you may have.