Public Testimony
New York City Council, Committees on Waterfronts; Transportation; Economic Development;
Re: The Economic Impact of NYC Ferry and the New Ferry Transport Routes

October 19, 2017

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The Waterfront Alliance is a non-profit civic organization and coalition of more than 1,000 community and recreational groups, educational institutions, businesses, and other stakeholders committed to restoring and revitalizing New York Harbor and the surrounding waterways. New York City is a city of water, with our waterways serving as a vital resource for commerce, transportation, education, and recreation. As the region’s premier advocates for expanded ferry service, Waterfront Alliance is thrilled with the progress made by the de Blasio administration to grow what already was the nation’s largest fleet of urban ferries.

NYC Ferry is making New York a waterfront town again, utilizing our “blue highways” to connect people in transit-starved waterfront neighborhoods with economic opportunity, and expanding New Yorkers’ mental maps of our coastal city. NYC Ferry has demonstrated a widespread demand for waterborne transportation from Red Hook, to Astoria, to the Rockaway peninsula. Two new routes are set to launch next year in Soundview, Bronx and on the Lower East Side. For thousands of New Yorkers who are seeing reductions in commute times of approximately 20 minutes per ride, NYC Ferry is greatly expanding access to jobs and educational opportunities. That 40 minutes a day represents a substantial quality of life improvement to over-stretched commuters. With more than 200 local jobs once service is fully implemented, and a new homeport in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, NYC Ferry’s economic impact on New York will be profound.

Demand for the new service has far outpaced ridership projections, carrying more than 2 million passengers since operations began in May. With more riders paying at the fare box, the per-passenger subsidy will be less than the $6.50 initially projected, and even further below subsidies for commuter rail and express buses. Heavy demand this summer meant that this passengers experienced crowding or longer wait times. We applaud NYC Ferry operators for responding quickly with a plan to build new, larger 350-passenger vessels for peak service times increase system capacity going forward, and cooperating with other operators throughout the New York Harbor to meet immediate capacity needs.

NYC Ferry’s $2.75 fare, equivalent to a subway or bus ride, is also a step toward transit equity in an increasingly unequal city. Of the 35 neighborhoods identified in the City’s One New York plan as both low-income and transit-poor, with inadequate access to jobs and economic opportunity, 2 out of 3 could be served by expanded ferry service, beyond what NYC will provide. Commuter ferries should continue to be subsidized to serve everyone, like any other form of mass transit, so that all New Yorkers have reliable, affordable transportation choices. Yet critics charge that the new service is a “luxury” transportation option, serving new residents and contributing to rising rents and gentrification. It is imperative that the administration and NYC Ferry operators continue outreach to disenfranchised communities through targeted community engagement and marketing efforts, to ensure not only high ridership but a sense of community ownership.
For ferries to succeed, they must connect with the wider transportation network, both physically and economically. Although a ferry ride will cost the same as a bus or subway fare, there are no plans yet for free or discounted transfers, or even Metrocard payment. The absence of free or discounted transfers limits NYC Ferry’s ability to serve low-income riders. We urge continued discussion between the City and the 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 and AirTrain JFK. We also encourage continued discussion with MTA, NYCDOT, and other City agencies regarding improvements to bus, bicycle, and pedestrian connectivity, including extending Bx27 and Bx39 bus service to Clason Point in Soundview. NYC Ferry’s new landings at Stuyvesant Cove and near Grand Street must also be part of a wider solution to the L train closure and repairs scheduled for 2019. One proposal to run 8 vessels per hour from North 6th Street to East 20th Street would integrate fares with SBS bus service.

Ferries are not a substitute for subway service, but should be seen instead as a cost-effective complement to the wider mass transit system, serving targeted markets where other options are unavailable or insufficient. 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. The subway system is aching under weight of expanding city, and people living in waterfront neighborhoods commonly have even fewer transportation choices than those further inland. NYC Ferry’s relatively low barrier to entry is perhaps its single greatest advantage. With no expensive tracks to lay, NYC Ferry’s new routes have been implemented with remarkable speed, and at a dramatically lower cost per mile of service relative to other transportation projects, a rounding error in transit dollars. The most important word in waterborne transit is “pilot”: if service to new districts proves unsustainable, infrastructure and service can be moved at a relatively modest cost. This makes NYC Ferry a flexible, smart investment.

The success of NYC Ferry has amplified calls for service expansion in other transit-starved districts across the city. We recommend setting clear timetables and metrics to define the path forward for future ferry service expansion, including the proposed, but not yet planned, next phase of service to Coney Island and Stapleton, Staten Island. We are pleased that NYCEDC recently committed in writing to study Coney Island and Canarsie as candidates for future service. It will be critical that this study utilize the current fare of $2.75 in its ridership projections, rather than the higher fare used in the previous study. We look forward to working with the Administration and the Council on the process for further expansion, this includes calls by members of the Council to expand service to northern Manhattan, northeast Queens, elsewhere in the Bronx, and the south shore of Staten Island, which all have long commute times and high rates of private auto use, as well as La Guardia Airport, where ongoing renovation will include a new ferry landing connected to the main passenger terminal.

The City and NYC Ferry’s operator, Hornblower NY, have incorporated stakeholder feedback well on many issues. Regarding site planning, this included: revising the initial plan for Red Hook, moving the landing to Atlantic Basin, which had strong community support; rerouting a landing on the Soundview Route from E.62nd Street to E.34th Street to address navigational safety concerns and improve system-wide connectivity; and providing service to Governors Island, opening access to its many recreational uses to south Brooklyn and Red Hook residents. Regarding operations, this included: responding to community concerns about the pitch of the safety horns, producing a solution within weeks.

We urge continued engagement with other harbor users, both recreational and commercial, as well as riders and affected communities. Last year, Waterfront Alliance was proud to work with a task force organized through the Coast Guard’s
Harbor Safety, Navigation and Operations Committee, or Harbor Ops, to organize the Captains and Paddlers Shared Harbor Tour, where more than 100 mariners shared diverse perspectives and insights about ways to obey safe and fair “rules of the road.” NYC Ferry should continue efforts to be a good neighbor on the water, including its work with local boathouses – getting captains in a kayak and paddlers onto the bridge – to share perspectives and ideas about maintaining safe shared waters. We support and encourage the use of lookouts on all ferry vessels, as well as developing operating procedures that account for shared waters near widely-used recreational launches. We also recommend deeper engagement with communities toward the creation of riders’ committees to resolve potential long-term challenges and provide accountability.

We encourage a wider understanding of the environmental and social benefits of increased ferry use. The use of dormant NYC Ferry vessels to carry freight overnight should be explored. Roberta Weisbrod, Executive Director of the Worldwide Ferry Safety Association, as well as a consultant to maritime transportation planning, has encouraged “the carriage of freight within the city – by water – instead of by trucks on road” and urges “support for two proposals to move freight within the city by respected maritime professionals, Work Cat and Blue Logistics.” Ferries have also proved their reliability in times of emergency, providing critical redundancy during system-wide outages. Improving vessel capacity must be a component of emergency plans in the event of an outage of one of the two North River Tunnels that carry rail passengers across the Hudson River, widely known to be in a poor state of repair.

We acknowledge that the waterways do not adhere to political boundaries, and urge a regional approach to plan and finance waterborne transit. The planned re-launch of the City’s Waterfront Management Advisory Board will be an important forum to convene the necessary partners to explore such an idea. We also urge policymakers to identify and implement a dedicated, sustainable source of operating funding, such as value capture or congestion charge revenue, in order to preserve NYC Ferry’s benefits beyond the current six-year window.

Ferries are a part of a wider phenomenon: the blue highways are busier than they have been in generations. Our waterfronts have experienced a remarkable transformation, and much progress has been made in recent years toward expanding both use and access. New York City must continue be a world leader in building equitable access for use and enjoyment of our waterways across all communities. 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.

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