Public Testimony
New York City Council, Committee on Consumer Affairs and Business Licensing
Re: Int 0936-2018 - Prohibiting single-use plastic beverage straws and beverage stirrers

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Waterfront Alliance

The Waterfront Alliance is a non-profit civic organization and coalition of more than 900 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. The waterways that surround us are a powerful reminder that we live among nature, and share the benefits the waters provide as well as the risks they pose.

Waterfront Alliance strongly supports Intro. 0936-2018 to prohibit single-use plastic beverage straws and stirrers, sponsored by Chair Espinal and several other members of the City Council. We support this legislation as part of the wider effort to remove from our wastestream many types of harmful plastic pollutants, which cause disproportionate impact to our waterways and marine habitats. Many plastic products, including single-use plastic straws, are carried through storm sewers and into our local rivers and onto our coastlines. This legislation is an important step forward toward reducing the use of single-use plastics, to improve the health of our waterways, for the people that use and enjoy the water, and the aquatic species that call them home.

Our waterways are an increasingly vital resource for recreation and education. Over the last generation, thanks to progress spurred by the Clean Water Act, many of New York’s waterways are clean enough for regular recreational use, as more people are boating, fishing, and swimming in our shared waters. Although our rivers continue to be polluted by approximately 20 billion gallons of raw sewage annually, when our combined sewer system overflows into the waterways, we have made significant progress over the past several decades to improve water quality. That has brought more and more New Yorkers not only to the water’s edge, but onto and into the water: from paddling and sailing, to fishing and oyster monitoring. According to a survey we conducted last year, the growing community of volunteer-led, human-powered boating organizations put more than 100,000 people on the water.

Our harbor should be an ecological treasure, restored with a thriving marine environment. New York Harbor is now a more conducive place for fish, shellfish, and marine bird populations, even as commercial shipping grows. Across our region, networks of stewardship groups and concerned citizens have contributed to improving our urban habitat through restoration initiatives, beach cleanups, and water quality testing. This legislation can significantly reduce the impact of plastics on our local waterways. Plastic straws are among the most common items found during beach clean-ups, and can cause significant harm to birds, turtles, and other marine animals.

Single-use plastic straws cause unnecessary, disproportionate harm relative to their benefit. Contrary to common belief, they are effectively non-recyclable. Plastic straws are too small and lightweight to pass through mechanical recycling sorters. As a consequence, many of the 500 million straws used by Americans every day end up downstream, polluting the water and threatening marine life. For most (but not all) New
Yorkers, plastic straws are a convenience, rather than a necessity. We recognize that people with medical needs or disabilities may require straws for drinking water or other beverages, and support efforts to ensure that this legislation does not place undue burdens on New Yorkers with disabilities.

**New York must be a leader in this global challenge.** A recent study by the World Economic Forum estimated that, at current rates, ocean plastics are projected to outweigh fish by 2050.¹ Other cities, primarily on the Pacific coast, have taken steps to reduce or eliminate single-use plastics straw use, from Seattle to Malibu. California and Hawaii are considering statewide bans. The world takes its cues from New York, and any actions we take to reduce our dependency on plastic will have a ripple effect far beyond our shores. We must work even more diligently to ensure that the progress we have made toward clean waterways continues for future generations. We join environmental advocates across our city in urging the New York City Council to pass this legislation to substantially reduce the use of single-use plastic straws in New York City. We thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony, and welcome any questions you may have.