Public Testimony  
May 9, 2019  
New York City Council, Charter Revision Commission Hearing on Land Use  
Re: Equitable engagement in land use decision-making  

Submitted by Roland Lewis, President and CEO  
Waterfront Alliance  

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Sarah Dougherty, and I am the Program Associate at the Waterfront Alliance.

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. Our mission is to inspire and effect resilient, revitalized and accessible coastlines for all communities.

As an alliance of organizations ranging from small kayaking organizations like the Sebago Canoe Club on Jamaica Bay, to international shipping organizations like the Sandy Hook Pilots Association of New York, the Waterfront Alliance serves as a convener and platform for the collective voices who have a stake in our region’s waterfronts. These voices may not always agree, but the diversity of perspectives has resulted in a more robust, shared harbor for people to live, swim, work, and play.

Still, our shared harbor is at risk. New York City’s waterfront have always been dynamic places, shaped by changing industries, communities, and habitats. But these challenges are becoming increasingly complex. Climate change is increasing the frequency, duration, and intensity of coastal storms. At the same time, the City (and region) is growing, and balancing the insatiable demand for waterfront housing and amenities with fears and apprehensions about gentrification, displacement, and the loss of working waterfront jobs and opportunities. These land use complexities require a framework which is both versatile and comprehensive, and can be used to balance the many, often conflicting, needs and priorities for local waterfronts.

Over the past several months, the Waterfront Alliance has been meeting with the 43 waterfront community boards across New York City to learn about the waterfront issues that matter most to them. As part of this campaign, we have been introducing our Waterfront Edge Design Guidelines (WEDG®) program, a framework for balancing waterfront priorities, while maximizing resilience, ecology, and access. Community boards in all five Boroughs have now taken the “WEDG Pledge” by adopting resolutions which promote WEDG principles of resilience, ecology, and access in new waterfront projects. Through this WEDG Pledge campaign, we’ve been overwhelmed and inspired by the demand for a local decision-making and advocacy tool like WEDG. Twenty six community boards have pledged so far, including those from the Brooklyn Borough Board which took the Pledge earlier this year.

This demand is particularly strong in community boards like Manhattan CB 12 and Brooklyn CB 7, which seek tools like WEDG to provide a common language for their priorities amidst rezoning processes. In Sunset Park, we heard that the community board was also drawn to WEDG because of its standards and best practices for engaging the community, and its promotion of water-dependent uses and working waterfronts. We also heard firm demands for higher citywide resiliency standards, from Manhattan CB 1, to Queens CB 7, to Brooklyn CB 10. Still in other communities, and largely in the Bronx, we heard from people who had never been to their waterfronts because of the lack of upland access and inability for people to
safely get to the water.

Of the many things we have learned from community boards, one the strongest themes was the need for more equitable and robust community engagement in waterfront decision-making. This desire is shared across the wealthiest communities to the most underserved. The need for more accountability, transparency, and equity in the community engagement process is also echoed by a task force of over two hundred community activists and civic organizations the Waterfront Alliance is convening to promote better waterfront access in New York City.

Based on the Waterfront Alliance’s experience leading the WEDG Pledge campaign, and recommendations we have been gathering from our Access for All Task Force, we propose the following changes to the City Charter:

1. **Creating a pre-ULURP engagement process to improve transparency and accountability.** We agree with the many organizations who have proposed this change and would add that community engagement metrics must be set for responsible parties: the city and/or private developers. These metrics should fall into two categories. First, there should be requirements for who private applicants and the city engages in the pre-ULURP process. A demographic analysis of the existing community district should inform the outreach approach. This analysis should focus on the impacts of the project on marginalized communities beyond EIS requirements, ensuring that race, ethnicity, and income are all considered in the design of the outreach strategies. There should also be minimum requirements for how many people are engaged, particularly within lower-income and marginalized groups, to ensure diverse and equitable participation.

   This analysis should directly inform the next category of requirements, which concerns how the city and private applicants engage with the community. Minimum requirements should include language accessibility for all languages spoken within the community district and providing multiple channels of communication and information to meet working class families where they are, rather than holding day-time meetings while people are at work.

   Lastly, responsible parties should provide a standardized, public report with concept designs and an explanation of how the community influenced the design of the project to the community board before the ULURP application is submitted. This report should be public and shared widely for the community to understand how their input was used to guide everything from granular design decisions, to affordable rents, to larger-scale land use decisions. The public should have an opportunity to respond to this report before the application is finalized, so that more granular design and programmatic elements are incorporated into the design. If the responsible parties fail to incorporate these diverse perspectives, their application should not be approved.

2. **Equipping community boards and responsible parties with additional resources for better engagement, and technical decision making.** The Regional Plan Association has proposed establishing an independent body to carry out robust community engagement and transparent data gathering for community boards’ district needs assessments. This need for better transparency and resources applies to community board processes beyond its district needs assessment, to committee-level decision-making, resolution implementation, and community engagement. The Waterfront Alliance proposes that waterfront community boards receive at least an annual training through the Borough Presidents’ Offices to understand WEDG basic principles and use WEDG as a
framework for making smarter coastal resiliency and design decisions for waterfront projects.

We also propose earmarked funding for community boards to work with WEDG professionals to assess and inform new waterfront projects which come before the board. The use of WEDG as a neutral, third-party framework to balance different priorities and illustrate best practices for waterfront design would help elevate community board (and therefore community) engagement in waterfront land use decision-making.

Lastly, the Waterfront Alliance reiterates its support of proposed Office of the Waterfront (Int 0982-2018) legislation. The Waterfront Management Advisory Board is an important entity to inform the Comprehensive Waterfront Plan, a process which is currently underway for the next 10-year plan. Many recommendations across different sectors will be put forth. The implementation of these recommendations, and how they are handled among many different agencies, is an important question. There is no one coordinating body ensuring that competing considerations are discussed under one tent and that can ensure recommendations can move forward efficiently.

We hope that the City Charter Revision Commission will consider how these recommendations address the nuances of waterfront land use within the larger conversation and can serve to make these processes more equitable and just overall.