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Waterfront Alliance Issues Recommendations for Equitable Waterfront Access in New York and New Jersey

60-organization bi-state Access Task Force publishes report on eliminating physical and social barriers to our waterfronts and waterways; critical in the context of open space during COVID-19

Recommendations include improving universal access to waterfronts through zoning changes; creating private funding access for waterfronts in lower-income communities; and improving community engagement in the decision-making process to ensure equitable access to our shores

New York, NY— While access to the waterfronts of New York and New Jersey has improved in recent years, the coronavirus pandemic has underscored an uncomfortable truth: as residents seek out open space, waterfront access is far from equitable in the region.

“Waterfront Access for All: Breaking Down Physical and Social Barriers to the Waterfront,” a report published today by the [Waterfront Alliance](#), addresses this inequity and answers three questions: ‘Why can’t we touch the water?’ ‘Why can’t we pay to create access where it’s needed most?’ and ‘Why aren’t our ideas for access being heard?’

As summer arrives and people long to be outdoors and free of the pandemic’s isolation, many will seek a waterfront breeze. In the New York/New Jersey region, 37 percent of all waterfronts are open to the public. Only nine percent of waterfronts in lower income communities, however, are publicly accessible.

Over the course of a year, the Waterfront Alliance partnered with the New York–New Jersey Harbor & Estuary Program (HEP) to convene a task force to develop priorities for increasing the equity of waterfront access throughout the region. The report recommends zoning and permitting changes that would improve universal access and incentivize widespread living shoreline restoration; creating private funding access for waterfronts in lower-income communities; and improving government-led and advocate-led community engagement in decision-making processes to ensure that outcomes reflect the interests of the diversity of the region.

The announcement comes as both states are finalizing new policies that will affect people’s ability to get to the water; in New York City, the Department of City Planning is in the midst of publishing a [Comprehensive Waterfront Plan](#), while in New Jersey, the Department of Environmental Protection is pushing legislation to improve [Public Access](#). At the same time, parks around the region are facing drastic

cutbacks to maintenance and services, as local governments wrestle with budgets upended by the pandemic response.

The Access Task Force has been led by the Waterfront Alliance and three co-chairs: Rob Pirani, HEP program director, Ibrahim-Abdul Matin, independent consultant, and Betsy MacLean, executive director of Hester Street Collaborative. More than 60 organizations are involved in the task force, with participants' experience ranging from environmental justice advocacy to urban planning and design.

Barriers to waterfront open space access in the report relate to policy tools like zoning, as well as policy-driven processes, like community involvement in the design of waterfront projects and public/private funding mechanisms.

A deeper overview of the report's findings are below:

- **Designing for direct access:** In New York City and New Jersey, the waterfront edge is almost always designed to keep people from directly accessing the water. Shorelines are typically hardened using concrete or metal bulkheads, which provide no habitat and fewer resiliency benefits compared to natural or living shorelines. Even when direct access to the water is encouraged by building features like get-downs or fishing piers, they are not always universally accessible to all people, including those living with disabilities. The report lays out these challenges and recommends zoning and permitting changes that would improve universal access and incentivize widespread living shoreline restoration.
- **Funding access where it's needed most:** Many waterfront access areas throughout the region are privately funded. While this has helped increase the quantity of waterfront access, these benefits are largely felt in wealthier waterfronts. The Restore Mother Nature Bond Act, recently passed by the New York State legislature, is intended to fund restoration and stewardship efforts that could help improve waterfront access in underserved areas and create programming opportunities to draw underserved communities to the waterfront. The report recommends a fair share allocation of this bond funding for urban areas, among other city-level funding strategies to improve access where it's needed most.
- **Broader participation in waterfront decision-making:** With rapid change taking place in waterfront communities, many people feel powerless in decisions about what gets built at their shorelines. At the same time, local and state governments must adapt to growing populations, changing economic conditions, and the increasing threats of climate change. The report outlines some of the key public land use processes which guide waterfront decision-making, and ways to improve government-led and advocate-led community engagement in these processes in order to ensure that outcomes reflect the interests of the immense diversity of our region.

"New York City's 520 miles of waterfront are a vital resource that every New Yorker deserves to access and enjoy. As we continue to work to create a resilient and thriving coastline, we must heed the Waterfront Alliance's call to promote equitable access to our shorefront. The COVID-19 crisis has reinforced how important public, shared spaces are to our city, and better utilizing our waterfront will give more New Yorkers the ability to enjoy our natural environment," said **New York City Comptroller, Scott M. Stringer**.

"Healthy access to our waterfront has never been so important. But this treasure is not always within easy access of everyone's home, especially in underserved communities," said **Rob Pirani**, a **Co-Chair of the Alliance Task Force** and program director of **HEP**. "The Task Force report offers specific suggestions for addressing the barriers that keep people from safe waterfront access".

"Open space, especially at the waterfront, does wonders for our health and well-being. As the New York City metro region cautiously emerge from pandemic isolation into a summer of continued distancing,

access to the waterfront and its cooling breezes will be crucial to our region's quality of life," said **Carter Strickland**, New York and New Jersey state director of **The Trust for Public Land**. "Going forward in our recovery, we must facilitate better waterfront access, particularly in underserved communities that have limited open space options, by buying out more flood prone properties to create more public parks and greenways. In addition, we can facilitate more access on private land, while adding value to private properties, through updated zoning laws and a more responsive planning processes."

"For all of us who care about urban waterfront open space and nature, this hits home at Liberty State Park in Jersey City, New Jersey," said **Sam Pesin**, president of **Friends of Liberty State Park**. "This beautiful 1200-acre park (600 acres of land) that edges New York Harbor is an important example of precious waterfront parkland that's been in danger from privatization plans since it opened in 1976. It's imperative that New Jersey legislators pass the Liberty State Park Protection Act as soon as possible, so that this unique open space is protected from large-scale development and from the current plan by the adjacent Liberty National Golf Course to privatize LSP's cherished Caven Point natural area habitat and environmental education resource."

"These recommendations from the Access Task Force will help break down the barriers that too many people face as they try to get to the waterfront," said **Adam Ganser**, executive director of **New Yorkers for Parks**. "We're pleased to be working with the Access Task Force and the Waterfront Alliance to improve waterfront access across the region. Now is certainly not the time to reduce parks funding."

"The pandemic and the crisis of climate change are problems we all face, but far too many of us are forced to deal with multiple layers of inequity. The Waterfront Access for All report with its set of just and equitable recommendations is exactly what we need at this time," said **Hugh Carola**, program director at **Hackensack Riverkeeper**. "Look, it's just a matter of time before another Sandy-level storm hits New Jersey. With good design, comprehensive management and proper funding state and local governments can put policies in place to help ensure our beloved waterfront parks and natural areas can withstand whatever comes their way."

"The Conservancy is pleased to have contributed to recommendations that can help New Jerseyans experience better waterfront access along the Hudson River," said **Elise Morrison**, a trustee of the **Hudson River Waterfront Conservancy**. "In our case, it's all about enforcement. We work closely with The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, who have responsibility to enforce public access along the Hudson River Waterfront Walkway. While the 18.6-mile Walkway is more than 85 percent complete, several properties along this stretch continue to refuse public access to the waterfront. One even maintains a private, fenced-in waterfront property, open only to residents of the private community. The Conservancy continues to focus on opening the remaining few Hudson River properties to the public, coordinating with the NJDEP, and local municipality officials. The shores of New Jersey tidal waterways belong to everyone, and it's time to take those fences down."

"We need to work harder to make our waterfronts more accessible and equitable. While each of us bears responsibility as individual advocates, it is up to our local, state, and federal agencies to wield strong policy to break down the physical and social barriers that keep many of us from touching the water," said **Roland Lewis**, president and CEO of the **Waterfront Alliance**. "With this set of recommendations encapsulated in our report Waterfront Access for All, we urge governments at all levels in New York and New Jersey to adhere to and celebrate the Public Trust Doctrine, so that all people, no matter where they live, can experience the many benefits of our waterfronts."

The Waterfront Alliance inspires and effects resilient, revitalized, and accessible coastlines for all communities.

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