PUBLIC TESTIMONY OF WATERFRONT ALLIANCE

March 22, 2022
City Council Committee on Parks Budget Hearing

Submitted by Karen Imas, Vice President of Programs, Waterfront Alliance

Thank you, Chair Krishnan and Council Members. I am Karen Imas, Vice President of Programs of the Waterfront Alliance, an alliance of more than 1,100 organizations, businesses, and individuals. We also convene the Rise to Resilience Coalition – a coalition of more than 100 organizations calling on government to make climate resilience an urgent priority.

We look forward to working with this Council and the new administration to ensure that the City provides more public access to the waterfront, especially where social and physical barriers exist.

Aging infrastructure, hardened shoreline design, trash and dumping are just some of the physical barriers that persist in New York City’s parks, along with lack of funding, particularly in lower-income communities of color. Waterfront parks figure centrally into New York City’s open space and pose unique challenges and opportunities in terms of parks operations and maintenance. In fact, roughly half of the land managed by the NYC Parks Department is directly on the water. That proximity to the shoreline makes these beautiful open spaces especially vulnerable to flooding, storm surges, and other consequences of extreme weather. At the same time, the recreational and educational opportunities – from boating to fishing to learning about marine life – are what makes our waterfront parks truly magical.

There are two main areas I would like to highlight today regarding the budget.

First, we stand in partnership with the Play Fair campaign to call for a one percent commitment for Parks in the FY23 Budget. Top U.S. cities dedicate one to two percent of their budget to parks – New York City has been stuck at less than 0.6% for decades.
The co-benefits of parks are irrefutable: from climate resilience to mental health and physical wellness, parks investments pay dividends.

The waterfront facilities maintained by the Parks Department are 76 years old, on average, which is long stretch for infrastructure that takes constant abuse from water and weather.

When Hurricane Sandy battered the region, the storm swamped 5,700 acres of the city's parkland and spawned $800 million in damages. Hurricane Ida had similar impacts. We need to bake more resilient features into park designs, upgrades, and retrofits.

The Parks’ Department own Design and Planning for Flood Resiliency: Guidelines for NYC Parks has a host of recommendations for how parks can quickly recover from extreme weather, as well as how design can bolster urban ecosystems, adapt edges for sea level rise, and aid in community-scale coastal resiliency. These approaches should be adequately funded in park designs and upgrades.

The second issue we would like to point out is the recommendation in the recent Citywide Comprehensive Waterfront Plan to “advance a citywide waterfront public access framework that addresses systemic access gaps and prioritizes investments in communities underserved by safe waterfront access.”

One of the ways in which this gap can be addressed is to leverage city-owned vacant and unused public land at the water’s edge. These parcels can bring many physical, recreational, social, health, and economic benefits to a community when opened.

The Comprehensive Waterfront Plan reinforces this notion and calls for “identifying City-owned waterfront sites and facilities that can support additional public access through investment and coordination among City agencies.”

There are up to 1,000 underutilized City properties along the waterfront. Waterfront Alliance is working on a project identifying such public sites in socially vulnerable communities. Some are entirely unused and cut off from communities.
Others are used occasionally by fisherman, paddlers, or pedestrians. These are mostly waterfront street ends where waterfront access is possible and where the community is already gathering, stewarding, and cleaning. These small parks and green spaces are equally as important as large parks and can serve as climate and public health solutions in urban communities.

We have honed in on several priority sites where we are calling for a transfer of agency jurisdiction or an MOU with community partner in order to truly activate quality waterfront open space. The goal is to provide the strongest pathway possible for New York City to open its waterfront lands to the communities that need them the most.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.