

PortSide New York testimony to
City Council Committee on Governmental Operations jointly with the
Committee on Economic Development and the Committee on
Transportation

April 17, 2019

Regarding:

Int 0982 - In relation to establishing an office of the waterfront.

Int 1512 - In relation to the establishment of a director of ferry operations.

PortSide New York thanks you for this hearing on an important topic that is very central to our mission and program plans. We do suggest more notice for proposals of this import and background should be sent with the hearing notice.

PortSide New York is an award-winning, maritime non-profit located in Red Hook, Brooklyn founded in 2005.

Re Int 0982 Office of the Waterfront

There is much to improve with how NYC's waterfront run. NYC is notorious on the eastern seaboard for being unfriendly to boats – of all types. At PortSide, we describe this by saying that NYC has lost fluency in the maritime language. Thus, the thrust of bill 982, to focus on water dependant uses, is something we support. PortSide our own real estate saga – we still seek a proper home after 14 years – reflects the way NYC's waterfront is run.

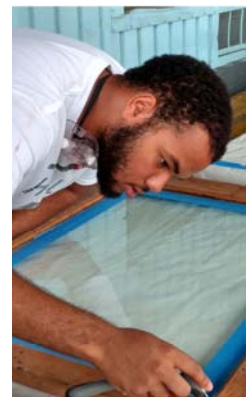
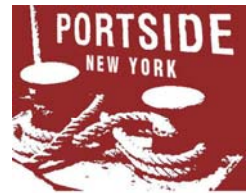
We see the advantage of an office of the waterfront if it answers what people who specialize in NYC's waterfront have long wanted: a waterfront planned, built, managed and permitted by people dedicated to the waterfront, by informed specialists. We all seek a higher level of competence, fewer silos, less bureaucracies to chase down, less red tape and a waterfront managed in a way that favors water-dependent uses and is more accommodating to maritime users.

As ever, the devil is in the details:

Should this be a Mayoral office? Depending on who is the Mayor that is not always a recipe for responsiveness and transparency.

Will this office add another layer (more red tape) or will it have the power to shift how things are done on the waterfront by other departments and authorities?

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For example, having an office to tell people where and how to get a permit is not much of a fix, getting the management entities to change the way they handle permits is what needs to be done. Or, if park piers are poorly designed for boats, having the Office tell an applicant how to apply for a permit does not fit the underlying problem.

Specifically, how is this new Office to interact with the authorities that govern large waterfront parks such as the Hudson River Park, Brooklyn Bridge Park and Governors Island? They are large, have long histories of being unfriendly to water-dependent uses (the focus of 982) and, in some cases, of being unresponsive and lacking transparency — AND they are not part of NYC's government.

Similarly, the Economic Development Corporation (EDC) manages a lot of waterfront and is responsible for much waterfront planning, and resiliency planning has been added to their work. They are an authority outside the structure of NYC government with little accountability to the public and little transparency, and they are legally constructed in such a way as to be exempt from FOIL requests and typical NYC government conflict of interest policies. Will the EDC be subject to this new Office of the Waterfront, or will they continue as more of an independent actor?

Will this Office of the Waterfront make the Waterfront Advisory Board more communicative, more transparent? The WAB has never responded to any PortSide requests to become a member or get information. We are not alone in that experience. The WAB emits no statements, press releases or policies that we can find, so what is its purpose?

Re Int 1512 proposed director of ferry operations.

We find this item perplexing. We wrote a blogpost alerting people to this hearing where we presumed that the trigger for this was Comptroller Scott Stringer's recent call for DOT to take over the NYC Ferry. Midday yesterday, Councilman Vallone's office sent his press release saying the intent was "to establish a Director of Ferry Operations within the Department of Transportation." It is our understanding that such a position exists. "The bill would not change this overall operational structure and control of the system could lie under any city entity – namely either EDC or DOT" meaning that it would leave NYC Ferry under EDC control. We suggest sending more info about a proposed bill in future hearing announcements. We will use this as a time to talk about some of our observations about the NYC Ferry and the EDC running it.

PortSide New York has long advocated for greater NYC use of ferries, and we see much to be praised about the current NYC Ferry system. We have a close working relationship with NYC Ferry staff which works for Hornblower. We are located just yards from their Red Hook/Atlantic Basin dock. The NYC Ferry is an asset to PortSide programming, we use it in multiple educational ways for field trips. The EDC helped us with one such

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program, when their president James Patchett received a small transportation study by students from the Red Hook Neighborhood School. NYC Ferry supports our programs by bringing us visitors. It is an asset in many ways to our community of Red Hook

Hornblower works for the EDC since the NYC Ferry system is planned and built by the EDC, and the docks are managed by the EDC as well.

Concerns

Very low ridership by Red Hook NYCHA residents and the very low awareness that this ferry exists that we find amongst those residents.

The ferry management at the EDC is resistant to suggestions of the most basic yet impactful sort, a major concern. Some examples:

- The Red Hook stop is called Red Hook Atlantic Basin. There are no signs outside Atlantic Basin identifying it as such. That place name is not well known even in Red Hook. It is a mariners' term.
- The map on the dock is basically blank (it is a DOT WalkNYC product). The map does not include PortSide though we are yards from the dock. The EDC has refused 2 years of our requests to install a sign on the dock saying that PortSide is on site, our ship is open to the public and here's the link to our digital museum about Red Hook. The EDC is refusing a sign that would list a tenant, support their giving us a free public berth and increase ferry ridership since our ship and our guide are attractions.

The way the EDC runs that Cruise Terminal in Atlantic Basin should be considered when assessing the idea of the EDC running NYC Ferry long term:

- The long promised shorepower is not working and the EDC maintains steady silence about the delays.
- The EDC management style is deaf to customer service, neighborhood input and partnering overtures.
- There is no calendar of public events at the cruise terminal, no notification system, no social media posts, to let the community know when thousands, sometimes tens of thousands of people will be there for an event.
- The EDC said the cruise terminal would be a boost to Red Hook businesses, but there is NO INFO about Red Hook in BCT, on the NYC Ferry dock, on any sign on the fences, and no notification of special events.

What kind of economic development is the EDC doing if they are not notifying businesses of the opportunity for more business or notifying terminal visitors about the existence of Red Hook businesses, art, attractions, history?

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Also, due to no notification about events via such a calendar, locals cannot prepare for the negative impacts of traffic or the ferries being full.

There are other dock design and operational issues with how the EDC runs the ferry.

As stated above, the EDC is an authority outside the structure of City government, a structure that allows it to be unresponsive to community demands, media requests and able to walk away from community promises.

Full disclosure, a home in the form of building space for PortSide is one of those unfulfilled promises, along with working shorepower at the Brooklyn Cruise Terminal.

These observations and others make us say that something as important to the City as a major ferry network should be run by an accountable, transparent and ideally responsive City agency. At this time, the EDC has not demonstrated that as their MO.

Shifting NYC Ferry to DOT control would consolidate all ferry functions in one place at the DOT could avoid duplication and competition, share expertise, maximize purchasing power, and maximize opportunities to link all City ferries into one network. If NYC Ferry does not move to the DOT, much about how the EDC runs NYC Ferry could be improved.

Thanks for your consideration.

Don't hesitate to call or write with follow up questions or comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carolina Salguero', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Carolina Salguero
Founder & President
PortSide New York