



Waterfront Development, Public Access and In-Water Access

January 29, 2020

5.30-8.00pm

Cornell AAP, 26 Broadway

As part of the Public Forums series on the **NYC Comprehensive Waterfront Plan**, the Waterfront Alliance partnered with DCP to host a meeting on ***Waterfront Development, Public Access and In-Water Access***. There were more than 90 attendees from nonprofit and community groups in NY and NJ, including a number of boathouses and recreational groups; advocacy organizations in the environment and open space sectors; government representatives; urban planners, architects and engineers; and citizens with a general interest in the waterfront.

Following introductory remarks and a presentation on the Comprehensive Waterfront Plan, Sarah Dougherty, Program Manager at the Waterfront Alliance, presented on the importance of advocating for waterfront access, specifically addressing persistent physical and social barriers to the waterfront, and about the work of the waterfront “Access for All Task Force” to make recommendations for the CWP. Nate Grove, Chief of Waterfront and Marine Operations at NYC Parks, spoke about the physical barriers that keep us from accessing the waterfront, the scope of waterfront parks across NYC, and what the NYC Parks Department has done to create more opportunities for public access and in-water access in the past 10 years. Ibrahim Abul Matin, “Access for All Task Force” Co-Chair, discussed the social barriers that keep us from accessing the waterfront, and how waterfront development can exacerbate these barriers.

Sarah Dougherty, Program Manager at the Waterfront Alliance, then facilitated a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) exercise. This enabled attendees to think collectively about major issues relating to public and in-water access on the waterfront. Participants broke out into smaller groups to discuss these issues and report back their top priorities. The ideas and themes highlighted during the open SWOT portion are listed at the end of this document.

The questions guiding the discussion during breakout groups were:

- (1) **Physical Access:** What issues related to infrastructure, planning and design should be focused on in the next 10 years to encourage more access/in-water access to the water?
- (2) **Community Engagement and Diversity:** who gets to have a say in waterfront development / decisions about public access? What people/groups do we need to be talking to and how do we reach them? What are the governance and regulatory issues that we need to address in order to support more equitable waterfronts and better access/in-water access?
- (3) **Stewardship:** What challenges do communities and community organizations face in terms of maintaining and supporting programming at their waterfront?

Main Takeaways:

Attendees discussed a range of topics, including barriers to directly accessing the water, water quality and the desire for softer shorelines and wetland restoration, and the importance of community engagement, programming and stewardship. Attendees noted the range and improvement of environmental conditions, and the active community of professionals and volunteers supporting this diverse work. Attendees also noted limitations of current physical access, equity and engagement concerns, and the threat of increased development and changing shoreline due to climate change. A strong emphasis on natural assets along the waterfront was made by many participants.

Conversation frequently focused on the improvements needed to balance the different needs and uses of the waterfront as well expanding access and engagement to reach a broader and more diverse population. Overall there was a strong recognition of the active social and community role that the waterfront can play — through education, programming and stewardship — but also the need to increase funding, investment and support to make this possible. During the breakout groups, more specific ideas, priorities and themes emerged, as summarized below:

Investing in infrastructure that supports diverse waterfront and in-water uses

Attendees discussed the range of infrastructure and investment needed to encourage and support safe public access and use of the water(front). This included more overall access points (on both public and private land), more beaches, more living shorelines and natural access, supporting and expanding boathouses, longer floating docs, more signage and in more languages, hands on access for fishing, more human-powered boat launches and ensuring ADA accessibility and designing inclusive spaces for a full continuation of access to both the waterfront and the water itself. Important to this conversation were also ecological factors, such as combined sewer overflow (CSO) and water quality, and the necessity of ongoing funding and maintenance, especially in the context of dealing with changing sea levels, erosion and climate change impacts. Questions were raised in regards to how to best balance and prioritize interests, as well as how to hold the public and private actors accountable to clear targets and goals for existing and especially future development around affordability, equity and transparency. Attendees also brought up some of the impacts and trade-offs of various activities, including for example how the wakes from ferries impacts small boats and other ecological, habitat and stormwater management considerations.

Ecological considerations + climate change

Attendees recognized the importance of ensuring the waterfront stays accessible even through rising sea levels as well as protecting and expanding the ecological functions of the waterfront more broadly. Topics discussed included the value of habitat, landscaping and other natural features of the waterfront; the importance of recognizing and protecting wildlife access and habitats; and issues of connectivity (greenways, etc) and upland access. Related to the changing conditions of the waterfront, attendees noted various interventions needed, including possible wider and deeper coastal setbacks for the transition, new ways to think about infill, and various strategies of elevating, dredging, and protecting against erosion. Sea walls were considered contentious and attendees suggested more space was needed for natural habitat adaptation (“back up vs build up”). Attendees stressed the need for clear targets for air, noise and water quality of existing and future development.

Community Engagement, Education and Stewardship

A clear take away from the discussion was the importance of public and community engagement and education for both waterfront communities and all New Yorkers. This stressed the importance of active programming and outreach needed to make the waterfront accessible to all and the support needed for community stewardship efforts. Many attendees suggested the potential of integrating the waterfront into public education efforts (including swim lessons, curriculum, field trips, after-school or summer programs, etc), as well as other educational and cultural opportunities to engage the public, learn about the issues, and change the narrative of the waterfront, especially reaching diverse and underserved communities. Attendees noted how important it is to support broader outreach efforts and to collaborate with community-based organizations (including community boards, nonprofits, churches, local businesses, etc) to reach new people through many different formats and ways of engagement (particularly noting language accessibility, etc), which is often a challenge. This is particularly important as a way to build trust, as attendees also noted how waterfront developments and some previous outreach efforts (post Sandy, etc) have disenfranchised communities. Overall, attendees noted the necessity of meeting people where they are and how vital public engagement and participation is in ensuring both equitable access and improved services (through participatory planning of infrastructure, storage, bathrooms, safety programs, access, transportation, etc), but also in meeting these broader challenges.

Governance and Management

Attendees frequently cited confusing or complicated governance of the waterfront and a clear need for a more transparent, equitable and engaged process; particularly regarding agency specific goals, the rezoning process, lengthy city procurement and capital planning processes, grant opportunities, and support for waterfront and underserved communities. Attendees discussed the need for better funding and decision-making processes. Clear rules and more flexible design guidelines on entrance and egress from the water that support human powered boating was discussed. Participants repeatedly noted the potential for cooperation between landowners, developers and the broader community. Most table discussions included that the Parks Department and other agencies in charge initiate providing access to the waterfront focusing on cultural and educational activities.

The ideas and themes highlighted during the SWOT exercise were:

Strengths and opportunities

More than 17 community boat houses; views; diversity and quality of places; stewardship and volunteers; better access to upland; watersheds; walkability, signage/wayfinding, and new access points; better engaging underserved communities; education, recreation and youth engagement (water is fun!); improved technology, infrastructure and sustainability (CSOs, renewable energy, heli-port at pier 6) different typologies; West-Side/HRD; connected greenway; rowing/paddling; free-rowing.

Weakness and threats

Consistency and transparency in governance (agencies, permitting, etc); lack of access for city island; Insufficient funding for public parks; not enough historical vessels; few public launches for boating; few docks particularly in Jamaica Bay; sewage; plastic; litter; sea level rise; aging infrastructure; erosion; physical barriers; low lying infrastructure at risk; high rises; slow government response; sharks and jellyfish; transportation deserts; ignorance; cost of putting people in water/maintenance; permitting constraints; poor access to city island; few public boat launches.

Key themes by comments:

Infrastructure; education and recreation; community engagement and stewardship; competing waterfront uses