

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION

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Chairperson

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Joanna Crisp

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[gavel]

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Good afternoon

everyone. Welcome to the city council chamber. I'm Mark Levine; chair of the City Council's Committee on Parks and Recreation and I'm so excited to welcome you all to our hearing on access to sites within the Park system that are now partially or fully closed to the public. Want to acknowledge we've been joined today by Parks Committee Member Alan Maisel from Brooklyn, Parks Committee Member Jimmy Van Bramer, and Majority Leader of City Council from Queens. We have a couple of guests as well here today. I'm excited to have Margaret Chin, Council Member from Manhattan, Parks Committee Member Fernando Cabrera from the Bronx. And we have another guest here today Liz Crowley, City Council Member from Queens. And we'll be hearing from a number of them shortly. But I'm excited to talk about our topic today. At a time when city parks usage is surging and New Yorkers appetite for discovery and exploration is as great as ever. We have many assets in our Park system which are untapped and underused. Soring monuments to heroes of long ago wars, engineering marvels from

centuries past, uninhabited islands featuring picturesque ruins and untamed nature. New York City's park system is home to all of this and more whether underground, in the sky, or out on the water these sites offer unparalleled opportunities for New Yorkers to connect to our history, to learn about the origins of our infrastructure and to simply see our city from an amazing new perspective literally and figuratively. North Brother Island, Heart Island, Soldiers and Sailors monument, Prison Ship Martyrs' Monument, Washington Square Arch, Grand Armory Plaza Arch, Old Croton Aqueduct, High Bridge Water Tower, 119th Street Gatehouse, New York State Pavilion... Each of these spectacular sites offers something unexpected or inspiring or thought provoking. Most of all each is utterly unique in the world. These sites all have something else in common. They're each partially or completely off limits to the public. To change that, to allow New Yorkers the chance to see and touch these marvelous sites up close is in many cases complicated and in every case will require significant resources. But investing and expanding access would yield incredible benefits to New

Yorkers and visitors alike offering countless opportunities for education and inspiration and even providing a potential economic boom from tourism. So, let's take a look at these 10 jewels of our parks system. First up is North Brother Island; New York's own lost city, a 20-acre island off the South Bronx that beginning in the late 19th century served as a quarantine facility for infectious diseases patients including most famously typhoid Mary. The North Brother Complex eventually grew to over 30 buildings including a tuberculosis hospital, dormitories, a church, and more. By the 1960s this city in miniature was abandoned leaving nature to reclaim the island for its own. Today North Brother is a spellbinding mix of history, natural beauty, and wild habitat. It's off limits to the public but a plan for limited highly curated access to balance the need for preservation with a huge educational and inspirational potential of the site. In the Long Island sound between the Bronx and Queens lies the 128-acre Heart Island which since the 18th century has served as a quarantine site, a home for troubled adolescents, a cold war and missile silo,

cold war missile base, and it has served for the past century and a half through to today as New York City's public cemetery as is Potters Field. There are a now an estimated one million bodies buried on the island, the indigent, homeless, aids patients, and others among our city's most marginalized. In a Dickensian twist Heart Island is managed not by the Parks Department but by the city's Department of Corrections which uses inmates from Ryker's to do the work of ongoing burials. This means that for security reasons the island is off limits to the public including those who want to visit their loved ones who are buried there. A bill sponsored by Council Member Liz Crowley would transfer control of the island to the Parks Department. This would open the way to public access allowing those with loved one buried on the island to freely pay their respects and giving the public a chance to visit the partially ruined 18th century buildings, the old missile silos, a little-known monument to world peace, and 120 acres of natural beauty with commanding views of the Long Island Sound in every direction. Back on the mainland New York City's park system is also home

to many spectacular memorials including the stately Soldiers and Sailors monument in Riverside Park which commemorates Union Soldiers and Sailors who served in the civil war. The interior of the monument is a stunning 90 foot high rotunda with intricately carved marble and mosaics. But it has sadly been decades since the public has been allowed inside. Much needed renovations would allow New Yorkers to again experience this wonderful monument at its best outside and inside. Brooklyn's Fort Greene Park is home to the Prison Ship Martyrs' Monument which was dedicated in 1908 and consists of a 100 foot wide granite staircase and central door column 140 feet in height. It marks the site of a crypt for more than 11,500 men and women who died from starvation and disease while being held captive aboard British Prison Ships during the American Revolution. The interior stairs lead up to the top of the monument where visitors can enjoy stunning views of the New York City High Line. But despite a short-lived attempt at renovation of the stairs in the early 2000s the Prison Ship Martyrs' column remains closed to the public today. The Washington Square Arch in Council

Member Chin's district was built in 1892 to honor the centennial of the first president's inauguration in Washington Square Park. Today it's one of the city's best known landmarks but only from the outside. The public virtually never has access to the interior of the arch which features a 102 step spiral staircase leading to a vaulted attic space with ceiling tiling by Guastavino, the same artisan whose work adorns ceilings at Grand Central Terminal. No less grand is the arch at Grand Armory Plaza, officially known as the Soldiers and Sailors Arch which was constructed in 1889 as a tribute to the Union Army. The top of the 80 foot high structure was first opened as an observation platform but the public today rarely gets to climb the 116 stairs to the top of the arch to enjoy beautiful views of prospect park and the surrounding areas of Brooklyn. New York City's long lost infrastructure also offers incredible opportunities for discovery. The old Croton Aqueduct built between 1837 and 1842 served as the city's first official water supply system and was one of the world's great modern aqueducts running 41 miles from Westchester through the Bronx into

Manhattan. Portions of the underground system remain remarkably intact today including a long stretch running from Washington Heights through West Harlem. To allow public tours of this underground engineering marvel would give young people and adults alike an adventure back in time. The old Croton water system also includes many above ground structures with themselves, which themselves are architectural jewels. Most notably, the High Bridge Water Tower in High Bridge Park which was built in 1872 and soars 200 feet in the air. The octagonally shaped tower has been intermittently open to the public since it ceased to be used for water system purposes in 1849 but the tower is now closed pending repair work. Another currently off limits above ground aqueduct feature is the 119th Street Gatehouse which you can see... I think that's the next slide, there it is, right in the middle, the stunning interior of this building is also closed to the public. A strong community coalition has emerged to advocate for opening the gatehouse for tours and for use in artistic and cultural events. Finally, there's one of the most dramatic and iconic structures in New

York City; the New York state pavilion in Flushing Meadows Crotona Park. The pavilion was designed for the 1964 New York World's Fair by architects Philip Johnson and Lev Zetlin a major engineering breakthrough in its day it featured what was then the largest suspension cable roof in the world. The structure has significantly deteriorated over the years and is today only open to the public one weekend per year. A recent design competition identified a number of exciting potential uses of the site including as a concert venue, open air market, or indoor park. Increasing access at each of the 10 historic locations we've profiled here will require significant investment. But the city's current outstanding debt is almost 13 billion dollars below its statutory limit. And relative to the scale of the overall capital budget the cost of these projects amount to little more than a rounding era. Opening up public access is an investment that will yield manifold dividends, a reconnection of New Yorkers to their history, added incentives for tourists to spend their dollars here, inspiration for future engineers to dream up the marvels of tomorrow, and the opportunity for

countless New Yorkers of all ages simply to say wow. I look forward to hearing the testimony of the Parks Department and advocates on this exciting topic. And first I would like to allow the two council members with special interest in some of the wonderful sites we've spoken about today to say a few words and we'll start with Council Member Margaret Chin who will speak about the Washington Square Arch.

COUNCIL MEMBER CHIN: Thank you Chair.

Good afternoon. I'd like to thank Chair Levine for holding this hearing and giving us a forum to discuss the secret world hiding in plain sight inside these public assets. I want to emphasize the word public in public assets because I believe it is important to remind everyone that these properties belong to the people of New York City. One of these public assets is Washington Square Arch in my council district. As one of the most recognizable monuments in our city it came as a surprise to me that this arch could be assessed and climb all the way to the top. Imagine what a view it could be from Washington Square Park looking out at the Village and beyond. So, I look forward to

hearing more from Parks about ways that we can as a city give the public the access that it deserve because I believe that everyone should have the chance to have a deeper connection with these iconic public properties. But I also want to take this opportunity to also talk about other park facility. Like in my district I have the Stanton Street Park House that is inside Sara D. Roosevelt Park. It's a beautiful building that used to be a community center. All of a sudden, now, it's closed off to the public and it's been used as a storage site for park supplies for Manhattan. Now, the Borough President and I, we have allocated half a million dollars to fix the bathrooms so that the kids who are playing soccers [phonetic] or in the playground at least can go to the bathroom but we want that building to open back up to the public, just as all the beautiful site that Council Member Levine had talked about. Thank you very much.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you Council Member Chin. I'd like to ask Council Member Liz Crowley who can say a few words about Heart Island.

COUNCIL MEMBER CROWLEY: Thank you Chair Levine. Good afternoon. I'm Council Member

Elizabeth Crowley. And I would like to thank Chair Levine for holding this hearing and for including Heart Island as an inaccessible [phonetic] public space on the hearing agenda today. Heart Island falls under the jurisdiction of the Department of Correction and the Committee I chair Fire and Criminal Justice has oversight on the Department of Correct. Heart Island is located in the Long Island Sound and is part of the Bronx. It serves as the city's cemetery and is often referred to as our Potter's Field. Since 1869 over one million people have been buried on Heart Island. Among those buried include many stillborn babies, veterans, and people whose identity is unknown. The burials are performed by inmates who are transported from Ryker's Island. It is through the Department of Correction that one has to arrange a visit to the island and visits are only available one day a month. All visitors are allowed to visit get escorted by Correction Officers by all times when they are on the island. I'm interested in discussing ways in which we can make Heart Island more accessible and more comfortable as a setting for those who visit and for those whose final

resting place it is. Heart Island is also rich with history dating back to the civil war. So again I, I want to thank Council Member Levine for having this hearing today and for his advocacy on behalf of Heart Island and I look forward to today's testimony. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you very much Council Member Crowley. Alright I would like to introduce the administration; The Parks Department. And we welcome your testimony on this topic. And I'll ask you to start out with our obligatory affirmation which our Committee Counsel Kris Sartori will lead you in.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL SARTORI: Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in your testimony before this committee today?

MATT DRURY: I do. Good morning Chair Levine, members of the Committee of Parks and Recreation and other council members. My name's Matt Drury and I'm the Director of Government Relations for New York City Parks. I'm joined today by First Deputy Commissioner Liam Kavanagh as well as several

colleagues from NYC Parks and our Partner organizations. Thank you for inviting us today to testify on Parks Department properties that are not currently accessible to the public. I'd like to begin by providing a little context about NYC Parks. We're the steward of approximately 30,000 acres, 14 percent of New York City's land mass. We oversee more than 5,000 individual properties which range from parks and playgrounds to community gardens and green streets. We operate more than 800 athletic fields and nearly 1,000 playgrounds, 66 public pools, 48 recreation facilities, 17 nature centers, and 14 miles of beaches. Each of these individual properties has a unique character and identity and each presents the agency with different challenges in keeping every park in the best condition possible and providing the best experience for our park users and visitors. Our efforts in this regard are guided by a clear principal. Distribute city resources in a fair and focused manner that reflects this administration's commitment to equity. Our signature effort and the centerpiece of the strategic blueprint is a community parks initiative, also known as CPI. This

innovative program has bought more than 285 million dollars in capital funding, targeted improvements, enhanced programming, maintenance and community partnership building, to nearly 150 neighborhood parks that need it the most in a way that's inclusive and equitable. We're also in the midst of our anchor parks initiative, 150 million dollar mayoral investment targeting five medium and large parks that will improve and provide a variety of large scale recreational assets including playing fields, playgrounds, comfort stations, and open landscape and natural areas. The improvements that are being suggested at our community outreach and visioning sessions will help these parks continue to serve a large diverse set of park users and make sure that these parks have a range of amenities and activities available to all New Yorkers. Since city resources are finite we believe that being responsible stewards of public dollars means that the widest audience possible should enjoy the services and programs available in our city parks and that capital investment and other expenditures should be prioritized to maximize public benefit. Along these lines it is true that NYC Parks has

some properties in its portfolio that cannot be fully and completely open to the general public at this time for a variety of reasons including visitor safety, structural stability, NYC fire and building Code, ventilation and climate control, as well as ADA accessibility standards. One example would be the Washington Square Arch in Manhattan which was completed and dedicated in 1892. The interior space of the arch was never truly designed for public access but instead to let the building breathe allowing air to circulate and moisture to evaporate from the masonry. The sole staircase in the west pier is very narrow not permitting safe passage for persons going up and down simultaneously as it is simply a service stairway for maintaining the structure. The arch was not designed in compliance with modern ADA standards and there is no fire egress or second exit in the event of an emergency. Though there are not any significant point of interest on the interior limited public access to the interior and roof of the arch was accommodated in previous decades. After the arch underwent a 2.7 million dollar restoration in 2003 the restoration team advised

that roof access should be forbidden as damage from visitation had caused leaks in the roof that largely contributed to water infiltration of the structure and further deterioration. Further, it was determined that regular foot traffic could damage the spiral masonry staircase which is supported entirely by the layering of terracotta rectangular tiles and again not designed for public access. Since then a policy's been set by NYC parks to only allow limited access to the interior for our maintenance and operations inspections, occasional preservation research, and conservation work and on rare occasion NYPD access. Though access to the arch's interior is no longer possible it is still a vibrant destination and gathering place, host to events throughout the year including holiday programs and countless wedding photos. Further, NYC Parks and the Washington Square Park Conservancy offer cultural and historical tours and programming that help bring the history of this fascinating location back to life. NYC Parks is fully dedicated to encouraging New Yorkers to get out and enjoy all of our parks by creating and improving creative open spaces through our targeted

placemaking efforts. We strive to make our parks special destinations that reflect the diversity and variety of New York's changing demographics since people from different age groups and cultural backgrounds seek different experiences from their neighborhood parks. We want our city's outdoor spaces to be part of the fabric of the community and our parks to be an inviting place to spend time whether it's a picnic on a lazy summer weekend or a brisk jog before work on a cold winter morning. We especially encourage New Yorkers to explore some of our park properties that might be a bit off the beaten path offering a range of natural, historical, and cultural opportunities, some of which you wouldn't believe are available right in the middle of New York City. This can be done in a variety of ways. Our Urban Park Rangers offer scheduled and pop-up tours throughout the year allowing park visitors access to fascinating places. A Fort Totten Tunnel Tour in Queens can offer you a glimpse into the Forts place in Civil War military history while curated access to the little red lighthouse in Fort Washington Park under the George Washington Bridge offers a fresh

perspective on the famous children's book. Though access to the apex is not possible the Fort Greene Park Conservancy does open the Prison Ship Martyrs' Monument as part of its Walt Whitman Historic Tours that occur throughout the summer and access inside the monument is also incorporated into some of our ranger historical programs as well. We host occasional discovery days at Freshkills Park opening up 700 acres and eight miles of biking and hiking trails, and kayak tours through the site providing opportunities to explore and learn about this landfill to park project. Also, New York City Parks works closely with the historic house trust to preserve and highlight New York's unique historic houses helping us appreciate the history of the City of New York. Thanks to their hard work and dedication you can visit the Bronx cottage where Edgar Allen Poe wrote some of his most famous works or see the conference house of Staten Island which served as a site of peace negotiations in 1776 between the British and the Americans who were represented by Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. We encourage all New Yorkers to explore the variety and diversity of our natural areas, over 10,000

acres throughout the city. The Central Park Conservancy recently completed its restoration of the central park Hallett Nature Sanctuary which offers public access several times a week. A hike through Alley Pond Park in Queens, Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx or the Green Belt in Staten Island provides New Yorkers with a chance to escape the pressures of urban life and find moments of natural beauty to enjoy leading most to forget, however briefly, that they're in the largest city in America. For example, our forestry, horticulture, and natural resource group are working to blaze trails through natural areas with clearly identifiable, identifiable trail markers. We've recently completed five signature trails, one in each borough making these natural areas more navigable without a formal tour guide. And we've posted updated interactive maps on our website so perspective hikers can plan routes of different durations based on various points of interest that appeal most to them. We recognize that some parks properties have captured the interest and imagination of historians and urban explorers which is why we're pleased to offer limited curated

access to many of our more unique properties. For example, we've partnered with Open House New York, a nonprofit focused on celebrating the best examples of design and planning throughout the five boroughs, to provide audiences with access to the extraordinary architecture of New York including many NYC Parks properties, the Soldiers and Sailors monument in Riverside Park or the Astoria Pool in Queens. We've also offered Hard Hat tours of the Tent of Tomorrow at the site of the world's fair, New York State Pavilion in Flushing Meadows Corona Park through open house New York programs as well as last summer's Only in Queens summer festival. We also provide further occasional opportunities for access to help facilitate educational, historic, ecological, or scientific research endeavors at properties such as North Brother Island on occasion. Technology has allowed New... NYC Parks to provide access to New Yorkers who prefer to do some site seeing from their, from the comfort of home. Our web pages on Periscope and Facebook Live host short videos highlighting the entire range of experiences available at NYC Parks. You can explore the salt marsh at Randall's Island. You can take a

virtual hike to the Ravine in Prospect Park. Or you can visit the Queens County Farm Museum which is the oldest continuously farmed site in New York state. Of course, we hope the videos inspire New Yorkers to get out there and see these amazing treasures in person and seek to explore even further options to use technology and social media to an even greater degree in the future. When resources are available to help preserve and broaden access to these properties sensible targeted investment in capital improvements can help protect these treasures. Last year after decades of inaccessibility and decay the renovation of the pedestrian high bridge connected neighborhoods in Manhattan and the Bronx offering greater access and accessibility to open space for residents living on both side of the river. The High Bridge is now the only interborough bridge exclusively for pedestrians and bicyclists ensuring that this historically significant engineering marvel can be fully appreciated and celebrated by the local community and the entire city. At the majestic Soldiers and Sailors monument in Riverside Park we're currently completing a comprehensive

condition survey of the building's exterior and interior including ADA exterior ramp compliance through a 400,000 dollar pre-scoping grant from OMB. Survey methods have include ground penetrating radar to access the, assess the mortar between stones, infrared scanning, and old-fashioned hands-on inspection. Other renovation and stabile... stabilization projects are underway throughout the city including the High Bridge water... High Bridge Park Water Tower and the New York state Pavilion Observation Towers to ensure that these structures will survive for future generations of New Yorkers to learn from and enjoy. As I hope our discussion today will make clear NYC Parks is working tirelessly to encourage every New Yorker to explore, discover new experiences and enjoy all that our parks have to offer. When opportunities arise to broaden access to our spaces in a way that are fiscally responsible and operationally feasible we look forward to working with the counsel and other stakeholders to explore these possibilities. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We'd now be happy to answer any questions you might have.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you so much
Director Drury and our colleague Council Member
Maisel has to leave momentarily so I believe he has
a question or two for you.

COUNCIL MEMBER MAISEL: As a great
supporter of Parks and looking forward to the
opportunity for more opportunities for people to
visit the park I think this is a great start to
explore the issue. However, here's some irony. In
my district, we have one of the oldest houses in
New York state. And a couple blocks from my
district we have the third oldest house in New York
state, the Wyckoff House, the lot house is on East
36th Street and Avenue S. And I'm willing to bet
that thousands of my residents have gone to Europe
and South America and points east, west, north,
south looking for historic monuments and places to
visit and look for old buildings and facilities to
visit and ogle and take pictures of and a block or
two from them we have these historic treasures.
Nobody knows that they exist. So, although I'm
certainly happy to see that more opportunities
exist what can we do that would increase the
knowledge that the New Yorkers have not just of the

Wyckoff House and the lot house. But we have other amazing old houses that are available to the public and nobody knows that they're around.

LIAM KAVANAGH: Liam Kavanagh, Deputy Commissioner of Parks. Thank you Council Member Maisel for highlighting our historic house collection. It's one of the, I think one of the great accomplishments of the Parks Department, that they work with interested parties in the private sector to... and this goes back to I think 1989 to preserve these historic residences around New York that are part of the history culture and fabric of New York City life. And while you know they, they may not be as well known in all cases as, as we would like them to be they receive over 800,000 visits a year primarily from school children who, who go there as part of their class...

COUNCIL MEMBER MAISEL: Excuse me, not the lot house.

LIAM KAVANAGH: Not the lot house, no. And the lot house is a little bit of a different situation. We have been doing some significant work there recently and it's on its way to joining that collection of places that can be open to the

public. But Wyckoff House as you know we've... thanks to cooperation with, with you and your predecessor have invested a lot of money into that... into Wyckoff House and the surrounding park to make it a much more you know attractive and vibrant part of the community.

COUNCIL MEMBER MAISEL: Just as a...

LIAM KAVANAGH: So... But, but we would absolutely welcome any ideas to promote the historic house collection. We'd like to invite every council member to visit the historic house in their district or nearby district to get a sense of what is available and to maybe come up with more ways to promote...

COUNCIL MEMBER MAISEL: No, I did not know that this hearing was going to take place on this subject but on my next newsletter I am featuring important points of interest in my district. And the first one I'm doing is the lot house. My neighbor... I live two blocks from the lot house. My neighbors don't know it's there which is why I decided to do it. There, there... we have to do more to... to expose New Yorkers to these, these,

these gems. And not sure how you do it, maybe a press release. That's your job.

LIAM KAVANAGH: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you Council Member. You know I have to admit I'm scratching my head a little bit here so maybe you can clarify some things for me. You, you opened up with kind of a blanket statement that concerns about visitor safety, structural stability, fire and building codes, ventilation and climate control preclude access to many of these sites. But then you told us that we opened up the little red lighthouse one day a year. I can't imagine that was designed with all those modern systems were... We have in the not too distant past opened up the High Bridge water tower which, certainly was, was not designed for such purposes. You talked about what you call limited curated access tours, hard hat tours which I assume are, are in conditions which perhaps don't meet the standards for general public access. But it seems, seems that it's, it's arbitrary that some properties get the benefit of these kind of limited access and others are just considered off-limits.

MATT DRURY: Well I don't think it's... I wouldn't use the word arbitrary but I do think it's, it'd dependent on the, the actual site conditions that are, that are present. And certain, certain of the structures are in more precarious or, or more hazardous conditions. And that's where I think that line gets drawn. I think there... for example it's Soldiers and Sailors in Riverside Park there's the effort to open... open the public into a... there's a... basically an eight foot sort of passageway through which you can see the grand chamber and a few days a year that's, that's opened so that folks can frankly get a glimpse. Now obviously as, as we're now undergoing with our condition study you know further, much further repair will be needed before that's robustly open and available and safely. But I think we have when possible in, in a way that is manageable tried to offer at least that glimpse that, that is possible in some cases.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: That's great to hear. I've had the pleasure of being inside Soldiers and Sailors and it's, it's really spectacular. And I can't wait for the public to

1 enjoy that. And it's, I think it's an example of
2 the fact that there are resource constraints. We've
3 got to do some renovation there. And that's
4 probably true in every one of these properties but,
5 but that's not insurmountable. That, that's a
6 different problem from saying that there are,
7 there's something about the nature of this site
8 that just makes public access impossible no?

10 MATT DRURY: I, I think that's fair. I
11 think there are, there are one or two and for
12 example the Washington Square Arch is, is one
13 notable example where you know robust public access
14 has, has been formally and scientifically advised
15 against. So I think there are a few instances in
16 which that's the case. In the others I think you're
17 correct in that it's more of an issue of you know
18 finite resources and, and what's... and...

19 CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Well I, I do want
20 to talk about some of the others. It seems like in
21 the case of Washington Square there was a decision
22 made during the last renovation and perhaps due to
23 finite resources and other concerns that may have
24 been reasonable at the time that it wasn't going to
25 be renovated in a way that would allow access. And

there wasn't going to be kind of structural work done. The roof wasn't reinforced in a way that would allow someone to stand there. And those might have been all perfectly rational. But, but maybe those aren't insurmountable. Maybe if we had the resources to shore up the roof people could, could enjoy that view and, and the interior architectural elements which I understand are quite spectacular. I think Commissioner Silver did, did a periscorped [phonetic], a periscope tour himself and the public got to see that. Isn't that again ultimately just a resource allocation question?

LIAM KAVANAGH: It, it could be perceived that way no question about it. But... and I'm actually glad that we're talking about resource allocation in relation to these kind of facilities and you know it, I think it shows that we've come a long way in what has been invested in the Parks Department over the last 30 years, how much places have improved. But there's still a lot more to be done throughout the entire system as, as you, as you well know. And our priorities are always going to focus on, on providing you know the most benefit to most New Yorkers in the broadest possible terms.

These sites, many of them are limited regardless of, of how well you develop them. They're small spaces. They are very, they would only accommodate you know finite numbers of people under very supervised situations. And while I think the port, point Matt was trying to make in his testimony is that we do try to make them available on, on an occasional basis because we understand the interest. And I have to say I'm, I'm really impressed by all of the interest that I, I heard and you know talking to some of, some of the people here before the hearing. And you know the level of interest in, in so many places in the park system I think it's great. It does in many cases come down to a question of resources investing in these places to make them accessible up to modern codes and that includes ADA accessibility which clearly many of these places were not designed to accommodate years ago. And the other things like public egress and fire safety and things like that, you know we have to take that into account. Several of them have, however are just not right in their current state designed for public access. The, the

Prison Ship Martyr being the principal among them.
It's 150 foot ladder. And...

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: I'm sorry which one
is that?

LIAM KAVANAGH: The Prison Ship martyr...

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: But wasn't there a
plan afoot to, in the 2000s to renovate that for
access?

LIAM KAVANAGH: No, that was not part of
the plan in 2000. We, we just wanted to stabilize
the, the monument so that it would last the, into
the future. And the access was not part of it.
What, what was part of it was a lot of effort was
put into the eternal flame and we sort of solved
that with a, with a modern sort of adaptation of
the, of the eternal flame concept.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Is there anyone
here who'd be up for climbing a ladder to the top
of that monument?

LIAM KAVANAGH: I'm sure there are.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Alright I'll try
and keep up with you. Look you're never going to
have as many users as we have in, in the great lawn
of central park for any of these properties nor

would we want that. But there's just something utterly unique about these spaces and I think the sense of wonder they offer New Yorkers the sense of discovery and adventure and a connection to who we are as a city, how we've dealt with infectious disease, how we honor our war dead, how we committed, commemorated national landmarks and national tragedies. You can read about those in textbooks but to touch the stone that was laid by someone who lived through those moments of history to experience their sense of engineering, their sense of values from those times. It's, it's something you can replicate. And so I wouldn't purely measure the value of these experiences by the number of visitors. I think that they offer something that few cities in the world can. And I think it... we lose something when the public doesn't get to experience them firsthand. I do want to ask about one or two other properties before I'll ask my colleagues to jump in. The Grand Army Arch, Grand Army Plaza Arch I believe was designed as an observatory essentially right at the time was probably a commanding view of all of Brooklyn. When did it go out of public use?

LIAM KAVANAGH: So yes, you're correct.

It was designed to a degree greater than say the Washington Square Arch. It was, it was designed with more robust public access in mind and then did so occasionally through to the decades. I think most recently in the late 80s and possibly early 90s there was a space about half way up between the ground and the rooftop that was used as sort of a defective sort of gallery like a presentation space. And then you know as, as damage to the roof and other, other pieces of the structure kind of came into play that, that's been, that's been discouraged since then.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Okay, is there any discussion on preparing now to allow for public access?

MATT DRURY: There's no current resources or, or plan in place currently but I, I think it's, as with several of these structures I think it's something that you know we're, we're happy to continue examining and, and discussing.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: In the case of the little red lighthouse which I adore and have the chance to visit how do you get around the questions

of egress and fire and safety codes that you sited as limitations and other properties?

MATT DRURY: Well I think that's actually, explains why the access is, is quite so limited. And it's, I believe two or three days a year if that. And so I think the questions with making it more broadly available on a permanent basis that's where some of those more problematic concerns kind of come into play but on... by appointment or, or other... which is really more of the situation at little red.

LIAM KAVANAGH: And as you probably experienced at the little red lighthouse it's, it's heavily supervised. The number of people who are allowed up at any one time. We carefully choreographed the entrance and exit of people so that there aren't large numbers of people that are beyond the capacity of the structure at any given time. So while it's a great experience there's no doubt about it, it's, it's labor intensive to manage and it does limit the number of people who can visit during any given day.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Well look, that could be a solution for almost any of these

properties. You don't have to kick the door open and walk away and let people run in and out all day. It can be the kind of curated access. You can have a parks ranger or local historian that would just offer people this incredible opportunity. I want to pause because I think that my colleague Council Member Crowley has to leave before too long and I know she has some questions for you as well. Oh...

COUNCIL MEMBER CROWLEY: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Sorry I... Sorry...

COUNCIL MEMBER CROWLEY: Oh you...

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: ...just acknowledge we've been joined, sorry, by Council Member Mealy Parks Committee Member as well as Council Member Cohen. Sorry, proceed, thank you.

COUNCIL MEMBER CROWLEY: Thank you Chair. Good afternoon. So I have a bill that would change the jurisdiction to Department of Parks from Department of Correction for Heart Island. Do you support that?

MATT DRURY: We were glad to participate in and pleased to participate in a hearing on the

topic earlier this year or late last year, I can't recall.

COUNCIL MEMBER CROWLEY: January.

MATT DRURY: January, there you go.

COUNCIL MEMBER CROWLEY: Almost a year ago.

MATT DRURY: And we do currently, we believe that the operation of a public cemetery falls outside of our agency's expertise and, and the resources that are at hand. And though we have worked closely with DOC we've done some, some projects to help with plantings and things like that to make as I think you referenced in your remarks to make the experience more enjoyable for, for visitors and that's something we would be certainly happy to continue working with DOC in that regard.

COUNCIL MEMBER CROWLEY: How could we get information to the mayor about Heart Island? I've, I've requested a meeting. It's gone unanswered. There was a caller to WMYC Radio a few weeks back talking about Heart Island. The mayor said that he wasn't aware of it. You know so if Parks is not the agency I think we can all agree

DOC should not be the agency. I don't even think they want Heart Island. It's just been there. So what, what, what could you recommend?

MATT DRURY: In terms of bringing it to the mayor's attention I mean we're happy obviously to, to, to relay your, your, your thoughts and concerns back to DOC and, and advise them to communicate with the mayor's office and..

COUNCIL MEMBER CROWLEY: You think it's up to then to, to communicate this?

MATT DRURY: Well the property is under their jurisdiction and so I mean I...

COUNCIL MEMBER CROWLEY: I know they just have so many issues as it relates to violence and the focus the mayor's attention is really on reforming what happens on Ryker's Island. And this is just ancillary. It's just not a priority to the Department of Correction. All the while you have so many New Yorkers who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, most of them who want to go visit loved ones on the island and they have to go through these various different hoops to have to jump through just to gain access. And then there's everyday New Yorkers who understand the history and

have great interest in visiting but... or deny that access to. ...so much about what makes New York City the city that it is so unique and so different from other cities is our park land. And I do, I come from the Department for doing a good job maintaining the public parks that are easily accessible. And... but I think that this is a lost opportunity that could bring a potential, potential maybe even a way of generating funds. I know that it seems as if the frustration your department has is a lack of staff necessary to maintain your parks. Is that one of the reasons why you think that acquiring heart island would be burdensome for parks?

LIAM KAVANAGH: I, I don't think... obviously if we were to acquire Heart Island we would need resources to maintain it properly and to provide access. I think our, our major reservation is that as long as it remains a public cemetery that, that it's not a function that the Parks Department has any expertise or experience in and that some other agencies should be responsible for.

COUNCIL MEMBER CROWLEY: Right, but the Parks Department doesn't have expertise in being

concessionaires right? I mean like you go to Rockaway Beach and there's a lot of different entertainment spot now you can hit on the Boardwalk because you rent out spaces to businesses. And you do the same in central park for ice skating and, and you even rent out a cemetery in Brooklyn, Prospect Park, pretty much we have a deal with the Quakers that they maintained that. So it could be that you could do something similar, go into a partnership with a nonprofit organization or a profit organization that can maintain the use of an active burial ground as well as keeping it and making it a parkland. Would the parks be open to that?

LIAM KAVANAGH: I, I have not heard that suggestion before. I'd like to think about it a little bit unlike the other businesses that operate on parks. You know our, our, our premise always is that it has to be a park appropriate use. It has to serve the constituencies of the park and the examples you sited, all of those businesses do that. They provide services, amenities, recreation, entertainment to people who are visiting the park. And the idea of a contracted entity managing the

burials, it doesn't fall under that sort of general guideline that we use to...

COUNCIL MEMBER CROWLEY: Because when you look at the size of...

LIAM KAVANAGH: ...offer business opportunities.

COUNCIL MEMBER CROWLEY: The Island is over 100 acres.

LIAM KAVANAGH: Yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER CROWLEY: And the active burial areas are... much not smaller than even an acre. So the area could be sectioned off if it has active burials. And the area could be closed for the one or two days it is actually used as that if, if need be. But now that the mayor and this administration is putting in place more ferry service throughout the city that's supposed to come online next year. This could potentially be an opportunity for that ferry service that is going up towards the Bronx to, to even come to that island. I just would like the administration to get together and, and give this idea of transferring the island out of DOC some real consideration and I feel like we've had these hearings, we have this

bill where we have a majority of the council members signed onto... and nothing's happened even though publicly you know people are coming together and supporting it but, but nothing seems to be happening on the other side of City Hall. So, I would really ask your help. I've, I've brought it up to DOC but again when they go to see the mayor it's always mayor wants to look at their performance statistics and not necessarily the subject. So, since you do so well with the spaces you have I, I encourage you to consider this and to work with us.

LIAM KAVANAGH: Well we will convey your ideas and thoughts to the mayor's office.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank, thank you for your continued leadership on this Council Member Crowley. I understand that with an active burial site it's a complicated property for any agency to manage and that, that you're not expected to have expertise in that. But boy I can't think of any justification for the corrections department to be the agency in charge at this point. And perhaps there could be a compromise in which HRA managed the burial aspect a little more in line with kind

of human service work. And then the Parks Department could do what it does best which is be a steward for this incredible natural environment, 120 acres. I mean it would be one of the biggest parks in the city in the middle of the Long Island Sound with so much history going back to the 1800s. Some buildings that are in ruin, some are the... they're pretty well in tact of the history of how we dealt with infectious disease and what was called then wayward boys, troubled adolescents, the 1950s that had two ajax missile silos on it. You can still see them. Thousands and thousands of civil war dead were buried there. Eventually I believe they were reinterred as is proper and I think in military cemeteries but just so much richness that most New Yorkers barely understand exist and, and most importantly a million soles who are at rush there, some of whose loved ones want to visit. And to go on one day a month with what I think are armed guards. Is that right Council Member? And you're only allowed to walk out to a little gazebo. You don't have the ability to move on the island. I can't imagine it will be conducive to the kind of emotional experience one would want

to have when paying respect to, to a lost family member. Understanding the complexities and the cost I would hope we would do much, much better. Just want to point out that my, my, my superstar staff has uncovered an article from the New York sun in 2005 which discussed the three-million-dollar project proposed for the prison Martyrs' monument in which it described, proposal to create a spiral staircase, I presume interior to the structure which, which would have allowed for access. Is that accurate?

LIAM KAVANAGH: I, I don't have any recollection of those details. I do know that it was not included in the plan for the renovation.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Well I personally would be up for climbing the ladder but the idea of a staircase would make it even more accessible, just something I'd like to flag is topic to further explore, exploration. I do want to ask a word or two about North Brother Island which a number of our colleagues had a chance to visit. Council Member Cohen had been to... my, my colleagues on, on the Parks Committee and other friends here come with us sometime it is like no other place in the

world. Truly an extraordinary, extraordinary location. I wonder if my staff could put up the picture of North Brother just for a minute. Too complicated. Our technology fails us. But I, I, I do want to sort of take the temperature of the Parks Department now in, in a time where some very smart work has been done by some scholars at the University of Pennsylvania we're going to be hearing from them shortly about this idea of investing some in the infrastructure to allow for safe, very limited highly curated essentially tours of the site could be led by a Parks Ranger by a historian or by a naturalist that would in particular, I want to emphasize this, be respectful of the harbor herrings who, though they no longer nest there, do nest nearby and we could avoid their nesting season. I wouldn't want this to be cavalier but, but on the contrary truly mindful of the, the safety concerns, the historic, and also the naturalistic concerns. Could you comment on, on your, your thoughts on this type of plan at the moment?

MATT DRURY: Yeah we're, we're currently... I know we've received Professor Mason's

study and we're reviewing it currently, under review so I think we'll have more to say on that in the near future. But in the, but in the short term I think you highlighted it quite ably sort of the really complex set of conditions that are, that are present there and that make it, to make relatively... you know medium scale or, or you know large scale access, public access to the island complicated including you know the site conditions there, the conditions of the historic buildings, many of which are in, in severe disrepair and are, are quite dangerous. So, public safety is first and foremost sort of our primary concern about that. And then as you also mentioned sort of the ecological concerns. Within all that sort of complicated matrix though I think we are open to and, and have been and, and certainly most recently we just conducted a, completed a reforestation effort that just did complete in 2016 so we're now in essence sort of reopening the discussion and, and I think exploring along with yourself and your colleagues and, and other stakeholders exploring options where you know limited you know perhaps some volunteer projects to help with some of the ecological sections, sections

of the park. Those are sort of thoughts and we're beginning those conversations now and I think that's something we're certainly exploring and, and interested in. I do think that we have to return to sort of the main, our main thematic and operational concern which is to make sure that the investments that the agency are making really serve in a broader equity sense as many visitors as possible and with the doubtlessly very significant investment that would be eventually necessary to make that island truly safe and secure for relatively medium or large scale access. You know it does become the agency in the city and has to, has to weigh those kind of cost and benefits and, and so I think that's sort of part of that complicated calculus that has to sort of happen because obviously our priority...

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Understood. And I, I really do commend particularly a natural areas group, sorry natural resource group which has done amazing recreation work in recent years of the island to remove invasive species and, and shore up some of the infrastructure. I, I know that your staff has put a tremendous amount of love and care

into the island and, and you saved it to some extent and, and the public should be grateful for that. And, and I do appreciate your willingness to at least discuss how average New Yorkers can experience this marvel up close. I think that my colleague Council Member Chin has some questions.

COUNCIL MEMBER CHIN: Thank you Chair.

Just to sort of reiterate what you just said. Parks... find some... now that we know that there are like architectures and their, their histories... I mean this is the arch. Whatever the reason that you can probably organize some limited tours and, and visits. I mean the, the parks department did that a couple years back where some journalism bloggers they were able to get in there. And that's how a lot of people saw pictures in the discussion. So I think really opening up that opportunity to New Yorkers whether it's students and people doing research I think that, that is a, that would be great. And the other thing is that when you look at resource... right chair? I mean the, the budget of the parks department is still less than one percent of the city's budget, 26. It's a little better than the seniors budget. Okay? Department of Aging is

less that point five, less than point five. So we got to fight to really increase the budget. And I just want to bring back to the question that I raise earlier in terms of there are certain facility within the parks, you know just like in Sara D. Roosevelt Park, we have all these beautiful buildings that long, long time ago were used to be community centers. Right? They have bathroom facility inside and they were centers or kids were there for after school program, training, now it's a storage site. It's a waste. I don't... why should we have to store everything from Manhattan. Right? Everybody should just store their own supplies. And buildings like that should be given back to the community. That's why we invested capital dollar to put the bathroom back in so that park users could use it but it would be great to really open that house back to the community for a community center. And we could share. And yesterday I spoke to the commissioner, HRA commissioner, Commissioner Bank talking about we could even share the facility to take care of some of our homeless population who uses our park. And we can really turn that back into a public asset. So, I want to continue that

discussion with the Parks Department to really open up back those space to the public. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you Council Member. I just want to ask you about one more property and then I'm, I'm anxious to hear from the public. We have so many people who want to testify. It's going to be very exciting. The New York State Pavilion or the tent of tomorrow which you, you properly termed it. There was a design study conducted recently. Was that done under the offices of the city or was that entirely independent?

MATT DRURY: That was a design... if we're talking... if I'm thinking of the same thing I believe that was a design competition...

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Yes.

MATT DRURY: And, that was organized by, by a third party.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Got it. Has the parks department begun to even estimate what it would take, what the financial cost would be of a restoration for that property?

MATT DRURY: There were some structural studies assessed for both the tent of tomorrow and the observation towers that happened I believe at

the end of the 2000s and maybe as recently as 2012 that, that they, those studies focused largely on stabilization as opposed to some of the more cosmetic or completely full access, those sort of things just stabilizing the towers themselves. And those, those studies at the time... and again this is years ago and with a relatively limited scope we're, we're clearly in the, in the realm of you know 10s of millions of dollars.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: And I understand that's a substantial investment. We are routinely spend... routine is not the right word but for a number of major marquee parks we developed the price tags but over a hundred million I think that restoration of the World's Fair Site is, is comparable to its impact. It really would be a regional draw that unlike some of these smaller historical monuments could, could really be a place for thousands and thousands of New Yorkers and visitors to enjoy. So I do ultimately think this is an investment that we should consider.

MATT DRURY: Yeah, and actually I, I have good news to report on that front that thanks to funding from mayoral and, and the mayor, the

mayor and the borough president, Borough President Katz. We actually are in the gate. We have identified sort of phase one which would focus significantly on stabilization and some electrical and, and lighting work for both the towers and the tent. That's actually begun design and that's actually underway. So, you... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: That, that's great.

MATT DRURY: ...we agree these are, these are treasures and been thankful to have some resources that to be, you know to make a very significant step in that direction.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: And the, the new paintjob. I think you call it American Cheese Yellow.

MATT DRURY: Yes, that's right.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Really looks great and brings it to life. We didn't list the Queens way as one of the projects on our site. It didn't exactly fit with the mold. But I know there's folks here who are very interested in that project. I am a supporter of that. For those who don't know this is a plan to take an unused rail line through Queens and convert it into a linear park

reminiscent of the high line that would connect many, many different neighborhoods of various socioeconomic levels and would connect disjointed parks that otherwise one can't move between and would pass through some very park start neighborhoods. I wonder, since I just wanted to ask this we have you here where the administration has a position on this, whether something that you are considering or open to or what your stage of, of study this might be.

MATT DRURY: I know we've met with the, with advocates for the project, Commissioner Silvers heard about the project and, and obviously it's an interesting intriguing idea. The administration does not currently have a policy I think the conversation is ongoing and parks is always open to hearing you know it's obviously not currently Park's jurisdiction but in terms of these sort of spaces that exist out there in, in the public imagination or in the public interest. You know Parks is always interested in hearing you know, being a part of that discussion.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Well we appreciate your openness to that at a time when park use is

surging, a commission... we had record levels of park use or near record, certainly in, in what would the answer to that be?

MATT DRURY: I, I would say we're approaching record levels.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Approaching record levels and certainly the, the most in decades and as the population of the city continues to grow now at 8.5 million we're building new housing. We're upzoning neighborhoods. And I support this. The city should grow. Demographers project. We could be at nine million. We're just going to have to add new park space so that everyone has open space and green space to, to breathe, to connect to their neighbors, to connect with nature, to learn about our history, the Queens way is, is one of the really inspiring projects that would do that in, in an imminently achievable way. And we're happy that you're willing to consider it. So, I think we're going to wrap up the administration's testimony. Thank you very much.

LIAM KAVANAGH: I, I just want to point out one interesting fact. The idea of access to these you know important historical spaces is not

new. And in about seven weeks it'll be the hundredth anniversary of Marcel Duchamp and his bohemian friends entering Washington Square Arch at night unauthorized and declaring the free and democratic republic of Washington Square Park.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: That was 100 years ago this week.

LIAM KAVANAGH: 100 years ago, 2017.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Well we, we may have to have another hearing to commemorate that. Thank you Commissioner. And thank you Director. Alright we have a, our first panel is going to consist of two of the most prominent leaders in the movement to open up access for our city including Moses Gates who is an official with the regional plan association. And Gregory Wessner from the open house New York which has led so many New Yorkers on tours of these and many other fabulous sites if you two could come on up to the front please. Alright Mr. Gates you want to start us off? Button... It, it, it... Sergeants are those working... only for recording purposes, Moses not... not so much for us to hear you we do need to get the mic. There we go.

MOSES GATES: Okay whoa, there we go.

Alright thanks for having me out Councilman. My name's Moses Gates. I'm from the Regional Plan Association. As our, our Parks Officials are still here I might suggest a reenactment of that anniversary for Washington Square Arch on the hundredth anniversary. It doesn't have to be illicit and things like that. But it might be a... might be an interesting thing. So, I want to just kind of start by reiterating a story which is about High Bridge which is one of the places mentioned. And I really want to commend the Parks Department who I think really has kind of done a lot in terms of opening up new spaces to public access, especially lately. And I was up at High Bridge after it had been opened up and I was really excited to get to go on the, you know on the bridge and everything like that and I expected lots of people to be there and I, I got there on the Bronx side and what I saw was I looked down the hill and I saw four you know preteen teenagers looking inside the bridge at that aqueduct section. And what I wanted more than anything in the world is to be able to go down to them and say hey go to the

Parks Department website and sign up for a tour and you'll get to go in here. Because I can see how curious they were and I could see how curious they were and I could see how interested they were in this, in this structure. And I thought it was great and I thought it was a great opportunity to get kids involved in their city. And I think that that's largely kind of what the Parks Department is here to do to some extent. And I think that as we grow and I will say the regional plan association is projecting in excess of nine million people over the next 25 years closer, about 9.7 I think is, is our projection. And as we grow we need to add infrastructure. And that infrastructure needs to be not just housing and, and subway and transportation but it also needs to be parks and open space and access, and access is part of our, our public infrastructure and you're going to hear from folks testifying not just about kind of the flashy stuff that we all love that we want to get into but also kind of small neighborhood parks that are locked or handball courts or, or places like that. And just as with transportation it's important to kind of renovate things and it's important to make them you

know more, more aesthetically pleasing and more easy to navigate and, and otherwise kind of improve what's there but we also need to add infrastructure. You know you also want to build a new subway station. You want to create a new train line. And as any transportation planner will tell you the easiest way to do this is on existing right of ways. You know let's have no judgements on the Queen, Queens way I will, I will say. But just you know to try to use what's there and that's what Parks can do also is you know we need to add more Parks access and, and as interest grows in the city we need to add more access to these places of interest. And you know we can create new parks and you know Brooklyn Bridge Park and some others are great opportunities but we also need to continually make a civic virtue of adding access to what already exists. And the, the two most disappointing things I heard in, in the testimony were that in the prison Martyrs' monument renovation of the 2000s and in the Washington Square Arch Monument renovation of the early 2000s public access was not a priority. You know we invested this huge amount of money in essentially you know structural and

cosmetic improvements without... awards were spending all this why don't we try to make sure that we can, we can open it up and we can use it. And that's what I would ask of not just the Parks Department but the city as a whole is that this becomes a, a value that you know when we renovate things, when we think about use we, we incorporate the idea that the public should be able to visit up close and that there should be more public access as a value along with you know aesthetic improvement along with structural renovation along with everything else this is something we're going to do with and IDE Awards. And every site is different and, and I appreciate that and, and I appreciate that and I understand that there is some places that you can you know un, you know there's some low hanging fruit where you can just unlock a door and there's other things where you're going to need more investment, you're going to need more curated access. Places like for instance the statute of liberty, not designed for, for tourist access once so ever. But we decided that it was a value to give folks access to the top of the statue of liberty and you know the, the United States Government

found out a way to make it happen. And the other thing I will note is the statue of liberty's crown is the cheapest observation deck in New York City that this is also an equity issue that when you have access to public sites that aren't, you know that aren't privately owned you can do it with an IDE Awards equity, you can deal with an IDE Awards hey. It costs 37 dollars to go up the Empire State Building but what if we open the terrace of the Municipal Building owned by the city would take a little investment... You know you couldn't have two million visitors a year, maybe you go to your city council person, they give you a pass, what have you. But you could do it for free or for a nominal charge like Las Angeles does, like Madrid does, like Kansas City does, like a lot of other cities do. So, I, I think I've talked past my three minutes and I will turn it over to Greg here.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you very much. Mr. Wessner.

GREG WESSNER: Thank you very much for the opportunity. This is an exciting conversation for, especially for Open House New York to be having. So I really appreciate you taking the time

for this hearing. Good afternoon I'm Gregory Wessner. I'm the Executive Director of Open House New York. And this is an especially meaningful topic for Open House as I said. And we're particularly happy to be here on an issue related to the Parks Department, Open House has been privileged to work with the Parks Department for many years to open up their sites, many of which were mentioned here today as was said earlier. Places like the base of the Prison Ship Martyrs' monument in Fort Green, the Little Red Lighthouse, in Fort Washington High Bridge Water Tower, and of course the Parks Department's own headquarters, the arsenal, in Central Park. Open House New York if you do not know is a nonprofit cultural and civic organization that was founded nearly 15 years ago and we are best known for the annual Open House New York weekend which is held every October in which hundreds of buildings across the five boroughs open for Public tours and talks. It is a celebration of the extraordinary inventory of buildings that make New York the greatest city in the world. But it is also a reminder that to all New Yorkers that our greatest shared resource is the city itself. In

opening these sites whether they are public buildings like City Hall or infrastructure like the Newtown Creek Wastewater Treatment Center or campuses like the Bronx Community College. Open House is hoping, is helping to both inform and enrich the conversation about how we design, build, and preserve New York. We do this because we believe that direct experiences, the most powerful form of education and engagement. Giving New Yorkers the opportunity to experience a place for themselves especially ones that are not normally accessible to them can be transformative. It is empowering and it seems like such a small thing to do but opening a door is a profoundly meaningful act of trust and sharing and we all benefit both as individuals and as a community that there is interest in this kind of increased access. You need only look at the response we get during Open House New York weekend. This past October we estimate that we have more than 81,000 visits over the course of two days to 275 sites. Nearly 11,000 people made reservations for sites that require them in the first hour that reservations were available. Last year 8,000 people made the trek to

JFK to tour the TWA Flight Center. This was not because they were taking a flight but they actually spent the time to get out to JFK simply to walk around an empty building because they got recognized as one of New York City's greatest works of architecture. To me this says that New Yorkers care deeply about the quality of their environment and it is a step towards building consensus around the kind of future that we want to shape together. And I should add since it was discussed earlier when we talk about access we're not talking about unlimited or unregulated access for a lot of reasons which were already mentioned, safety and security among them. Not all sites are meant to function as public spaces. We understand that. But speaking from experience there are ways to work the sites that take into consideration the existing site conditions while still accommodating visitors even if only on a limited basis. The question then is what benefit does this access serve. We talk a lot about the importance of civic engagement but we have to, we have to consider what form that engagement takes for most people most of the time. Sadly, for too many of us scrolling Facebook's news

feed or watch a YouTube video stands in as a form of engagement. We get information about our civic life second and thirdhand and I think we are beginning to realize now that lack of direct experience both with one another and with the places in which we live can leave to an eroding of the public sphere. I am not so naïve to think that simply letting people climb the Washington Square Arch or visiting Heart Island will reinvigorate citizenship but I do think that the degree to which the city makes itself open and accessible to its citizens communicates [phonetic], communicates a great deal about this city's values. And there is no more tangible expression of a welcoming city than the simple act of opening a door. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you both Mr. Wessner. So basically in your expertise, if there were to be a tour offered of the Washington Square Arch then it was one of these either lottery access or first come first serve. But it would be a guided tour through the staircases and the vaults and you could go to the roof and enjoy the view. How many people do you think would sign up?

GREG WESSNER: Let's see, to put this in perspective we did, well we did a lottery of the, of WNYC's Offices and had two to 3,000 people sign up for 30 slots.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: WNYC's offices?

GREG WESSNER: Right. No offense against WNYC but the Washington Square Arch is going to get a lot of interest. But the, the point is that we can manage that. There are ways if the, if the interior is structurally sound and safe. We have other examples of sites that have that kind of limited access that we have allowed visitors into and even if it is only a small group of people the experience of that is so powerful and it ripples outwards and I think it's a really important thing to do if it's possible.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Look, I think the fact that there's so much interest validates...

GREG WESSNER: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: ...why we're having this discussion.

GREG WESSNER: Absolutely.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: You, your organization has proven there is an incredible hunger from New Yorkers to explore their city.

GREG WESSNER: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: To understand their city. To see things up close that even if this digital age watching a periscope video of, it's just not the same. And you have to be there to experience it. And to me the prospect of opening up any of these sites is, is just it's, it's really thrilling to consider. Moses I wonder since you might have a little more of a global perspective as an accomplished author on this topic whether there are sites outside of New York around the country, around the world where there's been a successful effort to open public access?

MOSES GATES: There's been lots and I would say it's, it's a bit of a worldwide kind of, kind of trend to try to get access to these kind of things. Rome has been pretty good about it. You know they've opened kind of lots of ruins recently. Even Jerusalem of all places which you might not think of you know as being a, having the ability to kind of do this has, has you know kind of started

to trend. Lots of it is archeological sites, kind of better access to that once you've been excavated and stabilized. But others are simply you know things like you know in New York the High Line which is underutilized assets that are invested in and then kind of opened up. One thing I would say it's a little different about New York than the rest of the world as New York tends to be a bit of an all or nothing kind of thing like you either you know it's either abandoned, inaccessible or you have to do this giant multi-million dollar renovation like you know like the High Line to do a real transformation whereas you know you things like the prominent plontay [phonetic] in Paris which was also an abandoned rail line which was opened but you know it was not a, it was a little bit in the middle, it wasn't you know completely turn... it, it wasn't you know renovated and made into a giant tourist attraction like the High Line is. So, I think that the lesson to be learned is that there's a lot of different ways to open stuff up. And sometimes you know the appropriate thing is to turn it into a real destination park. And sometimes the appropriate thing is to just open the

door a little bit more and do a few more tours or,
or have a little bit more access going forward.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Well thank you
very, very much for... very much to both of you for
your leadership on these issues and for your very
powerful testimony today. Thank you so much.

Alright I'm pleased to call up two people who have
been leaders on opening access to North Brother
Island including Randy Mason from the University of
Pennsylvania and Paul Lipson. I gather we're
struggling with audio visuals, is that right? The
password, that will get you every time. Looks like
our cyber security is too strong around the here.
Maybe you could start us off Professor Mason and...

RANDALL MASON: Sure.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: ...while we
simultaneously pursue a resolution on the
technology. Looks like it's coming online. Go ahead
please.

RANDALL MASON: Thank you Councilman
Levine and for the opportunity to talk about the
work we've been doing on North Brother Island over
the last year. The, the study I'm going to talk
about. It was conducted by PennPraxis, an

organization I lead. It's an arm of the University of Pennsylvania School of Design. And we are doing this work with the support of the J.M. Kaplan Fund here in New York. PennPraxis has been collaborating with a number of organizations, individuals, officials, and stakeholders including New York City Department of Parks and Recreation have been excellent partners. Councilman Levine's Office, the point CDC, my colleague Paul Lipson of Barretto Bay Strategies rocking the boat and other faculty and students from my school in Philadelphia. We... I should say at the outset that the views that I'm expressing are the views that I'm expressing are the views of PennPraxis and the study team not, not those of any of our partners. So, what you would be looking at right now is a beautiful picture of North Brother Island and as you've already heard and I think many of you already know it's an extraordinary and, and little known heritage and natural place, a 22 acre island that is, has been part of the New York City Parks Portfolio for some time located in the East River near the South Bronx. It was, it was used, it was inhabited before it became a quarantine hospital in the 1880s. But

from the 1880s through the 1960s used essentially as a public health facility of one kind or another. Also as a, essentially a, a neighborhood for returning veterans after World War 2 so quite an extraordinary history. It's valued today for multiple reasons, both its ecological rarity and it's, it's, it's function or its ecological service as a wildlife preserve for the harbor herrings but also for other reasons beyond them. Also for the significance of the cultural narratives and the architectural works that are associated with the island's development as, as a hospital campus. And also, I think it's valued, or should be valued for its potential as an open space resource. In an educational asset, particularly for South Bronx communities but I think as we've heard from others for the city at large, to the current management of the island centers on what's called the forever wild strategy which precludes public use I think for good reasons here before. Cultural resources go largely unaddressed. The buildings have been largely abandoned since the 60s. There's been very minimal ecological restoration but it's been effective what, what has been done, to try to

strengthen the, the highly disturbed natural environment of the island. As questions of public access have been raised we have been pursuing with others the specific questions about what kind of conservation priorities should be put forward for both the cultural resources, the buildings and landscape and for the natural and ecological resources. And are there forums asking question, are there forums of public access that are both desirable and feasible given the conservation mandate that is the overriding one. Yeah, the one that says city council. Thank you. If you just go to the second one, great. So, let me get to, to the point and then maybe I'll go through the slides quickly as I, just as I finish. The, the basic findings of the study which is almost complete and will be by the end of this year. Some measure of carefully curated public access could, is feasible, and would significantly benefit New Yorkers by providing this kind of extraordinary experience that you've talked about already. Albeit for a, a smaller number of people I think the, the benefits to, to providing more equitable access to public space sometimes come in the form of greater numbers

of visitors but can also come in the form of smaller number of visitors having really extraordinary experiences. It can be a really kind of transformative experience for instance for youth from South Bronx nearby neighborhoods to, to get physical access and, and real experience on this place that's, that's so visible for them but yet physically inaccessible to them. So let me... think I can just use this. Yeah. So just very quickly I know probably can't see it very well from the, from the seats. Your two maps, one from the... from before development in the early 1880s, late 1870s and a current aerial map that shows essentially it's abandonment and that nature has more or less taken over the place. This is image from the late 1950s that shows very clearly the development of a campus, it's actually a campus that was much bigger than the, the number of buildings on this photograph through numbers that were demolished even by the, by 1960 as well as the coastguard property in the southern end of the island that was part of the, the lighthouse service. This is the gantry that you see on entry for most of us who get to go to the island we enter on the west side of

the island where the sentry stands. The, the stabilization of this would be one of the early action projects if access were to be contemplated. This is the male dormitory. You can see that nature has almost fully inhabited the building and its, in serious structural deficit, the physician's house which has begun to collapse at least the porch, the tuberculosis pavilion which is the, the largest and most charismatic building on the island. I should say that the, that this is from a book by Christopher Payne. It was recently published, has some extraordinary photographs of the island. The view back to Manhattan and an old garage in the southern part of the island. There also... we've documented very carefully the different natural conditions in different parts of the island. So, our assessment comes out of a very careful series of, of field work campaigns to look at both the buildings and the natural landscape. And this is kind of an... map that shows you sort of what's where today. So, to get to the recommendations that, that we're putting forward and we hope to continue speaking to, to our partners and collaborators with in three parts that we, that we, that we continue,

we conserve... continue to conserve the island and interpret it as a stabilized ruin. We think of the preservation strategy as more one of triage and interpretation. We're not talking about adaptively reusing habitable buildings. Secondly, it's important to both strengthen and monitor the state of the ecological resources. I'm just doing occasional restoration work and then hoping things improve or don't degrade too much is not a really viable strategy. So, we have to invest in the monitoring of both the buildings and the natural landscape. And thirdly this, this note of providing limited public access with the obvious issues to be solved of, of financing and more importantly safety and security. So, the short term initiative is that we put forward... again this is not specific to who would actually do what and how it would be financed. But first of all, to create a management plan for both North Brother and South Brother Island they should be managed as a, as an ecological zone together. Not just because the herrings use both islands but because it would make sense I think logistically. Secondly, stabilize some of the ruins and deconstruct some of the

buildings that are far beyond their, their service life. They present ready public threats and, and they, they need to be taken care of. We, we don't, we don't recommend demolishing the buildings and carrying the debris away. We recommend reusing it on the island for various things. Thirdly, the public access principally focusing on Bronx serving institutions and partners at first. And second, fourthly interpreting and memorializing the place, I know there have been efforts in this direction in the past. It's important for those who will never go to the island to understand its importance. And so, it should be in... the place should be... and its stories should be interpreted for the public. And finally, the monitoring regime. And so, we have a number of different sort of immediate next steps. The most important which is that... mentioned so far is do a next level of studies which sounds like the academics' constant refrain that we have to study it more before we can really conclude anything. But in this case, it's a very, very pragmatic need especially with buildings. We were not able to access the interior of the buildings but with Parks Department and DOB together we can make a full and,

and solid assessments of what the futures of the buildings would be and I think that would go a very long way to allay [phonetic] some of the safety and financial concerns uncertainties of what, what can come next. So, I'll just end by saying that this is the, the cover of the study that will soon be done, the end of this year. We will happily make it available to anyone who wishes. And just on a personal note it's, it's been an extraordinary experience for me to not just to spend the last year studying the island with some great partners but this is the, the second time I've done a study of the island. We did a first preservation study on the site in 2005 and we noticed a great deal of change in those 10 years. And so it's, we've had the, I think a rare chance to respond to knowing the site in, in two different very distinct moments of its, of its evolution. And we, we feel a real sense of urgency for wanting to act or needing to act now in order to make sure that this extraordinary asset exists in the future for future New Yorkers.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Very eloquently put. And we are waiting anxiously for the full

study but your work in charting a path forward for a very balance, balance form of access has been incredibly helpful. And... please. Yeah.

PAUL LIPSON: My name is Paul Lipson. Good afternoon. I'm Paul Lipson. I'm President of Barretto Bay Strategies. We are an urban solutions firm. We specialize in community development, transportation, and renewables. I think it might be worth it to take a minute very quickly to talk about the narrative on North Brother Island and how it articulates with the unfolding history of New York City because it's quite significant. I, I've been acquainted with North Brother since 1990... 1988 when a California Real Estate firm came to Bronx Community Board 2 and told us about a plan to site a theme park on North Brother and South Brother. This was a long time ago. And it was at a moment when the city itself, the Koch administration was flirting with ideas for repurposing and possibly even privatizing those islands way before we were thinking clearly about ecology and harbor herrings and all the beautiful resources on that island. North Brother and its sibling to the southeast, South Brother, are an artifact. They're, they're

artifacts from really the earliest days of New York. North brother lies just southwest of the Hunts Point Peninsula and it's, it's a remnant of a long forgotten time in New York. The clocks on North Brother stopped in 1963 when the city pulled the plug on experimental drug treatment program for youthful offenders that was housed largely at Riverside Hospital, you saw a picture of that which is the, really the newest and largest building on the island, by newest it was completed in 1943. North Brother has been used to isolate and confine successive groups of New Yorkers since 1886. Like many of the islands in New York Harbor North Brother was designated for the treatment and quarantine of victims and carriers of contagious illness at a time when infectious disease ravaged immigrant communities and other vulnerable populations across New York. The island gained notoriety in the early 1900s as the involuntary home of Typhoid Mary Mallon, an asymptomatic carrier of Typhus who was allegedly responsible for three deaths and 47 illnesses from 1907 to 1915 but who never fully understood the nature of her condition and the consequences of her actions.

Also, lending a tragic cast to the island's history was the General Slocum Disaster which took place on June 15th, 1904 and claimed the lives of 1141 people, most of them German immigrants from the lower east side on their way to a Sunday picnic on Long Island. At the time that was the greatest loss, single loss of life in New York's history. It was the greatest maritime disaster in American history at the time. Legend has it that it was an overcrowded steamer that was set ablaze by a careless passenger or sailor who tossed a lit cigarette on a bundle of rags. The boat ran aground on North Brother and the patients as well as doctors on the island rushed out of the hospital to try and save the hundreds of passengers who would jump from the burning ship. Only 400 people survived including a one year old baby. So, the weight of so much sadness slowed down the passage of time it seems on the island to 20th Century bypass the island's gas light lined streets, brownstone nurse's quarters crumbling powerhouse and sandy beaches littered with the cookware and heavy glass tonic waters of the 19th century. Today North Brother is a source of fascination cure..

curiosity for many of its neighbors. The Hunts Point community especially has taken some tentative steps to embrace the history of the island.

Document its ecology and consider its future. As early as 1999 the point community development corporation and friends of Brook Park, a Mott Haven based environmental group began communications with Department of Parks and Recreation and local elected officials about exploring limited public access strategies for the island. Since 2007 young people from the point of work with Parks NRG, Natural Resources Group, and New York City Audubon to clear invasives, remove trash, and document conditions on the island teens from rocking the boat which is another youth development group in, in the area provide transportation on Whitehall gigs 19th century rowboats essentially to the island for work crews. They also documented the Harbor herrings in the, in the area. And our local elementary school, PS48 has built a curriculum around local history from the precolonial era to the mid-20th century that features the story of the General Slocum disaster and the role of North Brother in the history of New York. Due in part to

the surge of local interest in the island

Congressman Jose E. Serrano secured 950,000 dollars in the 2009 Omnibus appropriations bill for pathway construction on North Brother. What is emerging in community conversations around the future of the island is an interest in limited seasonal access for schools and manageable groups of visitors accompanied by trained guides. As an educational resource the island offers an unmatched immersive experience for 21st century New Yorkers seeking a glimpse of late 19th century New York. A place where prevalent notions about poverty, public health, and full rights under the law had not yet caught up with the emerging modernity and diversity of Americans... America's largest city. To adequately address concerns about access, concerns about access, concerns about preserving and protecting the memory of the people who, who live there, the habitat of the, of the flora and fauna that's there and the cultural resources are there. Policy makers should ask several questions. They should ask their own questions about the benefits of access and preservation. One of them is what lessons can the island impart to New Yorkers from this century. And

what is those, the value of those lessons today?

What is the meaning of this place for decedents of those were confined here or who lost their lives on the Slocum. And how can the island teach us to more sensibly co-exist with nature in a place as dense as the five boroughs of New York. Lastly, can equity itself be a driver for a limited public access strategy. Equity was a prime catalyst for the development of the Bronx River and South Bronx Greenways, the Randall's Island Connector, and a string of new waterfront parks along the Bronx shoreline throughout New York Harbor waterfront locations that were once off limits to the public has been gradually pried open; Governors Island, Ellis Island, South Brooklyn Piers, Gantry State Park to name a few. And while no one is suggesting or has suggested that North Brother should be subject to large scale visitation nor in the future. It would be an interesting thought exercise to consider how public access might have evolved if the island was closer to lower Manhattan or Brooklyn Heights rather than its current location in East River halfway between Ryker's and the South Bronx shoreline. So how does this move forward? Who

can carry this forward? Is it a special purpose conservancy that's best suited to the task or maybe an existing organization like the Bronx River Alliance or New York Restoration Project. Can they take on the daunting task of protecting the island's natural and cultural resources while creating a thoughtful public access strategy. And what role can property owners provide and play and furnishing embarkation points and providing access along the water. Already we have Oak Point property that has offered to provide a public dock space and access to the water for people who want to visit. And finally, I would be remiss if I didn't cite the workforce development implications of the, that the island presents. Even limited public access could mean a lot, like rocking the boat in the point. Providing transportation to the island in their handmade Whitehalls could offer graduates of Rocking the Boats on-water program stipend jobs and a career path in the maritime industry. And team leaders from the point have already expressed interest and serving as ecological stewards and trained dosants [phonetic] for tour groups under the supervision of parks. These are small

opportunities in a largely forgotten place but they had meaning beyond their numbers. They will help protect a singular and breathtaking place in our midst and preserve the memory of those who came before us whose struggles who came before us whose struggles have helped define the city we've all inherited.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you so much Mr. Lipson for decades of advocacy for preventing the theme park from ever taking route there. We're grateful that you scuttled that or, or otherwise saw to the preservation of this incredible, incredible location. And you two have really inspired myself and my staff and many others have taken interest in this project and I'm more optimistic than ever that other New Yorkers be able to experience it up front. We have so many people waiting to testify. So, I'm going to thank you both very, very much for sharing your thoughts with us today. And I'm going to ask that Rebecca Hills from RAFT Landscapes, Meisha Hunter Burkett from Waterline and Andrew Burdick from Waterline please join us for the next panel. Folks we, we... because we have so many people waiting to speak and we want

to hear from every single person before they have to leave. I am going to ask the Sergeants to use our conventional three-minute clock. Going to lead us off Mr. Burdick, is that right? Okay.

MEISHA BURKETT: Yeah okay I'll jump right in. Council Member Levine and the Parks Committee we just are thrilled that you're taking this leadership position and hosting this hearing about exploring the possibility of reopening these vacant landmarks on, and associated with the city's 19th Century water supply system for New York to experience and enjoy. So of course, I'm member of the Waterline team. And with Rebecca and Andrew and a number of others that, that are not here today we just want to convey our sincere interest on... in having this conversation move forward. New York City wouldn't be what it is today without abundant, potable, and reliable supplies of water. Without it we'd still be in the dark pre-Croton days of catastrophic fires, cholera, and typhoid epidemics. Civic investment in a Croton aqueduct both in its underground kind of... as well as above ground structures was courageous and visionary. Civic investment in a Croton aqueduct both in its

underground conduits as well as above ground structures was courageous and visionary claiming to all New Yorkers that our water was an extremely precious resource. Just as Roman military engineers approached aqueduct construction over 2,000 years ago the Crotons engineering, building materials, and construction methodologies were intended to last for a long time. There have been several successes in the recent stewardship of Croton landmarks in New York. Several people have mentioned today the reopening of the High Bridge over the Harlem River just last summer in 2015 was as a pedestrian and bike path has restored in vital connection between upper Manhattan and the Bronx. The Harlem stage has breathed new life into the formerly derelict 135th Street Croton Aqueduct gatehouse making it a beloved performing arts venue. And the Amsterdam nursing home is repurposed the 113th Street Croton aqueduct gatehouse as an adult daycare center. In addition, the 13 Croton Aqueduct interpretive signage panels designed by Nancy Owens landscape architect and Laurel Marx Graphic Designer are in the process of seeking approval by the landmarks preservation commission.

A tremendous stewardship opportunity stands before us all regarding the remaining vacant aboveground Croton structures in Manhattan and the Bronx. While the 119th Street aqueduct gatehouse looks like a water for trace it actually has tress growing out of its roof and its walls and slate roof tiles have become displaced threatening to fall on the children of the Columbia secondary school who used the adjacent public space for their garden and composting programs. Right now, the department of parks and recreation needs support for a stabilization campaign for the structure. All of these vacant and shuddered gatehouses including those at High Bridge and the central park reservoir to name a few were designed with a purpose-built use. Just because that purpose-built use doesn't exist anymore doesn't mean that we can neglect or forget about them. These buildings merit an inclusive public dialogue about stakeholder visioning and adaptive use possibilities. I look forward to continuing this conversation with you and making these vacant underutilized structures places where New Yorkers can meet, visit, grow, and play for generations to come. And I'll just add

lastly that on... we've had tremendous success in the last year particularly with open house New York with Jane's Walk with the Municipal Art Society with Pathway Through History operated by the New York state and has had tremendous attendance numbers, so many people are interested in these sites that are normally shuttered. And I think... all I get is thank goodness that these places have been opened, please can we get them open more often. So that's all I have to say. Thanks again.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you so much.
Okay Andrew.

ANDREW BURDICK: I'll go next. My name is Andrew Burdick and I'm an architect at Ennead Architects, an associate partner there. And...

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: I think... your microphone might not be on.

ANDREW BURDICK: I don't know. The light is on.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Okay.

ANDREW BURDICK: Can everyone hear?

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Okay that, that microphone might not be working.

ANDREW BURDICK: Alright. How about this one. Yeah. Okay. Alright so my name is Andrew Burdick and I'm an architect and associate partner at Ennead Architects and also member of the Waterline Team. As Misha just said we have an incredible opportunity, all of us together to reactivate the historic structures of the old Croton aqueduct system and make them new public assets for their surrounding neighborhoods and the city at large. Over the past seven, almost eight years now we have had numerous conversations with neighborhood organizations, activists, nonprofits, city agencies, community boards, and government officials. During that time, we have heard and together with all these sort of... brainstorm many exciting ideas for these historic structures. And today I just want to share just a snippet of those ideas that have come out frankly from the communities surrounding these assets. Imagine if you will that you could order a light lunch or have a coffee at the side of the High Bridge. Imagine if those two gatehouses with their barrel-vaulted ceilings could actually be utilized as studios... and residents or some similar cultural program. Imagine

if the High Bridge Water Tower, one of the best observation points in Manhattan could once again afford visitors its expansive views of the city and if accessibility was an issue well design can get around that too, imagine if the entire tower was a 21st century digital virtual reality, augmented reality periscope. There are ways around accessibility issues in terms of making design successful to everyone. Imagine this tower is a lit beacon visible from the surrounding river, highways, and neighborhoods at night or the 119th Street Gatehouse. Imagine a hydroponic greenhouse growing and run by the Columbia Secondary School whose green thumb program is already using the site. Imagine its interior green vertical walls surrounding the new community event space or imagine... space running collaboration with Columbia's School of Architecture, set up to train Northern Manhattanites and new digital fabrication and other high tech skills. Imagine the possibilities of the three structures around the Onassis reservoir in Central Park. Imagine an exhibit space run in conjunction with the museum of the city of New York that narrates the history of

New York City's water and growth. It is after all why we're all here in a huge metropolis. Imagine if city hall weddings could take place on the flat roof of one of the gatehouses around this reservoir. Imagine if that incredible midtown skyline south of the park was the backdrop of these quintessential New York moments. Imagine if there was a water mister that puffed a halo of water mist right around the edge of the track every 15 minutes keeping your track time, cooling down runners, visually reminding us all how important water in the old Croton system was to the history and the vitality of the city. Imagine these possibilities for each of these historic structures and, and the possibility if we created them unified them together through a singular narrative that tied these individual structures together as part of a larger vision, a vision for a waterline.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Exquisitely timed but also very, very compelling and inspiring vision that you offered. Thank you for that please. Rebecca.

REBECCA HILLS: My name is Rebecca Hill. I'm a landscape architect and partner at the firm

raft and I'm also member of the waterline team. The question of making infrastructure that is underground visible is an intriguing design challenge but it is... this invisibility that makes the revealing of it so critical. As Misha pointed out New York City would not be what it is without the construction of the Croton aqueduct.

Unfortunately, today access to clean and abundant freshwater is a privilege most New Yorkers take for granted, ignorant of the history and heroics necessary to bring this resource into their homes. The waterline project offers us a chance to make this effort apparent and in the process bringing understanding and appreciation to the public that will aide water conservation and stewardship efforts. As we've discussed the, the gatehouses are the visible expressions of this mostly invisible infrastructure. Restoring these points is a first step in improving public awareness and connecting them along a continuum is a second. We see opportunities for this continuum to express itself in a variety of forums, a greenway, continuous green infrastructure, a walking path, a digital tour, and we see the opportunity to integrate this

continuum into planned infrastructure improvement efforts such as the Amsterdam avenue bike lane currently being studied by DOT. We acknowledge this is a long-term vision. We do not anticipate it being completed soon. Just as with the construction of the aqueduct itself, the faith and dedication required to see this project to its fruition will often be challenged. But in the end it'll be worth it.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you very much. I wonder if, if any of you could clarify whether it's, it's accurate that a portion of the actual aqueduct itself. I believe... has been opened and people can walk through it and, and how is that working?

REBECCA HILLS: Yeah, no it's an incredibly visited and, and really popular tourist destination. They, friends of the old Croton Aqueduct have restored and reopened a section of a... so you can actually get inside of this brick line conduit and see for yourself the work of the Irish immigrant laborers that did this you know beautiful construction. And this is not something that would typically be seen by anybody. But it is accessible

and, and it's, it's possible to see so unfortunately we, we don't have that asset available to us right now in New York City, a boundary, so you have to get up to West Chester to see it.

ANDREW BURDICK: And that is one of the last points of this is really how do we as a city connect to this existing infrastructure that is an incredible asset. The historic state park that follows the rest of the waterline, the rest of the aqueduct in Westchester and up... sorry, and up to the Croghan Lake. And so, can we catalyze that? Can we city dwellers have access to that incredible public space just to the north. As a last point, we have pulled together you know this is a long, a long process. But the next step is really to look at the specific feasibility questions for each of these sites and put into a larger strategic masterplan, one that pulls in the rest of the community members through a series of public envisioning sessions. And through a series of feasibility studies looks at the real number for each of these sites to understand what exact uses can through code and other safety issues truly be,

truly make sense in these sites but also what the community will be stewards for. At the end of the day if it's something the community will not utilize it is not necessarily a good investment. So, merging those two needs together or those two ideas together is the central tenant of the next step. And we have, we can share those preliminary thoughts and budgets with you all.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: I look forward to that. Thank you all so much for your work on this and for speaking with us today. And I'm pleased to call up our next panel; two representatives from Riverside Park including John Herrold and Micah Lasher. It is wonderful to see you both. John do you want to start us off?

JOHN HERROLD: Good afternoon Chairman Levine, members of the committee. My name is John Herrold. I am the Administrator of Riverside Park and President of the Riverside Park Conservancy. I come before you to talk about Soldiers and Sailors Monument. I thank you for this opportunity. The Riverside... The mission of the Riverside Park Conservancy is to restore, maintain, and improve Riverside Park in partnership with the city of New

York for the enjoyment of all New Yorkers. The conservancy has constructed, restored, maintained, and endowed many of the monuments in Riverside Park and continues to work to ensure proper care of the park's entire collection of city owned art and antiquities including Soldiers and Sailors monument. Through our constituent group the Soldiers and Sailors memorial association we host the annual Memorial Day ceremony at the monument. We contributed financially to the 2008 restoration of the plaza in front of the monument and the conservancy's horticultural staff maintained the plaza and surrounding landscape. And we have raised private funds in support of the monument's care. Soldiers and Sailors monument is a beacon atop one of New York's highest promontories. It is a familiar landmark to millions, a place of respite and contemplation for visitors of all ages and of course a memorial built by the city of New York to honor the memory of those who gave their lives in military service to our nation, authorized by the city shortly after the end of the American Civil War the monument was finally completed in 1902, its cornerstone having been laid by then governor

Theodore Roosevelt. Many wars later its original purpose is not forgotten and sadly is no less relevant. Each May more than 1,000 New Yorkers gather there with visiting service men and women from around the country to step away from the fleet week festivities to attend the solemn Memorial Day... Ceremony. But sadly Mr. Chairman very few New Yorkers know that behind the massive Bronze doors stand an extraordinary sanctuary. After visiting it David Dunlap wrote in the New York Times that if there were a soundtrack for this chamber it would be the Battle Hymn of the Republic Adagio. Standing in the rotunda 90 feet below a glistening a dome of Guastavino tile. One is surrounding by walls of ornately carved east Dorset marble, each high above which rises an embrace of mosaic palm fronds [phonetic]. Mr. Chairman and members of the committee this space was clearly intended for the public to visit but the rotunda has for decades remained locked away but for rare brief occasions, those occasions have been rarer still since we began to find pieces of broken marble such as you have in your hand. On the rotunda floor and became concerned for the safety of visitors. As you know

the summer and fall conservators conducted an in depth study and pre-scoping study of the Soldiers and Sailors monument funded by the city. Their final report is expected soon but preliminary data confirmed many of our fears about the monument's condition. In the interest of time I'll mention only a few. They have identified chronic water penetration, repairs from the 1950s that are now failing. They removed multiple pieces of stone from all heights of the exterior but made no repairs beyond that and the root causes remain. As the conservators put it bluntly 100 percent of the mortar has failed meaning the conditions will only worsen. They also studied accessibility and will propose plans for making the monument itself accessible. It is 10 feet above Riverside Drive, above three flights of monumental stairs, and completely inaccessible to veterans or anyone else in a wheelchair. In conclusion, the last time the monument was in this state Robert Moses reportedly considered tearing it down. Thankfully he did not and this tremendous work is paired for us but it is now in our care and it is in decay and we must act to protect it.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Am I going to... I want to understand that this, these, these... for the public look these fell off of the monument, is that right?

JOHN HERROLD: Inside.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: In... in the interior.

JOHN HERROLD: That's right. To my knowledge nothing has fallen outside but as I say they removed pieces that were simply sitting there.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Well this would be deadly if, if obviously, it hit someone. It just calls out the urgency of, of moving quickly to restore this incredible, incredible location. And could you ask me roughly how long its been since the public had access?

JOHN HERROLD: Well we open it periodically. On Memorial Day we opened it last, or this, last month on Veterans day. But we allow people only to go in to where they can see the Rotunda but they're actually in a, in a corridor.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Right.

JOHN HERROLD: So, we do open it but it's not open you know every week or every day or anything like that.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Alright. Thank you so much. Okay Micah.

MICAH LASHER: Thank you. Thank you Council Member Levine and to council staff for the opportunity to testify today and for raising public and official consciousness about the city's hidden treasures. I'm on the board of the Riverside Park Conservancy and I'd like to say a few words about the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, a place that I played, where I played as a child and on which today I look with awe each time that I pass but also with no small amount of disappointment given its distressed state. The monument commemorating the Union Army Soldiers and Sailors is the only monument dedicated to the civil war in New York. And given the rich civil war history of our city the monument's singular status here is all the more remarkable and important to protect. But this grand and beautiful structure is in a state of extreme disrepair. As John has testified its worn, patched, and cracked exterior is symptomatic of the damage

done over time by vandalism, the elements, and
abject neglect, damage that now threatens not just
its aesthetic but also its structural integrity.
And the Parks Department does what it can, does an
enormous amount with not enough and is forced to
make impossible choices between worthy projects.
The neglect of the Soldiers and Sailors monument is
a reminder of the consequences of underfunding our
public spaces. That having been said the unique
history and symbolism involved here should have
moved restoration of the monument to the top of the
Parks Department's priority list long ago. A fully
restored monument would allow for public access to
that wonderful interior and to quote the same
Dunlap article, a different section, he called it
quote one of the most astonishing memorial chambers
in New York. A 50 foot high cylindrical rotunda, an
elaborately carved marvel. This is a space Dunlap
writes that invites the somber reflection, demands
it really. Truly imaginative plan for the monument
might also incorporate the headquarters of the old
guard of New York just two blocks away. The old
guard is the honorary remnant of the city's
revolutionary era militias. The New York Times

writing in 1926 on its centennial celebration noted that its headquarters in West 91st Street the old guard possess a valuable collection of military memorabilia. Revolutionary flintlocks, swords, uniforms, and battle trophies. You could pass by this beautiful townhouse a thousand times and not know there was anything to it. Some years ago, I had the honor of a tour and it remains chalk full of extraordinary pieces of history. It too is in a state of disrepair which the Landmarks Conservancy has assessed. And much of the memorabilia was at least at that time not being properly preserved. But it does not take a great leap of imagination to envision a museum and educational center dedicated to New York Civil War history perhaps now opposed to one of the city's existing historical museums just around the corner from the Soldiers and Sailors monument. But first things first. Restoring the Soldiers and Sailors monument should be done as a matter a respect for those who served and in commemoration of what they fought for. It should be done out of respect for those who serve today. Restoration of the monument also becomes at a certain point a matter of self-respect for city

government and our capacity to protect public spaces and structures. And now more than ever in a time when some in our country would raise high the confederate flag restoring splendor of this monument and opening its doors would give New York an opportunity to reaffirm its pride and its place in the progressive march of history. Thank you very much.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Wonderful. The old guard house, is that owned by the city? Is it a Parks Department property?

MICAH LASHER: It is owned by what is the very slender organizational structure of the old guard. There are a... it is a... there is a board of directors. They are, it is a group of, or at least was at the time some five years ago or six years ago. Mostly veterans. I think there was some effort to recruit some newer people aboard maybe without all of them having to be veterans. But it, it's a struggle and they have no... there's no operating income of the organizations. The, the building was... and it's, and it's... this incredible stuff inside it was kind of just sort of laying there in disrepair and at the time and I assume

this is still the case. They had a... a caretaker who basically lives in the... you know is compensated effectively by being able to live in the building and sort of take care of it but it's... I think the Landmarks Conservancy found that while the building was not structurally unsound there were certainly serious needs. But it did seem... does seem to me to be a potentially great opportunity particularly given its proximity to Soldiers and Sailors to, to build something that people would go to, to build a destination.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Wow. I look forward to taking that tour sometime. John do you know when the report will deliver its results.

JOHN HERROLD: We hope to have it within this month.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Oh well we'll be anxiously awaiting that. Thank you both so much for your advocacy on this issue, for speaking today.

JOHN HERROLD: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Next up we have Diann Hawkins], Sabina Prescott, Mara Kravitz, and Paula Segal. Can you... Alright which one of you would like to lead us off?

MARA KRAVITZ: I would.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Okay, very eager
please.

MARA KRAVITZ: Thank you for accepting
our testimony and holding this crucial hearing
today. My name is Mara Kravitz and I'm here with
Paula Segal on behalf of 596 acres, New York City's
Community Land Access Advocacy Organization. We
help regular New Yorkers organize around and gain
access to the city's vacant properties to transform
them into community spaces that provide vital
public services. We have enriched 38 neighborhoods
by facilitating the transformation of inaccessible
and dormant spaces into community resources in the
form of pocket parks, gardens, and farms since 2011
and contributed to the preservation of dozens of
existing spaces. We are working with advocates from
dozens of other neighborhoods who are targeting
their local... lots and abandoned public buildings
for revitalization. You will hear from some of them
today about these specific spaces. So part of our
work is about turning municipal data into
information useful to the public. To this end we
keep an online map of vacant public land in New

York City developed using a combination of the best available data from City Planning and the Department of Citywide Administrative Services, ground truthing by our staff and organizers and property specific research. That map is a good starting point for identifying vacant and inaccessible NYC Parks properties. According to our research there are at least 27 places in New York City where land in the inventory of the New York City Parks Department sits idle and inaccessible. And that's just what we know right now. Our research is based on data that is gathered by agencies with agendas other than the creation of vibrant and open community spaces. We hope that one outcome of this oversight hearing today will be an imperative to the NYC Parks Department to survey its own land holdings and make that data available to residents and their advocates including the council itself. In addition to vacant parks department land we have begun to survey vacant parks department building. We started with the list of New York City properties published on the open data portal by the Department of Citywide administrative services and narrowed it down to

only Parks properties with structures on them. We have been using online tools and our feet and eyes to actually explore the status of the structures. With volunteer labor we have already uncovered 35 vacant public NYC Parks buildings including 10 buildings in Manhattan community district three on the lower east side alone. Today we are providing you a map of that district. But these properties are strewn across the city. There is an unused stable used as a fire communications building in the middle of central park and the closed Queen Bridge Park Field House, a works progress administration building built as a community center. Parks does not have accessible comprehensive data about its buildings. Our hope is that another outcome of today's hearing will be an imperative to the NYC Parks Department to survey its own building holdings and make that data available to residents and their advocates including the council itself. These buildings were all built for public use with public funds. Most were closed during the fiscal crisis of the 1970s and never reopened. These are opportunities for community centers, public restrooms, cooperative

food businesses and more. Without knowing where they are we cannot start the process of planning. Inaccessible NYC Parks Department Project properties are scattered throughout the city but located primarily in low income neighborhoods where communities of color live. Dozens of fenced off lots and boarded up buildings in the inventory of NYC Parks sit vacant, locked, and forgotten abscesses in the very neighborhoods that most need more healthy resources. The effects of the Parks Departments abandonment of these properties only compounds a history of red lining block busting, urban renewal clearance and municipal neglect.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: And, and Mara if you can try and wrap up and maybe Paula can continue? No? Okay, she has no voice.

MARA KRAVITZ: I'm, yeah.

PAULA SEGAL: I just had surgery.

MARA KRAVITZ: We are really pleased to see this council initiating a process through which we can together change course. So, we're pleased that some of our advocates are here today testifying and not everyone was able to be here

today because in the middle of the day and we will be emailing in additional testimonies from them.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Oh, okay. Thank you. And would one of the advocates also be speaking?

PAULA SEGAL: Yes, a couple of folks.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Okay, I think that... check that mic works. One of them is out of commission.

PAULA SEGAL: Testing. Yeah.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: We got you. Please introduce yourself. And...

DIANN HAWKINS: Good. Testing.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Yes.

DIANN HAWKINS: Okay. Dear Committee on Parks and Recreation. Good afternoon. My name is Diann Hawkins. I am here today from the Bronx. I live in the High Bridge Neighborhood for over 30 years. I am here to testify about the impact of the inaccessible Parks Department properties in my council district 16 and Bronx Committee Board 4. Particularly I am, I am going to tell you about a fenced off location, a location between 169th and 170th Street between Nelson and Shakespeare Avenue

Bronx Block 2519, lot 32 and Bronx Block 2520 lot 19 which is adjacent to a vacant public VOT lot. The sign on the fence which has been closed for the decades I have lived there says it's called Copper Fisher Park. I live near this property and often walk by just to see what's new. In the summer days, it brings much sadness to the neighborhood. Sometimes it's an eye sore. When I stand by it and observe children playing on the sidewalk ask me why is this park always closed, is there something wrong with it, why can't we use it. Over the past years, it has been very much neglected. You use... you use not even being able to walk on the sidewalk outside the fence of this public lot. In 2016 the Parks Department finally started cutting the grass and cleaning it up. The lots remain enclosed by fence and padlock. The city has honed this land for 20 years. Parks Department take, took jurisdiction over it over seven years ago to create a park meant to honor Corporal Irwin A. Fischer, a New Yorker who served the Army Air Corps during World War II and flew in locations including Iwo Jima, the Philippines, and Saipan. It is... the cost is undeveloped. I was also told by Elizabeth Gonzalez

from CB4 district manager's office in April that a Parks Department does not have the funding to develop it. And it a major capital improvement to make a park. I've been an active member of my community and engage in community activities from helping the homeless to clean, help... to maintaining our parks and community gardens. Through this I volunteered in my... in New York restoration project, Bronx green up and Green Thumb. I realize the potential of this space. Over the past couple of years I started feeling connected to it. I see so much potential each time I stop by. I develop more ideas and fondness for it as a respite for hot summer heat waves especially for senior who live in the senior housing across the street. Now we are organizing to make Corporal Fischer Park a real... what kind of park we want it to be. We see the potential for it to become a flourishing and awarding committee green space for the coin committee residents in a neighborhood where open space and growing space is limited due to rezoning. It is exposed... it will expose... environmental and sustainable urban environment in their communities providing teaching and learning opportunities for

all residents willing to learn about the environment and how plants grow. It will be the location of committee activities and will enrich and have the... have benefits to our residents and neighborhood. It will help to promote health and well being in today's stressful environment and organic oasis to meditate, relax, and rejuvenate. Thank you holding this oversight hearing to examine Parks Department properties currently and accessible to the public. Though there is an accessible and underutilized New York City Parks Property in my neighborhood I wouldn't have known about this hearing without an invitation from 596 acres. Turning these properties into real parks in collaboration with local residents would ensure their lasting benefit to our neighborhood. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Alright, thank you Diann. And Sabina will you be testifying?

SABINA PRESCOTT: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Okay.

SABINA PRESCOTT: My name is Sabina Prescott and I live in West Concourse in the Bronx. I'm here to testify about the impacts of

inaccessible Parks Department properties located at Block 2519, lot 32 and Block 2520, lot 19 located at West 169th Street and West 170th Street between Shakespeare and Nelson Avenues. I live near and bike past these properties and they are sadly abandoned, fenced off, and full of potential especially in an area that already has many new multi-family buildings and will continue to see an influx of new residents in the coming years but lacks adequate green space for everyone to comfortably enjoy. The properties are and have been Parks Department property for at least seven years. Previously city records show that any buildings that were on the lots were demolished by 1981 and that they had been empty ever since. I am eager for the land to become open parks with resident participation and planning. Locals are already organizing to create a vision for these parks. We would like green space for communal vegetable and flower gardening, picnic space, and a space for children to play. We are also set on having space accessible and safe for the many seniors who live within a block of either lot. A space with a combination of active and passive uses would be

ideal. We also have connections to community members and organizations vested in establishing long term community projects that will create employment and educational opportunities for resident of all ages. Thank you for holding this oversight hearing to examine parks department properties currently and accessible to the public. Even though I live near these two properties I would not have known about today's hearing if not for the assistance of 596 acres. More needs to be done in the future to advertise these hearings to the public which offer valuable insight into the process and limitations of making iconic and important public spaces accessible. Turning the properties into, in my area into real parks in collaboration with local residents will ensure their lasting benefit to our neighborhoods and city. Thank you again.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you Sabina. Thank you to this panel. Are, are, are you going to speak now? Okay.

PAULA SEGAL: I'm just going to... Hi, this is Paula. I apologize. Can you hear me. So, I just want to point out that there are kind of two

parallel processes that are available to us through the Parks Department for the development of assets to be used by the public. And one is the capital process that Diann referred to which is expensive and long and something that we all recognize that we need to... you know devote serious funds to a project, to move it forward. But the other, the other process is a development of community stewarded open space through the green thumb program which can be done with minimal capital dollars, the only capital dollars that are necessary for that is the capital to maintain the edges, the sidewalk, the fences. But everything that happens inside the property is then, can be stewarded by outside organizations, can be funded through foundations can be supported by residents like the ones you were hearing from today and actually is not the lengthy capital process that we're talking about when we're talking about some of the iconic transformations we would all also like to see. And so, I want to keep both those things in mind because just saying oh that's a capital project that should not be how you leave a

park empty for seven years in the South Bronx.

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Well thank you

Paula. Thank you to this whole panel. You've

brought up a very important point. We focused on

iconic historic structures through this hearing.

But there are just plain great spaces that are not

being utilized. And turns out there are dozens over

30 buildings that have been left derelict. And at a

time of growing use of our park system and a

growing city we should be taking advantage of, of

every square inch of the space that we have. So

thank you for calling our attention to this

important issue. Really appreciate it. Thank you.

Alright our next panel will include Andy Stone from

the Trust for Public Land and Ruben Rames from

Friends of the Queensway. Ruben or Ruben would you

like to start us off?

RUBEN RAMALES: Is this on? Can you hear

me? My name is Ruben Rames or Ruben Rames. I am

a resident of Mott Haven Queens and a member of the

steering committee for Friends of the Queensway.

I'm also part time Queensway Outreach Coordinator

at the Trust for Public Land which is the nation's

largest nonprofit creator of Parks. I'm mostly joined by my colleague Andy Stone who's the New York City Director for the Trust of Public Land. Thank you Chairperson Levine and the member of the Parks Committee for giving me the opportunity to speak with you about a notable opportunity presented by a seven acre piece of city park land in Queens that is not currently available for public use. This seven acres lies within the boundaries of Forest Park Queens. It's the third largest park and it is part of the Queensway Linear Park project which has been a proposal by the Friends of the Queensway and the Trust for Public Land. This parcel was formally part of the Long Island Railroad's Rockaway Beach Branch. Rail use was discontinued in 1962 and any rail interest was formally abandoned via the federal interstate commerce commission at the time. Now at the time three and a half miles comprising 47 acres a former rail corridor was transferred to the jurisdiction of the city's Department of General Services which is now DCAS, that included seven acres within the boundaries of Forest Park. In 2002 this seven acres within Forest Park was transferred to the New York

City Parks Department. This seven acre parcel consists of a half mile ravine with fairly steep slopes which was dug at the time the railway was built due to this configuration it is physically cut off from the rest of the park. There's only one at garden entrance for its entire half mile length. It is essentially an unmaintained section of the park with no trail or other facilities and it attracts a moderate amount of dumping. Given its topography it is quite understandable that city parks would overlook this rather remote area. However, if this seven acres could be incorporated into the three and half mile proposed Queensway. It could become a valuable resource for increasing the use of Forest Park. More specifically the Queensway would provide very easy off-street bike and pedestrian access to Forest Park for the 323,000 people living within a mile of the Queensway corridor. A large percentage of whom currently arrived by car. In addition, this seven acres lies in between Forest Park's major outdoor recreation space which is Victory Field and the 274 acre Forest Park Preserve. It's described by city parks as the largest continuous wooded area in Queens.

This section of the Queensway can act as a bridge for pedestrians and bicyclists between victory field and Woodlands providing greater safety to Woodland visitors by increasing use overall enhancing the seven acres and including it as part of the Queensway. It would be very meaningful and increasing, diversifying the use of major park, of a major park that is currently underutilized. Since the plan was released in 2014 we have received further state funding and started design for our first half mile just north of Forest Park. We believe that opening this segment will help demonstrate the major benefits that can accrue to the Borough of Queens by completing the Queensway. We appreciate the past encouragement we have received from the Chairman Levine including earlier today and we would be most grateful for any assistance from this committee. Thank you for your time.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you. Okay, Mr. Stone.

ANDY STONE: I don't actually... Council Member I don't actually have additional testimony. I just want to clarify as Ruben's testimony

indicated the assistant commissioner was just inaccurate in his one comment that none of the Queensway carter is in parks jurisdiction. So, Deputy Commissioner Kavanagh confirmed when I spoke to him later. So, seven acres of the Queensway is in Parks jurisdiction. It is an underutilized park of Forest Park. So, one asset we have in furthering the Queensway plan is seven acres of it is already parkland that could play a very valuable role if it was transformed into part of Queensway. Because it would be a key way for people to connect to and go across Forest Park, north south. So, given the schedule I'll leave it at that.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: And sorry, just to clarify the remainder is owned by the MTA?

ANDY STONE: No, it's owned by DCAS. So, there is...

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: DCAS... got it.

ANDY STONE: It's important to say because a lot of people, people say oh there's still a rail overlay, there's still a rail easement, there's a rail this, there's a rail that. This land is totally in Parks jurisdiction. It went through abandonment proceedings through the federal

interstate commerce commission over 50 years ago. There's no official rail right of way or legal rail overlay at all. So as the Department of Citywide Administration Services said all they'd need to hear is that Parks was ready to accept an assignment of all or some of it. And it could be transferred through interagency transfer. So seven acres is in Parks, 40 acres is in DCAS.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Well you know the number one challenge to expanding our park system is always acquisition of new land. And here you have this massive property, total of 47 acres..

ANDY STONE: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Which is already publicly owned. And you look at the recent news on Bushwick, Inlet Park.. a project I supported. The city promised that neighborhood we'd acquire the land but they spent 160 million on the final 26 acres. To have 47 acres that won't cost a cent to acquire, that's a heck of a good deal. Seems like one we should pursue.

ANDY STONE: Well we thank you very much for your support and...

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Alright. Thank you both very much. Alright next up we have Jamie Jenson, Michelle Young, Matt Molina, and Patrick Raftery. Would you like to start us off?

MATT MOLINA: Yes, good afternoon Mr. Chairman. Thank you for having me. My name's Matt Molina. I'm the Director of NYCH2O. We are a non-profit that offers education programs to the public as well as the schools in all five boroughs. We focus on educating school children about New York City's water system and, and ecology. We work at eight sites, all of whom are in city parks. I'm here to testify about the Ridgewood Reservoir High Bridge Tower and Gatehouse, and the Central Park Gatehouse. The Ridgewood Reservoir is a 50 acre de facto nature preserve that served as the, the main reservoir for the city of Brooklyn back in the 19th century and happened to be built the same year that the Central Park Reservoir was built for the city of New York. It was decommissioned about four years ago and drained. And the city never did anything with it and it grew a forest. And it's, it's approximate to very dense neighborhoods, a lot, a lot of schools and it's an incredible opportunity

to, to learn about the history of our water system and nature. And we'd like to see more access into, into the basins and have the, the gatehouses restored. That's the first one. The second one is the High Bridge. The High Bridge underwent a 60 million dollar, a 62 million dollar renovation. The gatehouses are, are in great shape. We'd like to have access into the gatehouses. Our students as, our students are very curious to see it and it's an inspiring place to visit to actually see the aqueduct inside and I, I have a, a diagram of it both of the, a man standing inside the aqueduct which is what it looks like when you go into the gatehouse, and an 1842 drawing of an engineer that designed the, the aqueduct. And that wouldn't require many, much resources other than given NYCH20 a key so that we could allow access on our student tours in a, a safe and controlled way. I, I know that the Open House New York almost had access to it last year and at the last minute permission was, was denied. But it's, it's a safe place and definitely a worthy one. Last but not least is the Central Park Gatehouse. That actually had plans to become a museum for the water system in 1997. I've

included in the testimony a drawing for plans to turn into a museum and that was done in 1997, part of a larger study by an engineering company and, and I'll leave it at that. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: The current state of the gatehouse in Central Park, is it abandoned or...

MATT MOLINA: It's, it's owned by the DEP but it, it is not abandoned. They, they send somebody in there every day just to check the water levels but there are giant plugs put on and so it's not... it, it can't, it cannot be used and, and won't be used again.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: And this image you had of the Croton aqueduct...

MATT MOLINA: Sure.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Was, was that an illicitly taken photos... okay if you're... you don't think of details but are, are... was there public access at some point?

MATT MOLINA: There is not public access to my knowledge anywhere in, in New York City.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Got it. Alright.

But it is big enough for an adult to walk through upright as far as... as far as they know?

MATT MOLINA: It... yes, it's eight... eight feet tall and seven feet wide.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Alright. Very good.

MATT MOLINA: In perfect condition.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Amazing. I hope to see it one day. Please.

MICHELLE YOUNG: Thanks. Hi. My name is Michelle Young. I'm a Professor of Architecture and Urban Studies at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation and I'm also the founder of the publication Untapped Cities; an online magazine about urban discovery. The publication receives over a million and a half page views per month and aims to show New Yorkers a side of the city that they may not know, a hidden side, a lesser known side. The list of places we discuss today constitute some of the most popular topics on the site, fascinating not only to the more visible and vocal urban explorer community but also more importantly to everyday New Yorkers who are interested in history and place

making. Questions on how to access these places are some of the most frequent inquiries we receive at the publication. And while we have been privileged to have been able to visit several of these places to document them it is always with misgiving that we cannot say that they are open to the public. As part of the work at untapped cities we partner with different city agencies and other organizations around New York City to fight access to sites normally off limits to the residents. Interest to these places including the Staten Island Farm Colony and others receive overwhelming interest with several million people reached on some of our event listings on Facebook and thousands of people on the wait list. I can assure everyone that given the choice of accessing a location legally versus trespassing most of today's urban explorers would actually opt for the legal option and sometimes actually really pay for it. So, I believe it is a right of all New Yorkers as citizens of this city to be able to access these properties under the parks jurisdiction. Openness in our society is more important than ever both for residents and for visitors to New York. Public access to the city's

public places will help to promote a more robust engaged civic society and inform everyone about the city's history and its built environment. And I hope that New York City can serve as a civic leader in this effort and be an example to other cities in this country. And I just wanted to make a side note not about a Parks Department location but as my role as an academic at Columbia we study a different New York City site every year as part of our studio. And this year we're looking at the future of Ryker's Island. And part of that work is looking at the surrounding area. So I just want to highlight the area of North Astoria which is a predominantly industrial zone. And it's actually one of the most strangest access areas I've ever seen. Most of the public spaces and public parks are actually under the jurisdiction of ConEdison and other industrial properties and are usually gated off except for certain hours. So anyways thank you for allowing me to testify today.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you. I love your publication...

MICHELLE YOUNG: Thanks.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: ...and we're, we're so glad that you've shined a light on all of these wonderful, wonderful spaces all over New York City.

MICHELLE YOUNG: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Please.

PATRICK RAFTERY: Good afternoon. My name is Patrick Raftery and I'm the Librarian at the West Chester County Historical Society. It's fairly well known that New York City acquired most of Heart Island in 1868. Within a year, the Department of Charities and Correction had set aside and opened a portion of Heart Island to serve as the location of city cemetery, the proper title for Potters Field. In 1874 the city's government approved the new method of burial for the thousands of bodies that were sent to Heart Island each year. A system that continues in use to the present time. In the years after this system was implemented Lawrence Dunfee, the Warden of Heart Island highlighted the steps that he had taken to improve the condition of the cemetery in each of the annual reports that he submitted to the commissioners of public charities and correction. And the following is an excerpt from his 1876 annual report. The

ground is divided into sections and between every trench a gravel walk was laid out. A certain quantity of assorted trees have been planed on the grounds which, which adds to the appearance and will be an ornament to the resting place of the dead in a year or two hence. I would recommend that another supply of trees and shrubs be granted for the cemetery and the grounds adjacent there too. The grounds are continually kept in good order and the city's cemetery now as it is already will compare favorably with many private cemeteries. Visits and inspections at any time are respectfully invited. Warden Dunfee's work was intended to keep Potter's Field in line with other metropolitan burial places that had been established as part of the rural cemetery movement. As part of this movement which came to the United States in 1831 and present day New York City in 1838 burial places were landscaped in a manner inspired by the English Garden movement. Rural cemeteries were very much intended for public visitation. Although budgetary restrictions and lack of private funds meant that city cemetery would never be able to rival places such as Greenwood and Woodlawn Cemeteries. It is

clear from Warden's... Warden Dunfee's reports that Potters Field was intended to be a place that was made open and accessible to the public. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Alright. Thank you very much. Please.

JAMIE JENSON: Good afternoon. My name is Jamie Jenson. I'm an advocate with NYCH20 and I would like to talk about a property which we have identified and has also been identified by 596 acres. It's a large landmark property on the lower east side now known as Baruch Baths or Irvington Street Baths, was built as the city's first public bath in 1901, was used for many years but was closed in the fiscal crisis in the 1970s and is now front and center with the city's newest effort to deal with water issues which is coastal resiliency. So, it kind of brings together a lot of the issues we've been hearing about today. It's a beautiful building, has a... there's been an ongoing effort for about 30 years since it was closed to reopen it including support from the local council member. But the issue is cost. And I understand that parks doesn't have the resources to spend an estimated 30 million dollars to reopen it as the recreation

center it was. But it has been... it's there. It's 35,000 square feet of space in the middle of a NYCHA complex which desperately needs recreation facilities. There is a lot of investment coming into the community to build new buildings more or less all around this to replace the heating supplies for FEMA, to deal with other aspects of upgrading the NYCHA facilities. But they are not... this particular property appears as a blank space and I would encourage Parks employees, whoever has, can start this conversation to consider the possibility of adaptively reusing this fabulous landmark structure which contains a... is now covered in a beautiful mural and a lot of volunteer trees growing out the roof. It clearly needs love but it is there and its rehabilitation could really be a sign to the local residents that were coming together to serve them I think and to reconnect as we adapt to the latest issues about how New Yorkers relate to the water. So I've, I've included a couple of very pretty pictures and a lot of the background material on the family who dedicated this, on this relationship to long time activism, on the lower east side but basically wanted to

bring together the other identifications made by the other groups and get parks to really put this out to other organizations who might be better funded with all the millions of dollars that are being spent there to maybe think about using some of that to bring this back to life. So, thank you very much.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you. Has there been an estimate of the cost of a renovation?

JAMIE JENSON: It's scary, a 32 million dollars.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: And when was that estimate done?

JAMIE JENSON: About four years ago, four five years ago. And Parks people know what needs to be done. They've done all the studies and that's a lot of money I think. So, but to use the building in new ways that preserves its connections with water and public health in the face of climate change and sea level rise seems like a consistent use that preservationists wouldn't have an issue with. I don't know. I mean, but it would, it would be nice to have these conversations before they build all around it and leave this abandoned. So...

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Well thank you for calling our attention to that facility. I wasn't familiar with it but I look forward to seeing it. Thank you very much to this panel. Thank you. Alright we have George Weisgerber and Aaron Asis [phonetic], forgive me if I mispronounce the names. Are either of you still here? Okay.

GEORGE WEISGERBER: So, I'd like to you know thank Chairman Levine for you know sending an invite out to constituents because I think it's really great to see citizens participating in this process and to have that type of transparency.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: And could you identify yourself? Are George or...

GEORGE WEISGERBER: Oh, yes...

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: ...Aaron?

GEORGE WEISGERBER: Yes, my name is George Weisgerber. So, I'm originally from you know Queens but I'm a resident of the upper eastside. And you know I'd like to just ask you know Chairman Levine and committee members to just think back to the first time you saw the observation towers of the New York Pavilion in Flushing Meadow Corona Park you know. If you didn't grow up in Queens you

know maybe the feeling you felt looking out the rear window of your parents' car on the Grand Central Parkway or if you're a millennial you know seeing them transform into flying saucers in the movie Men in Black. You know it had to be surreal. And you know what are those damn things. And you know thanks to you know Borough President Katz and the New York Structural Steel Association. You know there has been you know some progress made. And I had an opportunity to visit as you mentioned last year and see the American Green Cheese but you know the... but we can't really just stand idle and expect you know private donations and philanthropy to do all the work, especially in the outer boroughs which don't have the benefit of... you know that organizations like the Central Park Conservancy you know bring to Manhattan because these treasures are more than you know simply relics from... past. You know they represent an opportunity to bring you know people of diverse economic ethnic and, and religious backgrounds together in one place. And after the events of November 9th you know this takes on a, a lot more meaning. You know but unfortunately you know Flushing Meadow Corona Park

is almost a tale of two parks. Because I really wonder how many of the 713,000 people who attend the US Open each year, bother to venture you know, you know far from... Stadium or how many of the 2.8 million baseball fans who attend you know Mets games at city field in 2015 have actually been to the south side of the park. So, you know people from all over this planet come to Queens every year but unfortunately most of them only think of Queens as a place to you know fly into and pass through on the way to Manhattan. So, you know the cost to fully restore... you know reopen and resume use of the towers. I believe it's estimated at 72 million dollars. But... and that may sound like a lot but it's really a small price to pay if you think of how it can bring communities together you know and not just simply you know, you know academics and historians but, but real people... because resources and monuments like these don't belong to a single council district or to just one borough you know whether it's North Brother Island, Washington Square Arch or there... Soldiers Sailors monument on 89th Street. They're all national treasures in which every citizen really has a vested interest.

So, these untapped resources belong as much to the residents of the hills of Morningside Heights and the people of Brighton Beach ensures as they do to over the 50... the over 50 million people who travel the globe each year to experience everything this city has to offer. So, I just respectfully ask the members of the committee to please you know stop selling our parks short and you know give people the city access to that which is rightfully there and I want to once again thank Chairman Levine you know for his attention on this.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you Mr. Weisegerber, very much appreciated. Alright our next panel. The famous Malinda Huntz, Elaine Joseph, JT, JB, JP Borum, and Trish Van Buran.

MELINDA HUNTZ: Thank you so much for inviting me and for including Hart Island in this list of Harks because Hart Island is not yet a park. But we are... we know you're not going to let us down. I'm testifying on behalf of the Hart Island project, a nonprofit dedicated to opening access to city cemetery. A cemetery without public access does not serve its community. It is simply a place where people disappear. There are important

reasons why Heart Island should be open to the public. Heart Island is the largest municipal burial ground in the United States. The current burial practice is tied to the civil war and innovations that came into practice in 1866 at Belview Hospital with the formation of the Department of Charities and Correction. The fact that the burial process is largely unchanged for so long means that it is service that is not entirely without merit. Heart Island is the largest natural burial facility in United States. It is a resilient part of our green infrastructure. The city must now restore the public's confidence in this burial practice by opening access. New York City does not embalm. Unclaimed bodies are buried in plain pine boxes in common graves. While these graves are now too large plot size could readily be adjusted to fit a reforestation program as part of a master plan. Untitled graves can legally be recycled after a quarter century. In fact, New York City began to recycle graves older than 50 years in 1936. This is the reason New York City is not running out of burial space. On the other hand, private cemeteries in New York are very short of burial space. Titled

graves in private cemeteries cannot be recycled. Other than Heart Island there are no green burial options in New York City. Fortunately, Heart Island is large enough to accommodate the city's dead even if several times the current number of people were to choose a city burial. Burial space on Heart Island doubled in 1989 when city cemetery extended into parts of Heart Island formerly occupied by institutions. At the same time the number of burials has steadily declined. While the country has largely moved away from inground burials toward cremation, cremains are carbon. Combustion of the body requires industrial furnaces and fossil fuels. However New Yorkers are free to choose a natural burial over leaving a final carbon footprint. In agreeing to a city burial families do not relinquish their right to visit actual graves on Heart Island. A 2016 class action lawsuit was settled with the understanding that New York City must now provide access to families. It is in the interest of the tax payer not to keep city burials locked away. Communities, friends of the varied, of the varied also need access to city cemetery. The first burial on, burials on Heart Island were of

Union soldiers who died while training for the Civil War. These common soldiers and unknown soldiers who died in the course of duty were the subject of Lincoln's address at Gettysburg. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion that we are highly resolved that these dead shall not have died in vein. Heart Island is tied to Gettysburg. Honoring the dead was carried on after the civil war, the system of burials on Heart Island using legers and numbered graves and photographing the dead for later identification... was developed during the civil war and adopted by New York City but Heart Island has now become so isolated and forbidden that it's broadly perceived as an undignified shameful place, the subject of recent scorn on the front pages of the New York Times.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: And Melinda if you could try and wrap up or perhaps one of your fellow panelists can make some...

MELINDA HUNTZ: Almost there...

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: ...have a couple of minutes...

MELINDA HUNTZ: There are many veterans from all awards buried in common trenches on Heart Island. It is now time for the Park Service to take over management of city cemetery just as the national park service took over management of the national cemeteries. The New York state Office of Environmental and Historic Preservation, it is determined that Heart Island meets three out of four criteria for placement on national and state historic registries. City cemetery is an opportunity for New York City to encourage the public in historic and environmental conservation. But because tax payers don't have an opportunity to visit city cemetery or learn the history of Heart Island they cannot appreciate the significance of this place as part of our national heritage. Now is the time to adjust our vision, create a master plan and effectively use city cemetery as a renewable resource and historic site open to the public.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Alright.

MELINDA HUNTZ: Thank you.

ELAIN JOSEPH: Good afternoon. My name is Elain Joseph. And thank you for hearing me. My name is Elain Joseph. I'm speaking on behalf of myself and hundreds of thousands of family and friends of people buried on Heart Island. In 1978 my infant daughter passed away at a local hospital. After her body went missing between the hospital and the ME's office during a snow storm she was mistakenly buried at the city's potter field on Heart Island. I was unable to locate her burial site for over 30 years. I lost all of these years being able to grieve properly and visit her grave. After a settlement with the city I was the first person to be able to walk to a grave site on Heart Island on March 14th, 2014. The experience was surreal and it gave me a feeling of some relief to know where her final resting place was. Although the volume of records of her death were lost for babies from 1977 to 1981 by the Department of Corrections the Heart Island Project was able to help me and the department of correction figure out which trench she would have been buried in. I'm also a veteran having served 23 years of the United States Naval Officer. I feel that everyone should

have the opportunity to visit their loved ones grave sites and pay respect to all veterans buried at Heart Island Cemetery on a regular basis without having to make an appointment with the Department of Correction. It is a humiliating feeling to have to schedule in advance, give names of my family members, have IDs checked, relinquish my phone, and have a Department of Correction officer escort me to and stand there while I grieve my loved one. I was... I want the right to visit my daughter's grave and those of my fellow veterans without these obstacles. Please open Heart Island up to the public as a public park. The island has so much potential to be a serene resting place to those who have had no choice as to where their final resting place would be and to their family and friends to be able to visit freely. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Well thank you Ms. Joseph for, first for your service to our country for 23 years and for your courage and speaking out on behalf not only of your own family but thousands and thousands of others who are similarly limited in their ability to grieve or the ability to pay homage to loved ones who are buried there. And

you've been very, very important to the movement to open up access there and really appreciate you speaking it today.

JP BORUM: Look. I'm JP Borum. Thank you for letting me testify today, to this committee. I'm a New York City based queer righter and writing teacher at NYU who has cancelled her classes... well earlier today to honor World Aids Day. I want to tell you why I did not attend today's dedication of the new Aids Memorial in Greenwich Village near what used to be Saint Vincent's Hospital. It would have been a whole lot easier for me to walk from NYU to, to this event. Instead I came here to remind you that a memorial located in Greenwich Village fails to honor the truth about the Aids epidemic and holocaust in New York City. Thousands of Aids victims were buried on the city's Potter's Island, Heart Island which is inaccessible to their family and surviving partners which it bears repeating that were not legally married and therefore have no legal access to mourn life partners. And we're looking at over 60,000 since the 80s. In fact, the first small group of Aids victims were carted off and buried in a former

sewage plant at this... below a former sewage plant the southern tip of the island. I doubt anybody thought of them today at the opening memorial in Greenwich Village. Today a statement was made by the press to the effect that many aids victims remain anonymous, let me tell you that this is not true. The Heart Island Project has over the last several years accessed many databases but especially two... to provide the names of aids victims buried on Heart Island. So, there's work to do there. I ask you to consider the request to shift jurisdiction of Heart Island from the DOC to the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation. This would take an important step toward making Heart Island accessible to friends, family, and the partners that I mentioned who have never been able to pay respects. And just... I was inspired by hearing the commissioner speak before I would just say if, if the, if not the parks department then golly I don't know who else has, owns so many cemeteries in this city. And I would respectfully request that what, what constitutes Park's appropriate behavior be reconsidered and that expertise in this area actually be considered a

responsibility that... not only a responsibility of the Parks Department but also an opportunity to innovate and to move forward and to become leaders in, in what constitutes this kind of behavior, what constitutes expertise. Nobody has better archeological records in the city of cemeteries than the Parks Department. And I spoke to Mr. Kavanagh that... I'll just wrap by this, with this. This week and this month many of my students are reading Sophocles play Antigony [sp?] in their various Court Humanities classes. Their work of reflection about the importance of burial is crucial to, to their formation and scholars and members of society. And what's the take away? And here's like my little cliff notes or my spark notes cheat sheet okay? Things just really do not go well when a city fails to bury its dead. The results are tragic. We must open access to Heart Island to ensure that our city can mourn and honor the dead where they are buried. Where... and, and build memorial... memorials there on site. So, thanks a lot for hearing me.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you JP. And of course Washington Square Park itself was once a,

a burial site. And in fact, when the park was renovated recently they found many human remains.

JP BORUM: Yes I, I would just say... but let me keep it civil and just say that actually the Parks Department has a much better archeologist on staff than the DDC. That, but that's another story. Yeah, 20,000 yellow fever victims lie buried anonymously buried under, about three feet. So, if I stood on this table that's about how far down they are. And so it, there, there could also be some memorial work there. And I think it's, you know it's not just a memorial park for, for, for one, one man. 20,000 people are there. So thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Of course. Thank you. Please.

TRISH VAN BURAN: Wow, I don't know how to follow up after all of that. Hi. Yes, my... yes, thank you. Hi. My name is Trish Van Buran and I'm the founder of Heptoic Helps Organization to help advocacy for agricultural sciences and inaccessible gardens for, through New York City Parks Department. So, I'm here to testify about the impacts of the inaccessible parks property located

in South Jamaica Queens, 12089 lot 8. It is now currently the Hilton Holliday Garden. But since Sandy it's been abandoned and left unkempt and it's very unattractive to a very... everyday developing community. South Jamaica Queens is known in history for its violence and despair. And our organization would love to gain access to be the steward, to develop it into a place that could be place for togetherness and support. We have plans to implement different things and events for kids. Mother, tea parties, Easter egg hunts. We plan to bring in a fountain that is labeled the Van Sacum [sp?] fountain. It emulates the nine sciences of survival. And those nine sciences are body science, agricultural science, nutritional science, spiritual science, astrological science, kinetic science, economical science, historical science, and military science. These nine sciences are what the kids need to learn in the area so they can take pride in the community and their environment. We want to offer fitness classes and music festivals because the area is changing. It's becoming gentrified now. It's multicultural place. We want to keep it preserved but we want to get to work.

And I was invited by nine... 596 acres. I didn't even know this hearing existed until the day before yesterday. So I do thank them for their advocacy and helping with turning these properties into beautiful spaces. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Well we're so glad you heard about the hearing and could be here. And thank you for advocating on behalf of this space. Is it in the district of Council Member Daneek Miller?

TRISH VAN BURAN: No.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Who's the council member? Would it be Donovan Richards maybe?

TRISH VAN BURAN: I, I'm not sure. But the Parks Department... I sent a proposal. They already approved the proposal since 596 acres told me about it. I just wanted to keep a linear line of communication throughout the city Parks Department that we are really looking... we have over 40 committed community members now and we're just ready to go.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Alright.

TRISH VAN BURAN: Okay.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you for bringing it to our attention and for speaking.

TRISH VAN BURAN: Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Alright. Thank you panel. Okay next we have Wendy Brower from the Sara Roosevelt Park as well as Kay Webster, also from Sara Roosevelt Park, Kevin Tobar Pesantez or Pacantez [phonetic] from University Settlement, and Barbara Delinsic [phonetic] from City Island Historical Society. We'll just take it for the record. Okay.

WENDY BROWER: Hi, I'm Wendy Brower. I'm a nonprofit director and designer whose worked in climate change for a decade and for inclusive participation in sustainable community development for 25 years. I live and work in CB3 and biked down here today without a coat on. November had record high temperatures and record low sea ice in both the artic and Antarctica. With the dark sea now absorbing more sun and heat I fear we may be entering a period of rapid change in our climate. As a resident of a coastal community heavily impacted by Hurricane Sandy a member of LES Ready and Sarah D Roosevelt Parks Community Coalition I

feel strongly that we need to create a resiliency center in the Stanton Building. I'm inspired by the realization that NYC communities that already knew how to work together bounced back faster after that major disruption we all experienced. As Council Member Chin pointed out this perfectly located building has been inaccessible for years. As described in my written testimony with the help of NYC Commons and 596 acres the Stanton building task force held three visioning sessions this summer that brought out about 150 diverse participants who agree this would be a great community center again and that building skills such as bike repair, energy efficiency, waste reduction are good to learn together. Moreover experiential environmental education has been shown to improve grades in, from K to 12 so it will be a special benefit to youth. The Stanton building which is outside the flood zone is also perfectly located to double as an emergency center. It's big enough to house a variety of programs that solve community issues both for today and tomorrow. Let's work together to make this a beacon and a model of foresight and readiness.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you very much.

KEVIN TOBAR PESANTEZ: Good afternoon.

My name is Kevin Tobar Pesantez. I'm a senior housing advocate working at University Settlement in the lower east side. And I'm here to testify about the impacts of inaccessible Parks Department Building at Stanton Street in the SDR Park. I work this... I walk around this park every single day as I go to work every day. And it's currently used as a storage space for all of the five boroughs in the city. And when I walk in the mornings there's trucks, there's cars pulling by. People are trying to dodge them simultaneously city bike users which is directly in front of the park are trying to get the city bikes out. It's essentially an unsafe and haphazard space I find. The building was once used as a community space and was a vibrant area where people would play games and congregate and it was thereafter closed and turned into a storage space as I mentioned. The Parks Department promised to return the building to community, to the community in 1998 but we still have yet to see any action to carry this out. Currently there is a million

dollars located, allocated towards installing bathrooms at this building. And this money has come from Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer and Council Member Margaret Chin. I and my organization are a part of the Stanton Street Building task force. And as Wendy mentioned we've carried out various visioning events in which the community members came and let their voices be heard. And they gave many very good ideas like Wendy was saying, community space, a recreation center, a bike repair. I think there was even talk of there being an indoor garden where children could learn about urban farming and of course we think that a nonprofit organization could also get involved to manage services within this area. So we ask the Parks Commission to consider bringing this building back to the community. It's something that our taskforce has been fighting for all throughout these, this year. So thank you for letting me testify.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: It does sound like a beautiful building. Thank you for speaking about it.

KAY WEBSTER: Hi, I'm Kay Webster. I'm the President of the Sara Roosevelt Park Community Coalition. I've lived in the neighborhood since 1978 in or around the park. And, and I just want to say what a, what a privilege it is to be listening to all this testimony and it's the good news about testifying late is that you really get to stay and hear things that you want to know about and really appreciate you spear heading this and you've really taken this role seriously and we thank you. I do want to mention that amongst the august sites that we've heard of our park was created because Tammany... a Tammany Hall deal went badly. So, we have a slightly different beginning. And I, I, I just you know everything that's been said there because of time I won't repeat. But there are two buildings in our park that... four that are used for... three of them are used by the City Parks Department for their usages, for the five boroughs or all of Manhattan. And we think our park has done our fair share of donating space for the cause and we're happy to do so. But we think the building should... the three of them should be returned and one is already a, a senior center that's been there since

the 80s when our coalition formed to get rid of pimps and drug dealers who were in the park. And we see a lot of activity coming back to our park and that's why our role has really been to create anchors in, in the park of community stewardship. And we would very much like to see this building brought back for neighborhood use. In particular, the Council Member Chin you know mentioned something about a possibility of a homeless center, information center. We are wide open to possibilities. We have always been a neighborhood that welcomes in our entire community and would love to see something happen with this. And I'll just... last I would say that it could serve as so many things but the continuing collapse of structural supports for low income people is just one of the many reasons we think that all publicly owned buildings must be enlisted to serve the public that it's past time to activate the creativity and intelligence of neighborhoods elected and city agencies to good and collaborative use in solving what looks like will be a very difficult next few years. So thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you Kay.

Thank you for being here. Always great to see you.

And thank you panel. Next up we have Barbara Zay

from the Historics District Council, Johnny

Crowchuck [phonetic] from the Historic House Trust,

and I think that's Herbert Sweat from the Veterans

Action Group. ...some folks have had to leave so

we're going to ask that... if he's still here, or he

or she, Alex Selman please join us and Joanna

Crisp.

BARBARA ZAY: Good afternoon...

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Please.

BARBARA ZAY: ...Council Member Levine. My

name is Barbara Zay. I'm representing the Historic

District's Council. HDC is the citywide advocate

for New York's historic neighborhoods and

buildings. We're pleased to testify today in

support of this committee's exploration of making

underutilized historic resources accessible to the

public. Urban exploration and discovery within the

five boroughs are on the rise as we've heard a lot

today. One need look no further than the success

and popularity of Open House New York weekend in

which large numbers of New Yorkers scramble to get

tickets to visit the city's infrequently accessible nooks and crannies. Places that provide links to the past anchor us in the present and New Yorkers are keenly aware of this. Today we wish to speak in particular in favor of allowing public access on Heart Island, a mysterious place to most New Yorkers. Its history which reaches back to the civil war era is largely unknown to most and its reputation as a place where people disappear does not help in efforts to educate. Despite these odds the Heart Island project is working to document burial records and tell the stories of those interred there in addition to advocating to provide access to the island. HDC plans to work with the Heart Island project to get the island listed on the state and national registers of historic places to further their effort to gain recognition and raise public awareness about the island's heritage. Some of the city's most popular and well used parks were once potter's fields including Washington Square Park mentioned earlier and Madison Square Park. Their literal and figurative roots lend a strong sense of history that keeps people coming back to learn more. There's also recent precedent

for transforming cemeteries into recreational hubs.

Founded in 1981 the Friends of Abandoned Cemeteries

of Staten Island or FACSI has restored and

maintained 11 formerly abandoned cemeteries

throughout the borough to date, some of which are

owned by the Parks Department. This vital work

includes landscaping and tree work, restoration and

placement of grave markers, and the production and

installation of signage to identify the cemeteries.

In addition to respecting the lives of those buried

at these sites FACSI's important work allows these

cemeteries to reclaim and maintain their rightful

place as unique beautiful and historically

significant parts of Staten Island's physical

fabric. The organization holds public programs in

the cemeteries as well allowing the public to

engage and explore and thereby transforming these

formerly derelict spaces into beloved and well used

spaces with a strong connection to local history.

With so much to know and explore HDC could see the

same type of transformation taking place on Heart

Island and would welcome any opportunity to be a

part of that effort. Finally, we wish to make a

very quick plug for the East 134th Street Ferry

Bridges or Gantries on, in Port Morris in the south Bronx whose site is currently under the jurisdiction of DCAS. The local community in Port Morris has been advocating for the transformation of the site into Park land both to enable public access and waterfront recreation. The towering ferry bridges were constructed in 1948 to accommodate ferry traffic to North Brother Island which was at the time home to emergency housing for World War II veterans and their families. Professor Mason earlier mentioned the corresponding gantry that's on North Brother Island. Should access to North Brother and Heart Islands be granted the East 134th Street Ferry Bridge site would be a fitting and historically evocative launching point. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Alright. Very, very helpful. We've been looking at that site indeed on... as a possible connection to a reopened island. Thank you for speaking on the topic. Sir?

HERBERT SWEAT: Good evening members of this city council and those who gather here. My name is Herbert Sweat. I am a Vietnam veteran of the Tech Offense. Today I come here to represent or

should I say resurrect those United States colored troops who first formed from the emancipation proclamation written and delivered January 31st, 1863. Well so did the United States colored troops become unionized with our union. This historical situation served all the way up until the day that I joined the military service to guard, protect, and honor my country. I give this preference to the United States colored troops who first musted in at a place called Camp Asta [sp?]. Where is Camp Asta? No one here really knows but these people that speak about Heart Island because that's what Heart Island was named by President Lincoln, Camp Asta. From that situation like I said I kept digging and trying very hard to understand exactly what is the problem with us honoring those who we have stood on their shoulders as a nation and now we failed them in their death. Heart Island is an atrociously run. With this understanding I give you my personal viewpoint because god bless Elain Joseph also. My baby lies over there. They brought me home from Vietnam to bury my baby, I thought. But when I got here we didn't know where the baby was. She died at birth and one of my twins lived. So, at this time I

have tried to get access to two grave sites; one of the soldiers that had fought for the uniting of this country, that's what the civil war actually acclaimed, the uniting and also the freedom for those of color to stand and fight for this country.

With this in totality I wish that this could be a national historical memorable site. You asked a question honorable Levine and I'm going to try to give it to you in a puzzle. The first is who and how many people has visited the Vietnam wall since you seen it erected? Second question; how many people have you seen visit the intrepid [sp?].

Third and last question; to this day I have not had the right to visit or memorialize my baby that they brought me home from Vietnam because my wife lost one of the chins and one was born, so they gave me the 30 day leave to come here. I need for Heart Island to be open not only for me to visit but as Judge Broderick said at 140 Square that we, the veterans, are considered to be family members. And if anyone has been a soldier they know that the first thing that we understand sir is that we are family. I'm going to close because we know it's late and long. I'm a old guy and I need rest. But

what I want you to try to do is to understand all of the people that spoke about all of these great monuments that represent basically 90 percent veteran soldiers who fought and made this country what it is. It said a government of the people, for the people, and by us people. End of my conversation Sir. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you Mr. Sweat for that incredibly powerful testimony and for coming here again to speak before this committee. You have a very very very powerful case and you know that we agree with you that, that you and your fellow veterans should have access to the island and so, so should all members of the public. Thank you for speaking out Sir. Thank you. Please.

ALEX SELMAN: Good afternoon. My name is Alex Selman and I am a Senior Program Manager at the Woman's Housing and Economic Development Corporation or WHEDCo. We're a nonprofit based in the South Bronx. Our community development work is focused on improving the quality of life for families and individuals in the south Bronx. And we believe that parks and open space are essential components of healthy vibrant communities. Today

I'd like to focus on city council district 16 which is Vanessa Gibson's district which overlaps the southern portion of the Jerome Avenue study area which is currently being considered for rezoning. Although the area has some large parks properties like Mulloley [sp?] and Macomb State Park the quantity, quality, and accessibility of Parks severely declines north of 167th Street and west of the Grand Concourse all the way north to the Cross Bronx Expressway. Of the very few parks properties in this area two are closed to the public behind fences and locked gates. Corporal Fischer Park which Diann described earlier, it's two unconnected, undeveloped, overgrown parcels on West 170th and West 169th Street. And Jerome Playground which is a former handball court on Jerome Avenue overlooking the Cross Bronx Expressway. Together these properties represent almost an acre of inaccessible public park land. While we applaud DCP's proposal through the Jerome Avenue rezoning to demap Corporal Fisher Place and open Corporal Fisher Park we believe that the Parks Department which purchased the park in the 1990s and has left it close off for years has a responsibility to

invest in this park independent of the rezoning. Additionally, DCP's draft scope of the environmental impact statement for the rezoning does not include plans for the West 169th Street lot of Corporal Fisher Park. And we hope that Parks recognizes that opening and investing in only one of the Park's two parcels will not be sufficient for this growing community. The neighborhood surrounding Corporal Fisher Park and Jerome Playground are very dense with a high percentage of seniors and families with young children. The city considers this area adequately served by open space. But while some parks may technically fall within a half mile radius of people's homes this measurement doesn't take into account physical barriers that limit accessibility for many of our community members like steep hills and dangerous major roadways. This measurement also does not take into account the size or quality of nearby open space. According to New Yorkers for Parks City Council District 16 has just 2.6 acres of parks and playgrounds for a thousand children compared to a citywide average of 13 acres. The district also has just 9.2 acres in play... of parks and playgrounds

for a thousand seniors compared to a citywide average of 23 acres. Opening Corporal Fisher Park and Jerome Playground will add nearly an acre of public space but this community still needs more parks and playgrounds especially since the proposed rezoning is expected to bring 12,000 additional residents to this neighborhood. In closing we courage NYC Parks to work closely with community residents to redesign and open Corporal Fisher Park and Jerome Playground and to invest in programming and improvements to other parks properties that at this point are a little more than concrete and benches in the area. And we also hope that future assessments of park accessibility will take into account physical barriers, size, and quality of available open space. Thank you very much.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you. I could not agree more. As we upzone neighborhoods we have to plan for open space. It's infrastructure no less than subway stops and libraries and I appreciate you advocating for that for Jerome Avenue. Thank you.

ALEX SELMAN: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Please.

JOANNA CRISP: Hello, my name's Joanna Crisp and I'm here on behalf of the Municipal Art Society of New York. The Municipal Art Society of New York or MAS supports opening and improving public access to city owned property. As residents and tax payers of New York City we depend on the effective management protection and enhancement of what is collectively ours. Parks, open space, monuments, streetscapes, infrastructure views and other intangible resources. Just this week MAS released a first of its kind interactive tool to map the more than 14,000 city owned and leased properties amounting to a land area the size of Brooklyn. This online tool uses two data sets provided by New York City, Matt Pluto [sp?] and City Owned and Leased Properties or COLP. And we encourage the members of this committee and the public at large to examine these holdings with our new tool and identify opportunities for improving, protecting, and utilizing city owned property. According to the use codes provided by the COLP dataset there are 90 city owned park properties characterized as undeveloped open space. Accounting for approximately 191 acres of land. 74 of these

sites are located within the boundaries of the community parks initiative, a program led by DPR aimed at redeveloping parks in underserved communities. This represents an opportunity to maximize each of these holdings for the communities that need them most. Meanwhile 32 properties classified as undeveloped open space are located along southern boulevard and Jerome Avenue in the Bronx. Both of these areas are undergoing neighborhood planning studies under the Department of City Planning places initiative. Another 31 properties labeled as undeveloped open space are in the Edgemere urban renewal area in the Rockaways. Similarly Edgemere is undergoing a planning initiative for redevelopment, an effort led by HPD. MAS urges the city to closely examine underutilized city owned park properties within the boundaries of these planning initiatives and explore possibilities for developing recreational facilities, cultural amenities, coastal protection, and other appropriate uses. MAS is also concerned about incompatible or competing uses within park space, specifically storage facilities both indoor and outdoor, extensive parking lots, and

maintenance facilities often hamper user experience and limit accessibility. Improved interagency coordination among DPR, the Department of Sanitation, Department of Environmental Protection, and other city agencies can help mitigate the undesirable repercussions of sharing these uses within designated park land. In closing we think that all New Yorkers deserve a chance to experience and explore our city. We encourage the city to examine park properties on a case by case basis considering environmental concerns, landmark designation, economic feasibility, and other factors in order to determine the highest and best use of shared open space. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

CHAIRPERSON LEVINE: Thank you for your excellent testimony. We ended on a wonderful note. This concludes our final panel and it concludes our hearing. Thank you to everyone who participated, who spoke, and who helped us call attention to these incredible, incredible spaces that the public should be able to visit. Thank you so much.

[gavel]

C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date December 31, 2016