

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

----- X

TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

of the

COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION

----- X

November 13, 2019
Start: 1:24 p.m.
Recess: 1:57 p.m.

HELD AT: 250 Broadway - 16th Floor

B E F O R E: Ydanis Rodriguez
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS: Ydanis Rodriguez
Fernando Cabrera
Andrew Cohen
Chaim M. Deutsch
Ruben Diaz, Sr.
Rafael L. Espinal, Jr.
Peter Koo
Steve Levin
Mark Levine
Carlos Menchaca
I. Daneek Miller
Antonio Reynoso
Donovan J. Richards
Deborah L. Rose

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

1
2 SOUND CHECK: Test, test, test. This is
3 the Committee on Transportation.

4 CHAIRPERSON RODRIGUEZ: Good afternoon,
5 everyone. Today is a historical day. You know, as
6 the former social studies teacher that I was for 13
7 years before being elected to office, we know how
8 important it is to teach the current generation about
9 things that happened in the past, and today we can
10 say that the City Council of New York is making
11 history, is writing another chapter giving history
12 and dignity to more than one million bodies being
13 buried in the largest public cemetery in the United
14 States of America. As someone of faith, what I know
15 is that my father being buried in the island of the
16 Dominican Republic, when I go to DR I try my best to
17 get to where my father is buried, because it is
18 important to spend time with the loved one.

19 Unfortunately, more than one million individuals
20 didn't have that opportunity. Up to 2014 [inaudible]
21 it took a lawsuit and Melendez, you know, I can say
22 she is the leader of the advocate, Elizabeth Crowley
23 led this legislation, that it took them not only to
24 bring this effort to the floor, but even to take this
25 in a lawsuit and that's how the City of New York made

1
2 a decision that the family who has a loved one buried
3 in that place, they could make reservations to go and
4 spend time with the loved one. And even today it
5 takes like two, three months for someone to be able
6 to contact the Department of Corrections. I have my
7 accent, but you hear clear, the Department of
8 Corrections, being in charge of taking the family to
9 be close to where the loved one have been buried.
10 And when you go there you have to leave your cell
11 phone, you have to leave any item that you have as
12 you're visiting a detention center. And if you are a
13 member of the public you only have access to be taken
14 in a boat across the island and to be like in a
15 little temple 200 feet after you walk to the largest
16 public cemetery. So those members of the public,
17 they're not allowed to walk free in those days that
18 they allow that the city said that we have opened the
19 public cemetery. So for me, you know, as someone, a
20 community activist, a social justice fighter, I never
21 thought that we had this opportunity to be part of
22 something so big that it's beyond myself or this
23 generation. That's hundreds of years of history in
24 that place, in the place that not many people know
25 about it. You know, in the place that used to have

1
2 missiles in that area. In the place where the Civil
3 War white people refused to be buried together with
4 black during the Civil War and they were buried in
5 that location. That's the cemetery where the HIV,
6 people thought that, you know, all those [inaudible]
7 that we had as a society against the men and women
8 that were dealing with a tough condition and they was
9 buried in that location. Immigrants, poors, they're
10 the one who have been buried in that location. So
11 what we are doing today is, I can say is bigger than
12 what we thought. And I'm going to say thank you to
13 Council Member Levin because he's also been a
14 champion with this, Council Member Johnson, you know,
15 my cochair of the Black and Latino Nation Caucus,
16 Daneek Miller, and all of us who are members of that
17 caucus, we have made this a priority legislation.
18 And, again, like this is a day, this is a day where
19 we're going to be voting on bills, two bills, the one
20 that I had the privilege to introduce that is calling
21 DOT to put together a transportation plan. If you go
22 to Governors Island you only have to look how often
23 those, the boat leave to Governors Island, but
24 there's a number of hours that people are able to go
25 there. That doesn't happen [inaudible]. So we would

1
2 like again to bring everyone to the attention that
3 the mass burial began in the 1870s, with its original
4 intention to be that of a burial ground for mostly
5 black, Latino, immigrants, and poor, who could not
6 afford the expensive cost of being buried in another
7 [inaudible]. And that's the case today. HRA provide
8 \$1200 of assistance to a working-class New Yorker
9 that they don't have the money to take the loved one
10 to a funeral. Which funeral has a cost of \$1200,
11 when most of them are \$3000, \$4000. So even though
12 we provide those \$1200 assistance those family, most
13 of them, they had to choose to see their loved one
14 being buried in the public cemetery and now through
15 the process that the rest of New Yorkers are able to
16 go by when they lost their loved one. This is about
17 giving respect and dignity to the people who are
18 buried on the island and the family members who must
19 go through a lengthy and at times complicated process
20 to be able to visit the loved ones who are buried
21 there. Over 60% of the people buried at Hart Island
22 are there because a family member requested. I think
23 the majority of the time this is because they cannot
24 afford to be buried at another cemetery. This piece
25 of legislation was first introduced by former Council

1
2 Member Elizabeth Crowley. I would like to
3 acknowledge her work in this matter. I would also
4 like to acknowledge the support of my colleague,
5 Speaker Johnson, Mark Levine, Deborah Rose, Donovan
6 Richards, among many others. We would not have been
7 able to arrive to this point without the support from
8 all of these stakeholders. Today the committee will
9 be voting on proposed Intro number 909-B, which I am
10 the proud sponsor together with my colleague. This
11 bill will require the Department of Parks and
12 Recreation or another agency or office designated by
13 the mayor to consult with the Department of
14 Transportation to develop a plan to provide or ensure
15 the availability of public travel, including ferry
16 services, to and from Hart Island. They don't have
17 to leave only from City Island. They used to leave
18 from close to the Bellevue Hospital. That was
19 another location where the ferry used to leave in the
20 past. So they just had to reinstate that ferry.
21 They can identify all the location in Queens, in
22 Manhattan. So this is not just adding traffic to
23 City Island. This is about addressing how we can
24 give the dignity and respect to one million, one
25 million individuals buried in that location. We must

1 provide the proper mode of transportation for the
2 family members and loved ones to be able to visit
3 their deceased. Along with this legislation, at 2:00
4 p.m. today the Committee on Parks and Recreation,
5 chaired by Council Member Koo, will be voting on
6 Intro 906, which I am the proud sponsor, too. That
7 bill has been strongly supported by Speaker Johnson
8 and many advocates. Intro 906 will finally change
9 the control of the largest public cemetery in the
10 nation from the Department of Corrections to the
11 Department of Parks. Hart Island, which has over one
12 million bodies, must not be guarded by correctional
13 officers. That's a place that individuals should get
14 is only love by the loved one. There should not be
15 any restriction for anyone, visitors, New Yorkers,
16 family wanting to spend time in that location. We
17 need to make Hart Island a place of peace, where
18 people can go and pay their respect to their loved
19 ones. The time has come today to open the cemetery
20 for the loved ones and the family members. We must
21 turn Hart Island into a proper final place of rest.
22 I would like to once again thank the leadership of
23 Speaker Johnson, who cared deeply, and we did a tour
24 together to that location. And he committed to work
25

1
2 together with us to address the future of Hart Island
3 and has made this an issue of priority. I recommend
4 a yes vote on proposed Intro number 909-B and before
5 I ask the committee clerk to please call the roll I
6 also would like to give the opportunity to my
7 colleague, Council Member Gjonaj, also to say a few
8 words since he also represents that area. [speaking
9 in Spanish] With that, I would like to give the
10 opportunity to my colleague, Council Member Gjonaj,
11 to say a few words.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: Thank you so
13 much, Chair. I'm Council Member Mark Gjonaj and I
14 represent Hart Island. And I'm grateful to you,
15 Chairman, for allowing me to speak before you call
16 for a full vote. Potter's Field, which is known as
17 Hart's Island, means a great much to the families
18 that have the estimated one million people buried
19 there. We should be judged as a society on how we
20 treat those that are buried and the deceased. And it
21 must always be done in dignity and with the respect
22 that everyone deserves. One of the considerations
23 that was not afforded was to my constituents, those
24 that live on City Island. Like most New Yorkers,
25 they experience daily struggles and are plagued with

1 high traffic congestion and limited parking.

2 Hundreds of them have strongly expressed that they do
3 not support the addition of ferry service to Hart
4 Island from City Island. The infrastructure does not
5 exist to support additional ferry service. Simply
6 put, the ferry service would create a public safety
7 hazard to City Island. Intro 909 does not take my
8 constituents or their quality of life into account.

9 A study has been conducted to determine the effects
10 of this ferry service. As such, there is too much
11 uncertainty regarding future transportation. In
12 addition to all of the unintended consequences that
13 may come with these changes, I firmly stand behind
14 the majority of my constituency. Therefore, I am
15 happy to put it on record that I do not agree with
16 this bill in its form, because it puts and allows for
17 the mayor without a task force to make the final
18 determination of a transportation plan. There is no
19 committee that is going to be set up that takes into
20 consideration those that will be impacted before that
21 plan is implemented. It's solely in the hands of the
22 mayor to consult with DOT, Parks, or any other agency
23 to develop the transportation plan for public travel
24 without the input of those that would be impacted.
25

1
2 Thank you, Chairman, and I thank my colleagues for
3 allowing me to speak before they cast their vote, and
4 I ask them to take what I just said into
5 consideration. If it was their district that was
6 going to be impacted, I would imagine you, too, would
7 be fighting for a task force, for a committee, where
8 those stakeholders would be included in the
9 negotiations and final determination of a
10 transportation plan. Thank you for allowing me to
11 speak.

12 CHAIRPERSON RODRIGUEZ: Thank you, Chair.
13 And, as you heard, the bill is calling for the city
14 to put together a group that will be making
15 recommendation on how to make transportation from
16 different locations to Hart Island. So with that
17 also we address that we are not just adding traffic
18 to City Island as part of this plan. This is about
19 also calling for the city to address other location.
20 We understand, you know, the concern of my colleague
21 there and we also know that as we will be, again,
22 working in this body together with our colleague we
23 need to be sure that when we get close to that moment
24 when we expect for them to put together the plan that
25 mode of transportation that includes, should include

1
2 ferry, but should not be only just ferry, also we
3 feel that it should come from different location to
4 Hart Island. And with that I recommend a yes vote,
5 and I would like to ask the committee clerk to please
6 call the roll call, but before that I would like to
7 acknowledge that we have been joined by Council
8 Member Cabrera, Richards, Koo, Menchaca, Diaz,
9 Deutsch, Gjonaj, Levine, Miller, and Reynoso.

10 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: William Martin,
11 committee clerk, roll call vote, Committee on
12 Transportation, Introduction 909-B. Chair Rodriguez.

13 CHAIRPERSON RODRIGUEZ: Aye.

14 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Levine.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: Mr. Chair,
16 permission to briefly explain my vote.

17 CHAIRPERSON RODRIGUEZ: Of course.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: OK, thank you.

19 You know, it's really a mark of shame that for
20 generations in this city New Yorkers who in life have
21 faced poverty and disease and homelessness, people
22 who have been marginalized in life have again been
23 marginalized in death. Buried by our city in mass
24 graves, unmarked mass graves on an island that is a
25 secure facility, far and inaccessible from the people

1 whose loved ones are buried there. We are embarking
2 today on what will be the end of that shameful era,
3 and it is thanks to the efforts of one woman in
4 particular, Melinda Hunt, who began as a voice in the
5 wilderness to speak out on behalf of the one million
6 New Yorkers who are buried there and the countless
7 family members who have loved ones on Hart. And we
8 really owe her a debt of gratitude. She's doubling
9 today as a camera person, but she is really an
10 extraordinary activist. This is the first of three,
11 actually the second of three hearings that are
12 putting together a really powerful package to
13 transform Hart Island. Yesterday we passed bills out
14 of the health committee that would ensure people have
15 information on the burial options when a loved one
16 dies and ensures that there is public input on the
17 new plan for burial there and later following this
18 very important hearing. We'll be considering a bill,
19 ah, really a monumental bill that would transfer
20 jurisdiction of Hart Island from the Department of
21 Corrections to the Parks Department, where it
22 belongs, opening up the possibility that Hart will
23 become a dignified, environmentally conscious, well-
24 maintained, open and welcoming, publicly accessible
25

1 cemetery, what it should be. This is only the
2 beginning of that process. There is going to be
3 years, years of advocacy ahead on behalf of all of us
4 in the council and advocates like Melinda and others,
5 and which really careful consideration will also have
6 to be offered to the people who live nearby on City
7 Island, something I'm certainly committed to ensure
8 happens. I know the chair feels the same way. Today
9 is a start. But this is a really important moment in
10 history for New York City that is going to begin a
11 new era of respect and dignity for New York City for
12 the poorest amongst us, the marginalized, who in
13 death deserve at least the dignity of burial in the
14 kind of cemetery where any of us would want our loved
15 ones to spend eternity. So I'm grateful to this
16 committee, to you, Chair Rodriguez, to Speaker
17 Johnson, and to all my colleagues for making this new
18 era possible. Thank you, and I'll be voting aye.

19
20 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Cabrera.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER CABRERA: Permission to
22 explain my vote? I'll make it very brief. But, you
23 know, one of the deepest, most profound human
24 experiences that I think anybody could go through is
25 grieving and mourning. And I want to commend Melinda

1
2 and all the advocates and my colleagues in making
3 this bill possible. Because we have to remove every
4 hardship in a human experience that is already hard
5 enough, which is mourning and grieving. And with
6 that, Mr. Chairman, I vote aye. I'm proud to vote
7 aye. Thank you so much.

8 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Deutsch.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER DEUTSCH: Permission to
10 explain my vote?

11 CHAIRPERSON RODRIGUEZ: Permission
12 granted.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER DEUTSCH: Thank you. So I
14 just have some concerns with jurisdiction, switching
15 jurisdictions from the Department of Corrections to
16 the Parks Department. And I understand the Parks
17 Department will have protocols on the visitors,
18 oversight on Hart Island, as well as keeping records
19 of the one million plus people that are buried on
20 Hart Island. I just want to mention that for the
21 record that in the future if anything is done on Hart
22 Island by Parks Department that would be now we don't
23 know like what the future of Hart's Island is,
24 according, like the chair has mentioned that we need
25 to respect those that are buried there and I just

1
2 hope in the future that the graves will not be
3 disturbed in any way, especially according to Jewish
4 and Muslim tradition, you know, I hope that if
5 anything should be done in the future they should
6 reach out to organizations such as the Hebrew Free
7 Burial, to who, they accommodate the deceased and
8 especially help those who are less fortunate and
9 relocate in the proper way according to tradition.
10 So I hope that nothing, that if anything is being
11 considered in the future by Parks Department the
12 public should be informed about it and the council
13 should have, should be able to weigh in, and with
14 that I will vote aye.

15 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Koo.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER KOO: I vote aye.

17 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Miller.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER MILLER: I vote aye.

19 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Menchaca.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER MENCHACA: Thank you to
21 all your advocacy, to all the advocates, and I vote
22 aye.

23 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Reynoso.

24 COUNCIL MEMBER REYNOSO: Aye.

25 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Richards.

1
2 COUNCIL MEMBER RICHARDS: Just quickly, I
3 just want to congratulate the chair and all the
4 individuals, Melinda, who worked on this. You know,
5 to think about these individuals who have been
6 marginalized while they were alive, to be
7 marginalized even in death is shameful and it's going
8 to forever be a stain on this city that majority of
9 black and brown people who we know are buried at Hart
10 Island were not treated in a dignified fashion, nor
11 with the respect and dignity that they deserve, and
12 their families. You know, I was looking at the
13 report and to see the, you know, even their graves,
14 you know, they're put in pine boxes and marked by
15 black permanent marker, as if their lives didn't
16 matter is unconscionable. And I'm happy that we're
17 doing something today to change that. So I, I'm
18 going to vote aye. But it's hard not get emotional
19 looking at this report and to just think about how
20 many of their family members tried to get that island
21 who could not and how they felt degraded and as if
22 their lives didn't matter as well. So I'm happy to
23 take this vote today. With that I say aye.

24 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Diaz.
25

1
2 COUNCIL MEMBER DIAZ: Permission to
3 explain my vote, Mr. Chairman? Thank you. You know,
4 Potter's Field brings me memories. In 1965 my
5 nephew, I used to live in 590 Salter Avenue in
6 Brooklyn, between Georgia and Alabama, in Brooklyn,
7 Salter Avenue. So something happened, he died, and
8 then he was put in the, the family, in the basement,
9 that building. So, we the family, we didn't know.
10 So we went all over looking for him and for one year
11 my nephew was buried in Potter's Field, for one year.
12 And one of the friends after a year they came and
13 they told the family what happened and then we found
14 out that he was buried in Potter's Field. So we make
15 all the arrangements to take him out of Potter's
16 Field and took him to Puerto Rico. So we took him,
17 again, from Potter's Field, and my family buried him
18 in Puerto Rico. And so that brings memory to me.
19 But on the other hand, when we're talking about
20 making it honorable for the, for the people buried
21 there, transportation will be good for the family.
22 We are trying to have the family to go and visit him
23 and have better transportation. But we were doing it
24 for those buried there until, until we make for them
25 to, who are buried there, making easy. Nobody knows

1
2 who's there. They got numbers. They bury, in one
3 grave they have five, four or five people, nobody
4 knows, they go by numbers. So we're talking about
5 we, we have to make the, make for them honorably, I
6 don't know how we're gonna be honorably. They're
7 like sardines in, in, with no names. So I suggest
8 that we're making it easier for the family to go
9 there, to visit what? They're gonna go there and
10 there's no grave that you can go and say, OK, here is
11 my nephew. Jesus Vasquera, here it is. It's
12 numbers. So we want to make it honorable for them,
13 then we have to make sure that, be sure that they're
14 honorably honored and that the family go there, but
15 the family gonna go into graves where there's so many
16 people buried. It's not that regular. I don't know
17 if you know that, right? You know that, right? So I
18 know what I'm talking about, and I dealt with
19 Potter's Field. So make it honorable to whom? Make
20 it easy for the family to go there, to visit what?
21 That's what I'm talking about. I'm voting yes, Mr.
22 Chairman. I'm voting yes. But I'm telling you guys,
23 don't use things to put on the things because you
24 don't make it honorable for those that live there
25 until they are decently, decently identified like any

1 other cemetery. But the way they've got it in
2 Potter's Field, you've got to go there and they got
3 to find [inaudible] numbers, then you go find the
4 numbers, and then you go there, in that grave how
5 many? How many people you got in that grave? So.
6 I'm voting yes. But for you, [inaudible] but we've
7 got a lot of work to do. Thank you.

9 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: I have a vote of
10 10 in the affirmative, zero in the negative, and no
11 abstentions. The item has been adopted by the
12 committee.

13 CHAIRPERSON RODRIGUEZ: I would just like
14 to say that the names are there, Council Member Diaz.
15 The names are there. So, and their families today,
16 they can go and find their names, thanks to, thanks
17 today Hart Island Foundation and Melinda here, we
18 have one of the mother that went through those,
19 through those difficult situation, who lost his loved
20 one during the snowstorm and when her daughter was
21 born she was separated and born, and based on my
22 recollection, the story that we share, with some hard
23 condition, she found out weeks after that she had
24 died but she didn't know where she was. And went
25 through Melinda and she connected, and Melinda helped

1
2 for her to find out where her daughter was buried. A
3 few months ago I got a call from another person, who
4 I think now is in Chicago, another state, and his
5 friend called me to say, you know, I have a friend of
6 mine that his mother was buried, but he has not
7 closed that situation, some challenge that they have
8 in their relationship, and I put that family in
9 contact with Melinda, too, and they were able to find
10 out that yes, the mother of that gentleman, who is in
11 another state far from here, is buried in that
12 location. So we are still working on the arrangement
13 on when he is ready to come and spend time with the
14 loved one. So I can tell you that I've been walking
15 through different community, the south Bronx,
16 Washington Heights, and I've been stopping in Queens
17 and Brooklyn. People know that we are working in
18 this effort, and people know that the City of New
19 York has failed in the past, and people know that
20 this is about human rights and people know that most
21 public cemeteries are on the parks in the United
22 States of America. So this is the only one that we
23 have in the nation that is on the correctional
24 facility. So today, again, this is a great day for
25 all of us. But also I want to highlight it that one

1
2 of my idea is that those building, empty building,
3 that we had to tear them down, we should rebuild
4 those building and we should built the museum of the
5 dead in New York City, so that we can learn through
6 the history of those individual, every single
7 individual buried in that location, every single
8 generation of people, they represent a chapter of
9 social study, that way students that should be
10 learning from it. So again today right now it's
11 about the transportation plan, now this hearing will
12 be followed up by the Parks committee that will be
13 the one, again, leading the vote on transferring Hart
14 Island from Correctional to Parks, but this is
15 probably one of those bills among probably more than
16 50 that I have passed here, that I can say is one of
17 the most important for a large number of people, as
18 one million individual being buried here. Many of
19 them, they're not just only people who are New
20 Yorkers. Just think about a homeless person that has
21 a family, one in California, that is, was part of the
22 working class, but also middle class and upper class,
23 and they lost connection with the family, and they
24 decided that they didn't want to be in touch with
25 them, and those people have died in our city, and

2 those people have been buried in that location. So,
3 again, with that I would like to close this hearing
4 and say thank you to everyone. [gavel]

5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25

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 November 24, 2019