

Joint Testimony from NYC Human Resources Administration (HRA)/Department of Social Services (DSS), Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) and NYC Parks

Committee on Parks and Recreation jointly with the Committee on General Welfare and the Committee on Health

Council Chambers- City Hall

October 16, 2025

NYC Human Resources Administration (HRA)/Department of Social Services (DSS)

Good morning. My name is Matthew Brune and I serve as the Chief Operating Officer at the Department of Social Services ("HRA/DSS"). I would like to thank Deputy Speaker Ayala, Chair Schulman, Chair Krishnan, and the members of the committees on General Welfare, Health, and Parks and Recreation for holding today's hearing on the Hart Island Capital Projects Proposal. We appreciate the Council's continued focus on ensuring Hart Island serves as a respectful, dignified, and uplifting final resting place for more than one million New Yorkers.

At DSS, as with our sister agencies, we appreciate the tremendous responsibility that Hart Island represents. As both the Council and past mayoral administrations have recognized, Hart Island is unique. For more than 155 years, Hart Island has served as a resting place for New Yorkers including: veterans of every war since the Civil War, as well as individuals affected by every major public health crisis from the 1918 influenza pandemic, to the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980's, to the COVID-19 pandemic. As stewards of Hart Island, we remain committed to honoring and respecting both the decedents and their loved ones.

DSS has a specialized role to play in this process. We understand the sensitivity that must accompany service to loved ones in a time of mourning, and the circumstances applicants face as they determine if burial at Hart Island suits their needs.

Management of Hart Island transitioned from the NYC Department of Correction to NYC Parks and the Department of Social Services on July 1st, 2021. As part of that transition, HRA/DSS assumed caretaker responsibilities for the island, managing basic maintenance and oversees the interment and disinterment contract. We have worked in partnership with our

colleagues at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner and NYC Parks to ensure our administrative systems – whether around burial and interment, or around visitation and locating information about loved ones, remain current and continue to serve the public's needs.

Turning now to Introduction 1408 sponsored by Deputy Speaker Ayala. The bill as written would require HRA/DSS, in collaboration with NYC Parks and any other relevant agency, to conduct a study to analyze Hart Island's capacity for future public burials under existing burial procedures, assess whether the procedures at Hart Island should be changed, and develop recommendations if any changes are determined appropriate. A report would be submitted to the Mayor, Speaker of the Council, and posted online with study findings and recommendations within 180 days of the local law's effective date.

While HRA/DSS welcomes the opportunity to conduct this study with Parks, we are concerned that 180 days would not provide enough time to complete a thorough analysis and recommendations. We recommend extending the timeline to 18 months to allow adequate time for contracting an expert consultant, conducting the study, and publishing the report.

We appreciate the opportunity to have offered this testimony on this important topic. I would now turn it over to my colleague from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner's Office for his testimony.

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

Good morning, Chairs Krishnan, Schulman, and Deputy Speaker Ayala and Committee members. My name is Vincent Ruggiero, Executive Director of Mortuary and Response Operations at the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner, known to many New Yorkers as OCME.

The City Charter tasks OCME with providing City Mortuary Services to the entirety of New York City. One aspect of the City Mortuary Services provided by OCME to the families and loved ones of decedents in our custody is to aid them in facilitating final disposition of their loved ones for public burial at Hart Island if this option is elected. To this end, OCME's

Outreach team regularly works to provide information and guidance to those seeking Hart Island as their loved ones' final resting place and works with our partners at DSS to ensure that their final wishes are honored. Eligible next of kin may request a public burial at any time, for either temporary or final disposition; there is no minimum requirement for this request, and families may elect to disinter from Hart Island for private disposition at a later date.

Our Outreach team also facilitates final disposition at Hart Island for decedents who have been brought into OCME's care and remain unclaimed. For cases where next-of-kin is unknown, OCME utilizes a due diligence process (Outreach Due Diligence) to locate and notify loved ones of the death to facilitate determination of final disposition. This process involves collaboration with several external entities, including the City's Public Administrators, NYPD Missing Persons Unit and foreign consular offices. Cases where next of kin is unknown are also posted to the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System database (NamUs), which is searchable by the general public. Once all due diligence requirements have been met, any decedents for which next of kin remains unknown, and with no other eligible claimant, will be referred for public burial in City Cemetery on Hart Island.

Once a case has been referred for public burial, OCME staff prepare the decedents in caskets with care and place them on a specially equipped vehicle for transportation to Hart Island. Upon arrival at the City Island departure point, OCME staff connects with HRA staff and board the DOT vehicle ferry to Hart Island. Following the brief ferry ride, our team proceeds to the gravesite and assists HRA-designated staff with removing decedents from our vehicle for immediate burial. A manifest containing information on all the buried decedents is signed by both HRA and OCME, and burial is completed by HRA staff. OCME will request assistance from HRA to disinter decedents from Hart Island for further identification or investigative measures.

We appreciate this opportunity to provide testimony that offers a window into an important but often invisible topic. I would like now to offer the floor to my colleague at the Parks Department for her testimony.

NYC Parks

Good morning, Chair Krishnan, Chair Ayala, Chair Schulman, members of the Parks, General Welfare and Health Committees and other Council Members. My name is Sarah Neilson, and I serve as Chief of Policy and Long-Range Planning within the Environment and Planning division at NYC Parks. Joining me are Matt Drury, Chief of Citywide Legislative Affairs and Charles Handras, the Park Supervisor for Hart Island. We are also very pleased to have been joined by our colleagues at HRA/DSS and OCME.

Thank you for having us here today to talk about Hart Island, which holds a significant place in the city's history and has tremendous meaning for countless people in New York City, across the country, and around the world.

As you've just heard from our sister agency colleagues, Hart Island serves as the City's public cemetery and is the final resting place of over one million individuals. It is one of the largest public cemeteries in the country and has served New York City since 1869. While Hart Island is currently only used for city burials, the island has had many uses since the 19th Century, including a quarantine station, a psychiatric hospital, a tuberculosis ward, a reform school, a homeless shelter, a rehabilitation facility, a military base, and a jail.

Pursuant to Local Law 210 of 2019, management of Hart Island was transferred from the NYC Department of Correction to the NYC Parks and the NYC Human Resources Association (HRA) in 2021. The City is committed to ensuring public access to the island and providing several services to help individuals locate and visit loved ones buried on the island. In an effort to make the island safe for guests and improve the visitor experience, major upgrades have been made since the transfer of jurisdiction, including the demolition of aging buildings, planting of new trees in wooded areas, and additional beautification efforts. HRA/DSS, which manages burials and landscaping on the island, has created more navigable

conditions by clearing overgrowth that blocked grave plots for decades, and constructing a seating area near the island's ferry dock.

We have made improvements to the gravesite visitation process for families and loved ones of those buried on the island, such as increasing the capacity for each visit, and shifting the visitation times to make it more convenient for families and loved ones of those buried on the island, many of whom travel long distances to make the visit. We typically offer two visitation days per month, one on a Sunday and one on a Saturday, with 10AM & 1PM visits each of those days. These visits are generally intended for individuals with close ties to someone buried on the island, including family members, chosen family members, close friends, and partners. Since NYC Parks began hosting the gravesite visitations in October 2021, over 2,200 individuals have been able to visit their loved ones on the island.

NYC Parks is proud of its dedicated ongoing effort to significantly increase access to the island for the general public as well, while honoring the island's unique and solemn role as the final resting place for the deceased. In November 2023, we also introduced free Urban Park Ranger interpretive tours for the general public, which have been very well received. These tours mark the first time in the island's history that public tours had been offered. Since launching the program, the Urban Park Rangers have hosted over 1,100 participants on twice-monthly public tours, and nearly 220 students on individual school group tours.

Our public tours are designed to inform visitors about the history of the island, reduce historical stigmas surrounding its past, respectfully acknowledge those who are buried there, and educate the public about the island's role as critical city infrastructure. Our initial Hart Island tours focused on the fascinating history of the northern part of the island, examining how this island not only became the City's public burial ground, but also housed institutions such as reformatory schools, rehabilitation programs, and a missile base. We then diversified our programming in 2024 to offer tours of both the northern and southern portions of the island, providing visitors with opportunities to see more of the island and learn more about those who were laid to rest there, to highlight communities connected to Hart Island and share their voices. The Rangers are now continuing to explore the history through the development of thematic programming including Pride Month, Prisoner Justice Day and an

upcoming Veterans Day program. Our Urban Park Rangers have also hosted school groups at Hart Island through our Natural Classroom program, which gives students a first-hand experience to study sites of historic significance under NYC Parks' jurisdiction.

In addition to these efforts to expand public access to the island, NYC Parks, in coordination with other sister agency stakeholders, has recently completed the Hart Island Concept Plan, an improvement study for the island, presenting a longer-term vision for physical improvements to New York City's public cemetery. This concept plan seeks to preserve and enhance Hart Island as the contemplative, quiet, and spiritual place that the public discovers when they visit the island, and to improve the physical conditions and critical infrastructure on Hart Island to better serve those who visit and those who manage its daily operations. Moreover, this concept plan seeks to honor the history and people who are laid to rest on this beautiful, peaceful island in Long Island Sound, as well as those who lived or worked on the island over its fascinating history.

Our work to implement the concept plan began following the transfer of the property to the jurisdiction of NYC Parks. As part of the concept plan process, we received detailed and comprehensive public input from community members through two well-attended virtual forums and a digital survey. Participants expressed a strong desire for NYC Parks to prioritize the experience of family members visiting loved ones, including providing restrooms, shade, and seating. In addition, NYC Parks heard a clear preference to preserve the passive and contemplative character of the island, and that visits should remain a peaceful experience for the family members of those buried on the island.

The goal of the concept plan is to improve conditions on the island, while making it easier for the public to visit the island and pay their respects to those buried here. As of now, the visitor experience to the island remains fairly austere – there are no restrooms, and there is limited seating, as well as protection from extreme heat, rain, or other conditions. This concept plan outlines a vision and framework of potential capital projects in response to operational needs and public input while taking into consideration the ongoing logistical necessities of burial operations being proudly overseen by our agency partners at HRA/DSS. Enhancements to the island are also needed to ensure its ecological communities and

shorelines can be made resilient to erosion from coastal storms due to sea level rise and global warming. This concept plan is meant to help the City make strategic investments and identify necessary funding to improve the island.

The concept plan focuses on capital projects that are within the purview of NYC Parks to develop and implement; such as a modest Welcome Center building; a concept for the adaptive reuse of the island's historic chapel as a sacred space for remembrance; site-wide circulation enhancements to make the island accessible; restoration and stabilization approaches for natural areas and historic resources, and an upgraded maintenance and operations compound. The plan also includes landscape management recommendations that would extend the burial capacity of the island. We believe these proposed projects will help augment the additional active capital work that is already underway, including the DOT project to upgrade the ferry landing, and the DDC project to stabilize the historic Chapel.

In closing, our vision for Hart Island's future seeks to balance moderately and incrementally increased public access while honoring its emotional significance for the families and loved ones of those interred there. The following vision statement for Hart Island was formed in response to these priorities: *A contemplative, quiet, and spiritual place. Visitors come to be close to family members and loved ones, to engage with New York City's history, and to admire the natural beauty of the island. As New York City's public cemetery, Hart Island provides the essential service of burials for those most in need.*

Thank you for allowing us to testify before you today and for your continued advocacy and support for our city parks. We and our colleagues at HRA/DSS and OCME will now be happy to answer any questions that you may have.



Hart Island NYC Parks Operations & Concept Plan Briefing

Located on the Northeast Shore of Hart Island, in the
Borough of the Bronx

NYC Council Committee on Parks & Recreation,
General Welfare, and Health: Oversight Hearing
October 16th, 2025

Parks

What is Hart Island?

Hart Island serves as New York City's public cemetery, and it is estimated that over one million people are laid to rest there.

Located in the Bronx within the Long Island Sound, it is one of the largest public cemeteries in the United States and has been in operation since 1869.



SITE OVERVIEW

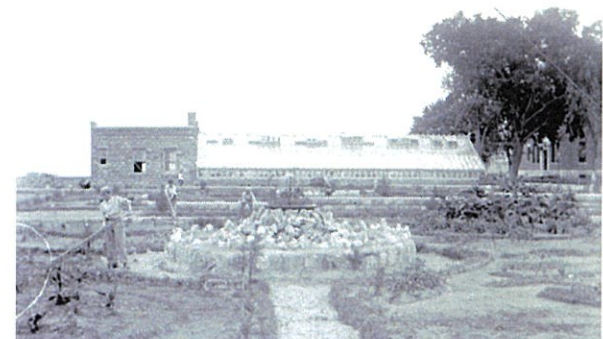
ISLAND HISTORY



1860s: Union Soldiers train on the island for the Civil War.
Source: Kenneth Spencer Research Library



1890s: The island in the early years of burial operations.
Source: Jacob Riis, Museum of the City of New York



1910s: The island is home to a boys reformatory.
Source: Shelby White & Leon Levy Digital Library



1970: Phoenix House, a rehabilitation center, hosts its annual summer happenings fundraiser on the island.
Source: Yukihsa Isobe Works



Early-1980s: Some New Yorkers who died of AIDS related illness are buried on the south end of the island in individual graves.



2021: Jurisdiction of the island transferred to NYC Parks; Urban Park Rangers offer regular tours of island highlighting Hart Island history.



SITE OVERVIEW

**Gravesite
Visits are held
twice per
month for
family and
loved ones of
those buried
on the Island.**





Urban Park Ranger Tours are free to the public and are held on select Tuesday Mornings.



NYC Parks



The Hart Island Concept Plan

A 20+ year vision for
physical improvements
to New York City's public
cemetery.

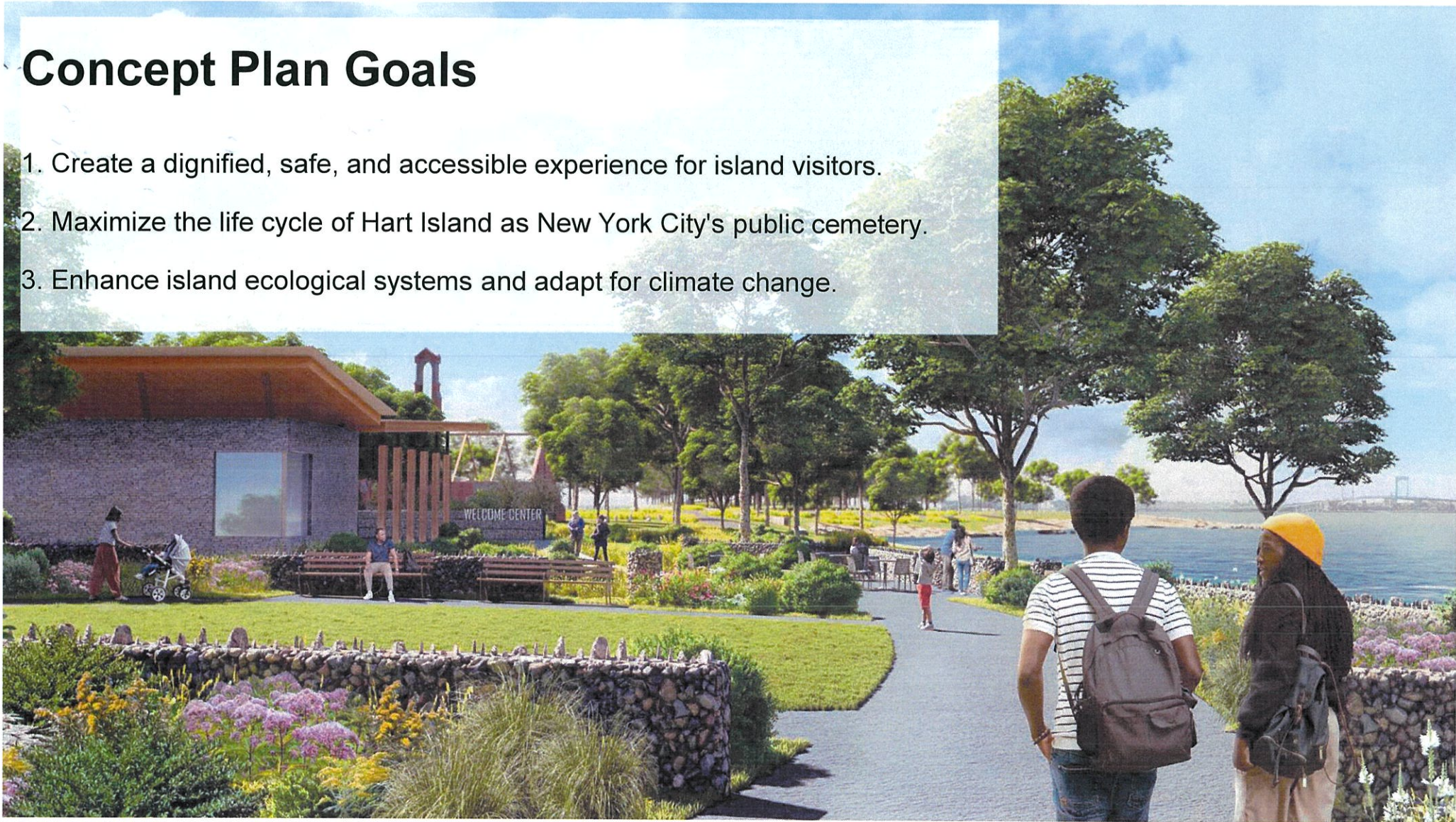


Participants expressed a strong desire for Parks to prioritize the experience of family members visiting loved ones, including providing restrooms, shade, and seating.



Concept Plan Goals

1. Create a dignified, safe, and accessible experience for island visitors.
2. Maximize the life cycle of Hart Island as New York City's public cemetery.
3. Enhance island ecological systems and adapt for climate change.



Concept Plan: Planning Framework



VISITOR EXPERIENCE



RESILIENCE

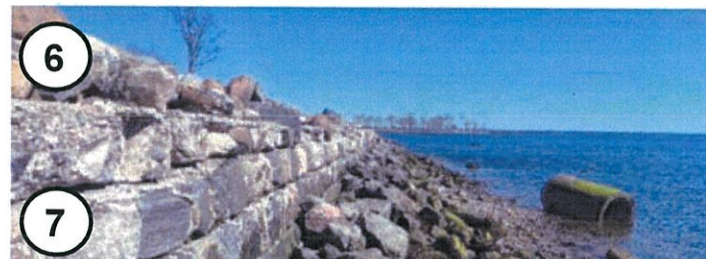
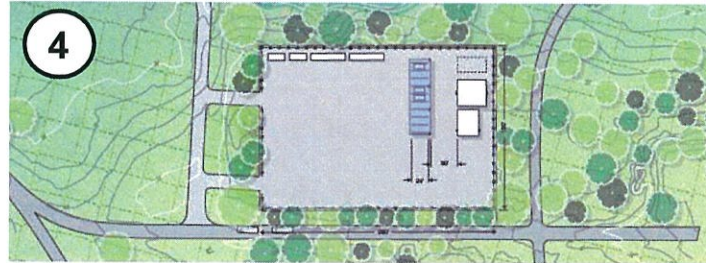


ECOLOGY



OPERATIONS

Seven Proposed Capital Projects

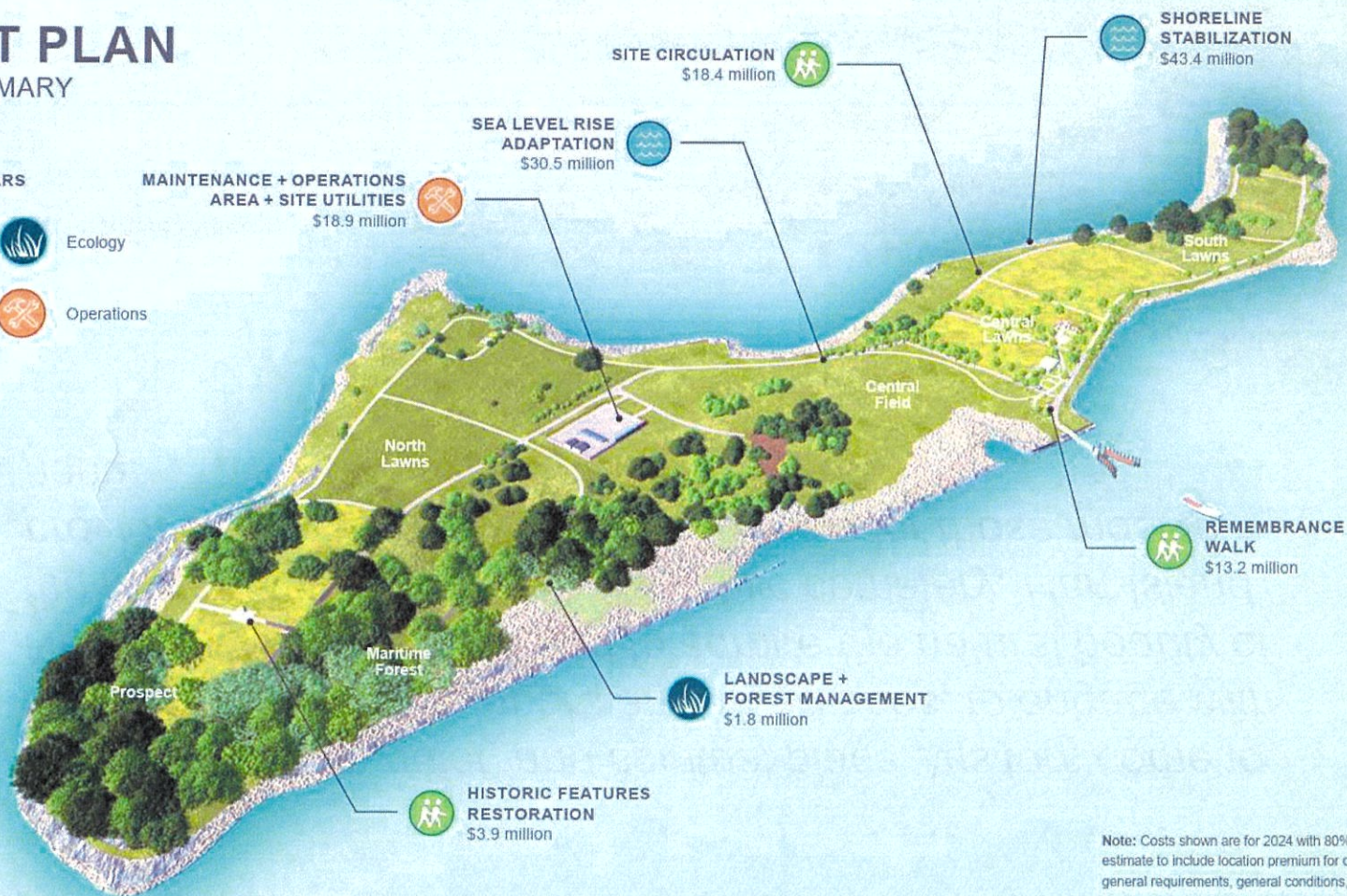


1. Remembrance Walk
2. Welcome Center
3. Historic Features Restoration
4. Maintenance & Operations Facility
5. Landscape Management
6. Shoreline Stabilization
7. Sea Level Rise Adaptation

CONCEPT PLAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

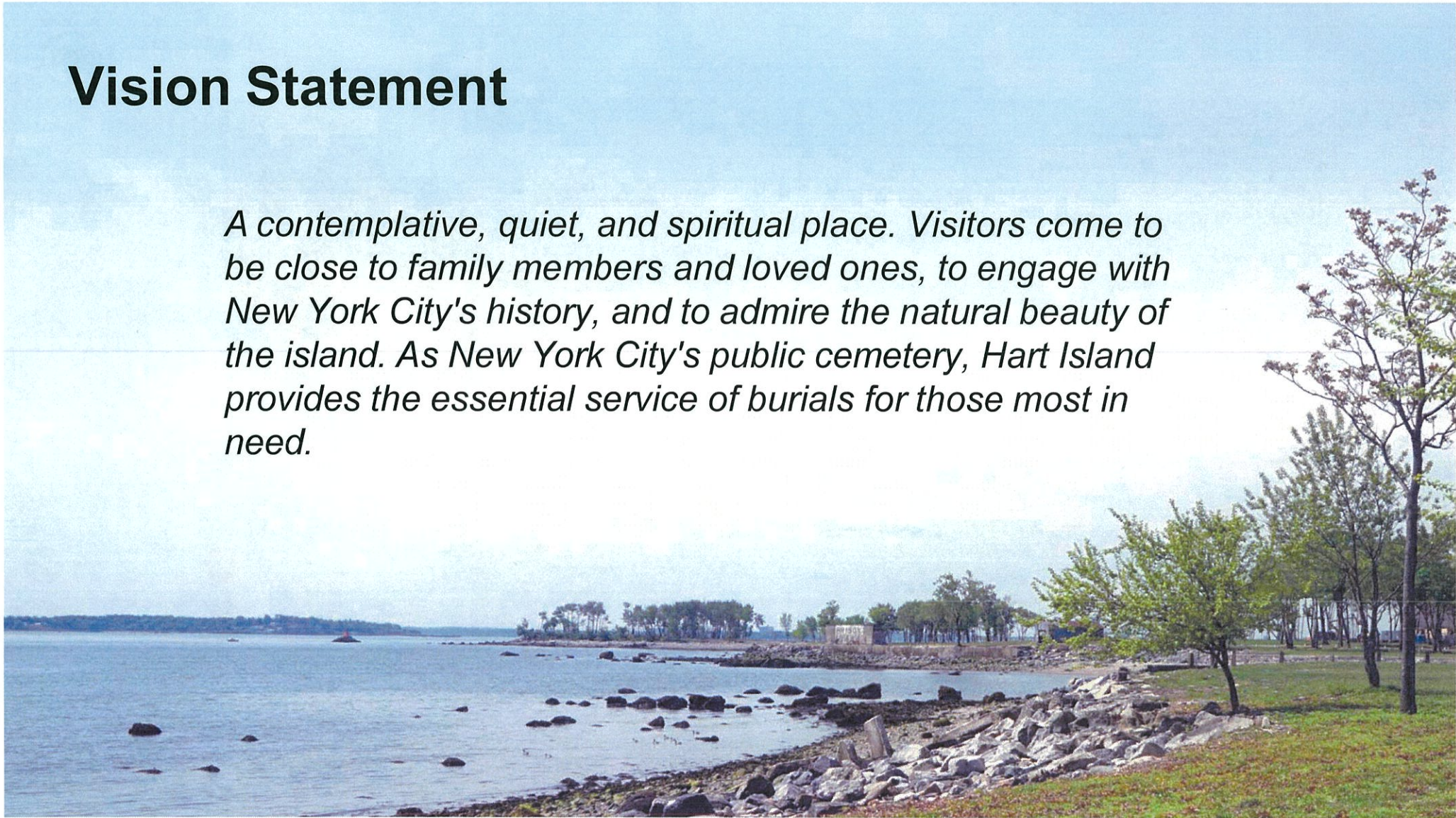
VISION PILLARS



Note: Costs shown are for 2024 with 80% contingencies over base estimate to include location premium for construction on the island, general requirements, general conditions, and design contingency.

Vision Statement

A contemplative, quiet, and spiritual place. Visitors come to be close to family members and loved ones, to engage with New York City's history, and to admire the natural beauty of the island. As New York City's public cemetery, Hart Island provides the essential service of burials for those most in need.





BRONX BOROUGH PRESIDENT VANESSA L. GIBSON

**Testimony of Bronx Borough President Vanessa L. Gibson
New York City Council Committees on Parks and Recreation, Health, and General
Welfare
October 16, 2025**

Good morning, and thank you to Chairs Krishnan, Schulman, and Ayala for convening this important hearing today regarding the future of Hart Island and the important work to ensure that all New Yorkers can be buried with dignity and without placing severe burdens on their families.

The proposed Resolution 775 calls on the state to increase the funeral cost limit of burial services for low-income residents from \$3,400 to \$6,000. This is a common-sense measure that would bring the cap more in line with the real cost of burial.

With the costs of funerals and cremations rising and inflation and a weakening economy increasing burdens on our households, particularly low-income households, we must do more to ensure that all New Yorkers can be appropriately buried and mourned by their families.

It's always difficult to lose a loved one, but for low-income families, their grief is compounded by the looming difficulty of paying for their loved one's funeral. Our city must ensure that every family can grieve in peace and that all our residents can find dignity in their final resting places.

In an era where too many families are forced to turn to crowdfunding to scrape together the funds to pay for burial, our city must step in to fill the gap. The HRA's burial assistance program is a lifeline that must be made more accessible to families as costs rise.

I urge the state to move expeditiously to raise the cap for our low-income residents. Thank you to Councilmember Louis for introducing this resolution, and I hope the full Council will act to pass it soon.

THE HART ISLAND PROJECT

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October 16, 2025

Testimony: New York City Council Hearing on The Hart Island Capital Projects Proposal

Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to testify today.

I am here to discuss what I believe is a fiscally excessive yet fundamentally insufficient proposal for Hart Island. As the nation's largest municipal cemetery, and the only place for natural burials within the five boroughs, the City Cemetery should be a valuable public asset. Instead, continued mismanagement has rendered it a significant liability to taxpayers.

The Conflict: Culture and Environment

City burials are environmentally superior to those offered by private cemeteries, as they avoid embalming, hardwood caskets, and concrete vaults. However, the practice of mass burial is widely considered offensive. For this reason, I am baffled by how little this proposal addresses the glaring cultural and environmental concerns, completely failing to solve the most pressing issues required to sustain burials, ensure public access and provide acceptable service.

While the Parks Department has produced an aesthetically pleasing plan that includes amenities to comfort visitors, it largely avoids tackling key structural problems.

The Overlooked Threat of Sea Level Rise

The primary flaw is the plan's failure to mitigate the impact of sea level rise on mass graves, which continue to be dug eight feet below the surface. Future burials are planned in low-lying areas where buildings were recently demolished to create new burial space.

- **Climate Data:** Using the city's own climate projection data, the **rising water table is projected to reach burial boxes eight feet below grade in several areas by 2050.**
- **Existing Evidence:** The HRA's 2022 Burial Capacity Study already indicates a high water table, with Test Pit 32 finding groundwater seven feet below grade in an area slated for burial within the next decade.

Legal and Financial Liabilities

Even the simplest capital improvements, such as the crushed stone walks, benches, and signage envisioned by this plan, will be impacted. If water reaches the boxes containing human remains beneath the surface, the ground will shift and heave, rendering the new infrastructure unstable.

The potential liabilities are immense:

- Will signs be posted at grave sites reading: “For your safety, we regrettably cannot permit access to this area”?
- Will the Medical Examiner be unable to recall bodies because boxes within a plot have moved?
- With burial plots containing 200 boxes, will attorneys file class action wrongful burial lawsuits using evidence of sea level rise that the HRA knew about prior to burial?

These are financial and legal liabilities that the surface-level proposal you are being asked to fund does not consider.

Failures in Planning and Management

We began meeting with NYC Parks in May 2023—well before the design contract was awarded—in an effort to convince them that the scope of this plan was insufficient because it did not address the burial practice itself. After all, burials are the primary use of Hart Island.

Although the plan’s stated goals include maximizing the cemetery’s life cycle, enhancing ecological systems, and adapting to climate change, there is almost **no indication of the rising water table underground**. The proposed shoreline restoration will protect the surface from inundation, but it will not keep water out of the boxes of human remains buried eight feet deep. We need drawings that show burials in relation to the water table 30 years after burial because pine boxes are intact that long after burial.

Additionally, the proposal calls for the extensive use of lawn grass, which is a poor choice for this location as it requires excessive watering and exacerbates the problems accumulating below. NYC Parks’ own recent guidelines for Design and Planning for Flood Resiliency recommend planting meadow species, a practice they should follow on Hart Island.

A Sustainable Path Forward

Over the past year, I have met with numerous City Council Members to present our proposal to end mass burials through legislation. We have collaborated with landscape architects on a plan for the city to switch to **individual graves only three feet below the surface**.

Furthermore, New York State may soon permit the city to cremate unclaimed remains after 90 days. We believe the capital plan for Hart Island should be immediately revised to include facilities for the storage and burial of cremated remains.

If state law permits cremation, the city must stop all mass burials at lower elevations immediately. The City Council has an opportunity to prevent a massive financial and humanitarian crisis by demanding a truly resilient and ethical solution. We still need a Master Plan for Hart Island.

Thank you for your time.

Testimony of Elsie Soto
Director, Friends of Hart Island
City Council Hearing on Hart Island – October 16, 2025

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Elsie Soto, Director of Friends of Hart Island. I am here not only as an advocate, but as a daughter and a sister. My father, Norberto Soto, died in 1993 from AIDS complications, and in 2023 my brother died from fentanyl poisoning. Both are buried on Hart Island.

I live with those losses every day. I have stood at the Hart Island ferry gate and placed locks in their memory. I have carried ribbons in my father's memory on World AIDS Day. I have watched other families visit the island with photographs and flowers in their hands. The grief hits in specific moments: like when I stood in my cap and gown just graduating from college, standing at the ferry gates, unable to visit my father or brother graves. It is those moments that remind me of the restrictions needlessly place on someone's resting place. That aching reminder to request a visit.

Hart Island is historic; it holds generations of New Yorkers who are part of this beautiful city's story. It should be landmarked and protected to preserve its dignity and ensure that what happened in the past is never repeated.

Many of us were not in the room when decisions about Hart Island were made, but we are here today to make a change, to make a difference in history by righting the many wrongs that have caused families pain and shame.

That's why we are asking for:

- Expanded visitation, so families can mourn and connect more than twice a month. (same amount of visitation for public tours.)
- Landmark status, to protect the island from future harm.
- A GPS system, to properly identify and preserve gravesites.
- A Family Advisory Committee, so those directly affected — the families — have a real voice in decisions about the island's future.

Finally, we strongly oppose any proposal that desecrates gravesites, whether it be adding soil over existing burials or disturbing those already laid to rest. To do so would be deeply unethical and inhumane. Everyone laid to rest on Hart Island is a New Yorker, and they deserve respect and dignity.

Hart Island is not just about history — it is about humanity. Families like mine carry both the pain of loss and the hope that this island will finally become a place of remembrance and respect.

Thank you for listening, and for standing with us to protect the dignity of all who rest on Hart Island.

Thank you for hearing my testimony today. My name is Jake Boswell. I am an Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture at the Ohio State University. For the past two years, two of my colleagues and I have been engaged in an analysis of the 2022 Burial Capacity Study in relation to the proposed master plan, which has now been released as the Hart Island Concept Plan by Starr Whitehouse Landscape Architects and Planners.

The 2022 Burial Capacity Study is a deeply flawed document. It should be redone before concrete decisions are made about Hart Island's future. The 2022 study offers only a cursory assessment of burial options beyond the current method of mass burial. It bases its future projections on historically low burial numbers, and it fails to consider the broader human dimensions of the city's mass burial practices.

Most jarringly, the study fails to consider the existing groundwater levels or projected sea level rise. As shown in figures one through seven of the testimony I have submitted, over 20% of the burial sites planned in the 2022 Capacity Study will experience significant groundwater intrusion by 2080, if not earlier. Given this information, the city should avoid relying on low-lying areas of the island for future burials, especially not for 8-foot-deep mass graves. In fact, it may already be necessary for the city to take steps to mitigate mass graves that are already situated in these vulnerable zones.

The 2025 Starr Whitehouse plan advances many necessary projects for the island. However, it unfortunately compounds the issues of the 2022 Capacity study by outlining future buildings, facilities, and roads without questioning the Capacity

Study's conclusions about burial methods or the timeline it sets out.

You have options beyond mass burial. By exploring different burial methods, my team and I have demonstrated that the city could extend the life of Hart Island by adopting a practical form of green burial. Figures eight through ten of the submitted testimony illustrate our idea and how it could work. This approach would allow the city to utilize much more of the island for future burials, including higher ground on the northern half. Using this method, we believe the city could ensure that Hart Island remains an active burial site indefinitely. We think our solution is more practical and humane than current mass burial practices. Our plan also offers better environmental outcomes and creates a more respectful and comforting space for visiting families. We call our proposal "Landscape of Hope."

In carrying out this work, our hope is only that it prompts the city to reconsider its burial practices on Hart Island. Alternatives are possible. For the very practical reasons I've laid out here today and in the submitted testimony, it is time for the City of New York to end mass burial on Hart Island. Thank you.



Figure 1. showing a map of the test pits taken on the island, with the location of Test Pit 32 circled in red. Test pit 32 was dug on March 29th, 2022, just south of the former Hart Island Hospital. VHB. “Hart Island Burial Capacity Study: Environmental Site Investigation.” 2022, p. 16.

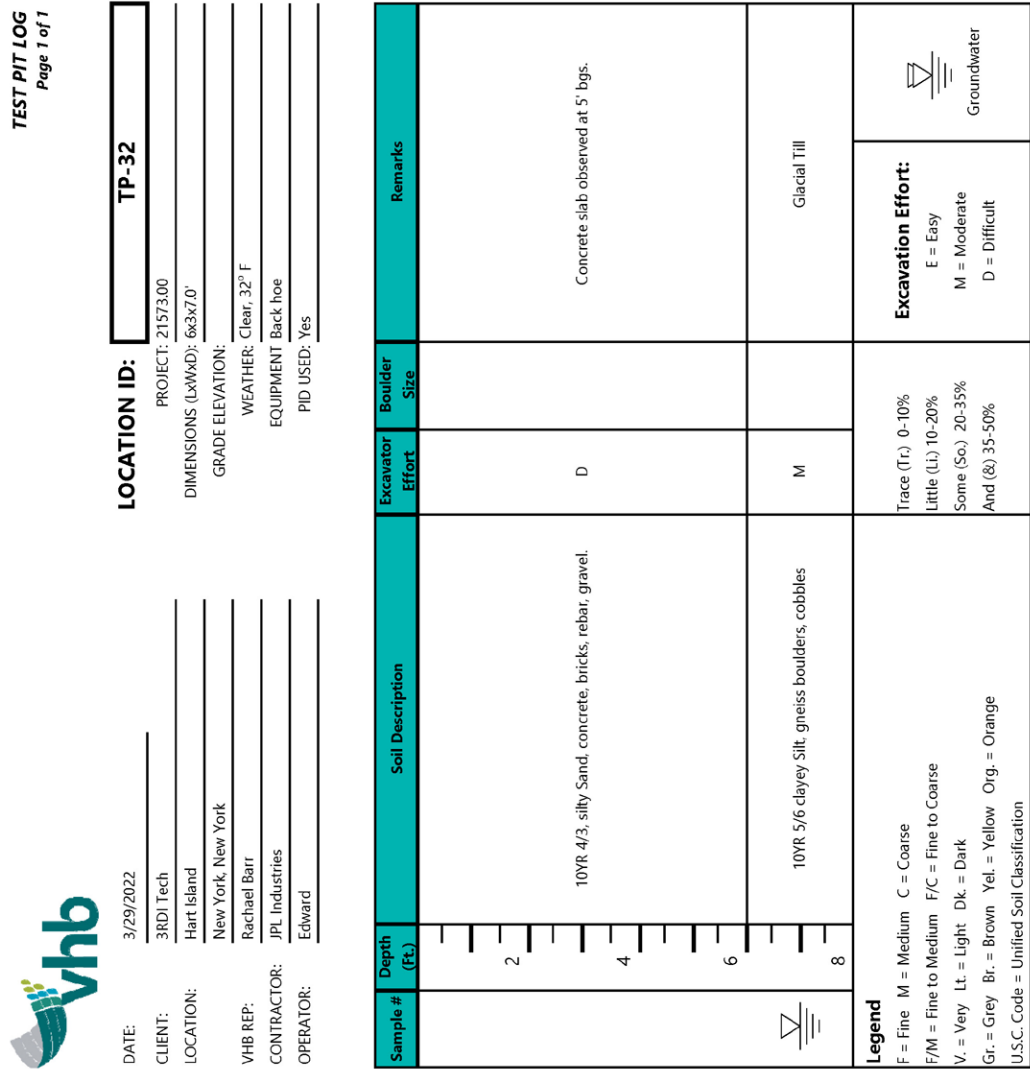


Figure 2. Showing that geo-techs from VHB clearly indicate that they hit groundwater 7 feet below the surface at Test Pit 32. VHB. "Hart Island Burial Capacity Study: Environmental Site Investigation." 2022, p. 78.



Figure 3. Showing the potential layout of mass graves suggested by the 2022 Burial Capacity Study. The location of Test Pit 32 is circles in Red. Despite knowing that VHB hit ground water at 7', you can see in this map that the Burial Capacity Study none-the-less recommends the area of Test Pit 32 for future mass burial trenches that would be at least 8 feet deep. The implications of burying 200 bodies in a standing foot of groundwater are disturbing

3RDI Technologies. "Hart Island Burial Capacity Study Appendices." 2022.

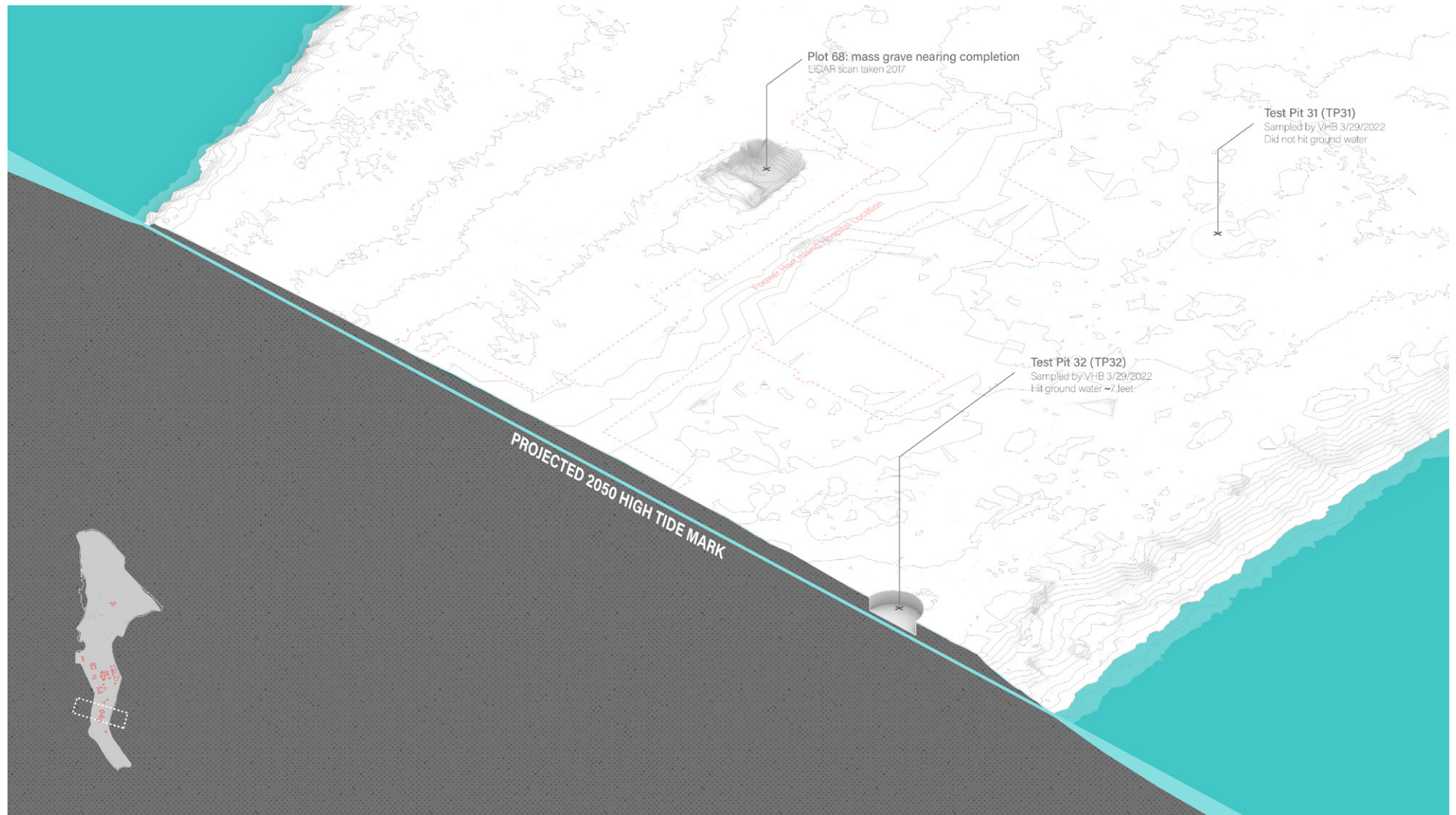


Figure 4. Seeing groundwater in Test Pit 32, my team and I decided to check the Burial Capacity study's conclusions against the City of New York's 2015 sea level rise projections. To do this, we used the city's LiDAR data to build an accurate three-dimensional model of the island, against which we could then read the City's 2015 sea level rise projections. In Figure 4, you see a segment of the island that includes the location of Pit 32. The segment also shows Plot 68, an open infant burial trench that was being filled when the LiDAR scan was taken in 2017. When we look at the City's projections for sea level rise, we can see that groundwater at high tide is projected to be just below test pit 32 by the year 2050. But remember, we know that VHB already hit groundwater in Test Plot 32 in 2022.

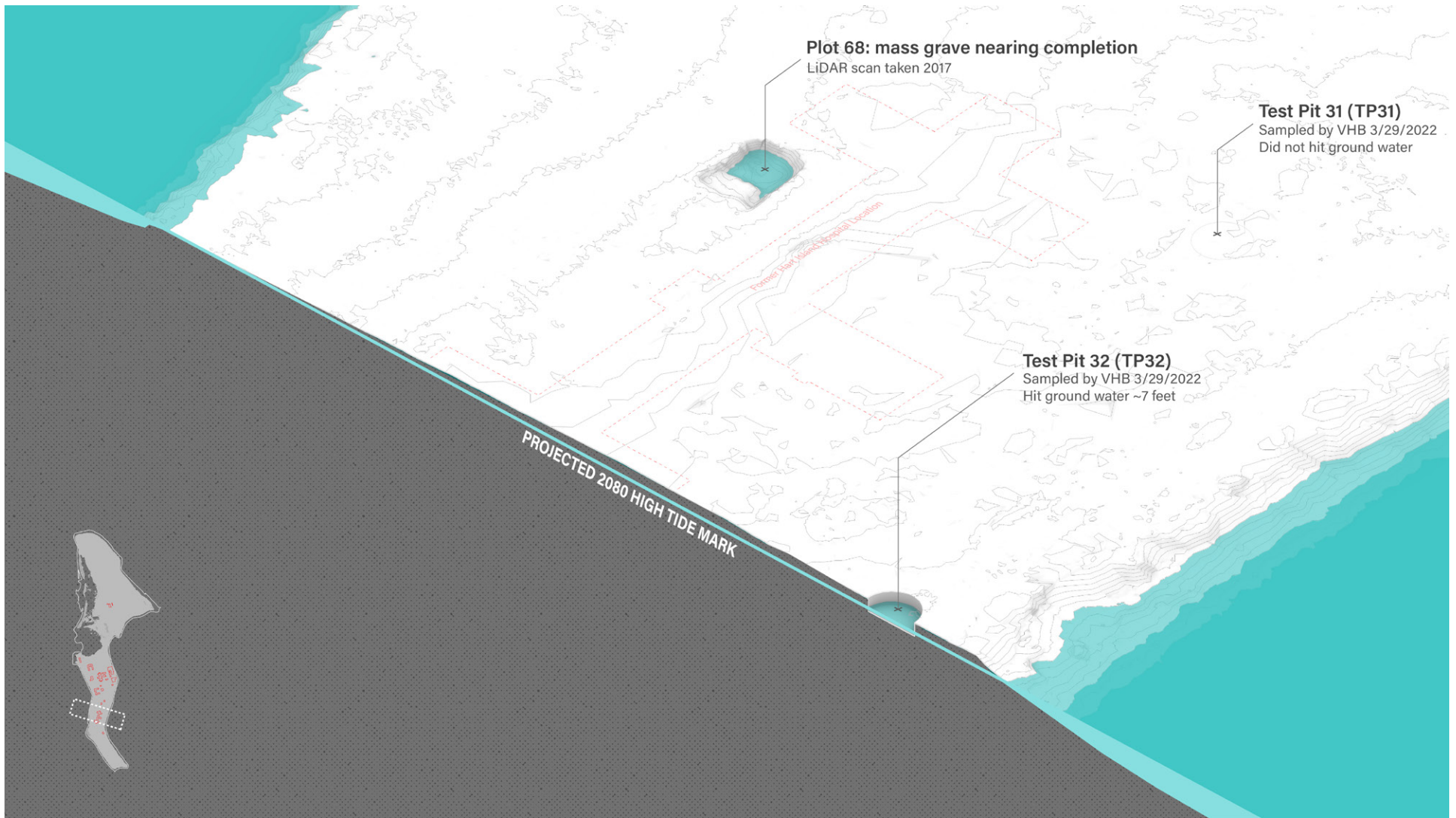


Figure 5. Showing that by 2080 groundwater fills both test pit 32 and plot 68 to a depth of two feet at high tide based on the City of New York's 2015 Sea Level Rise projections.

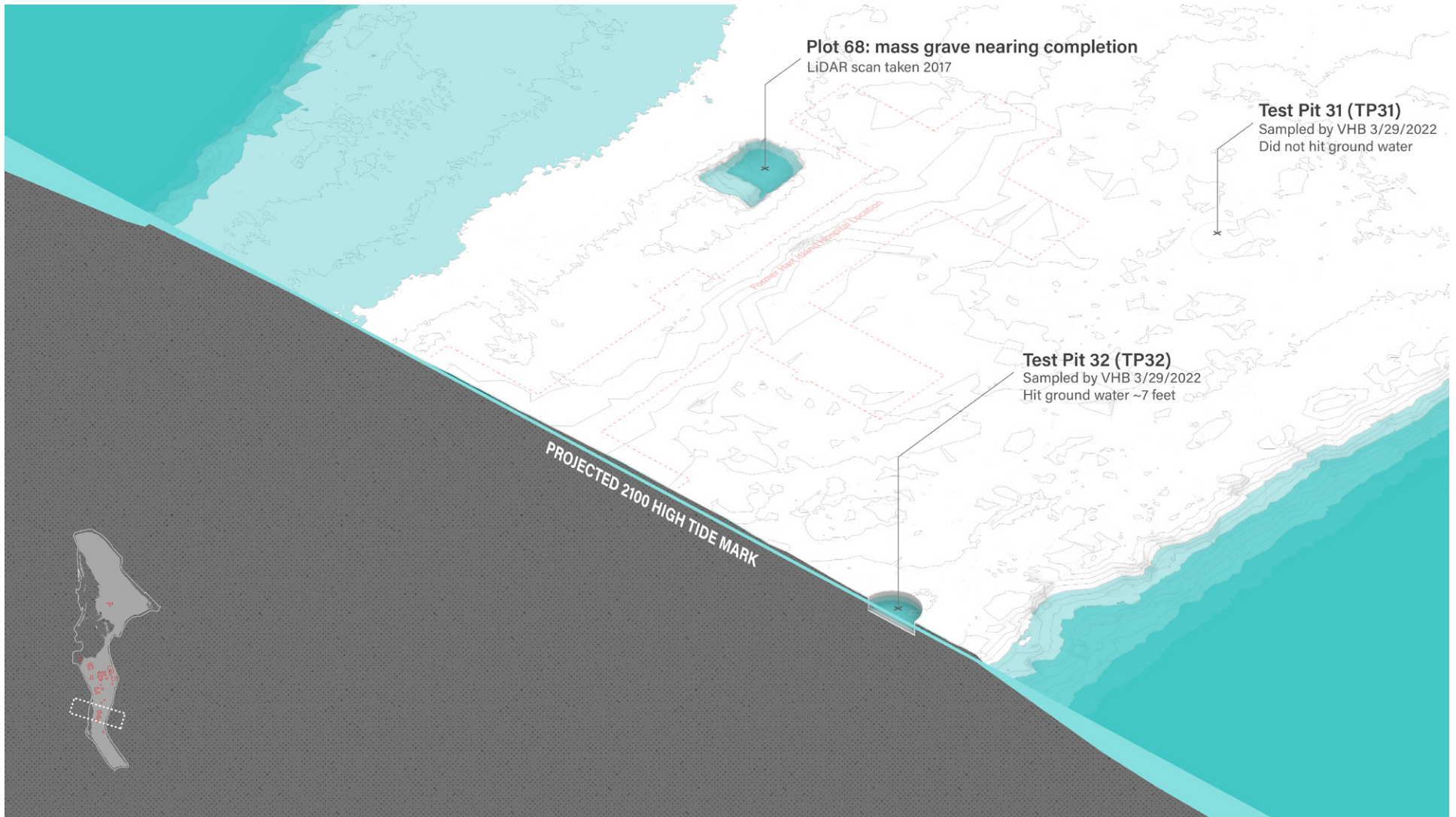


Figure 6. Showing that by 2100 both Test Pit 32 and Plot 68 are filled to a depth of 4' at high tide.

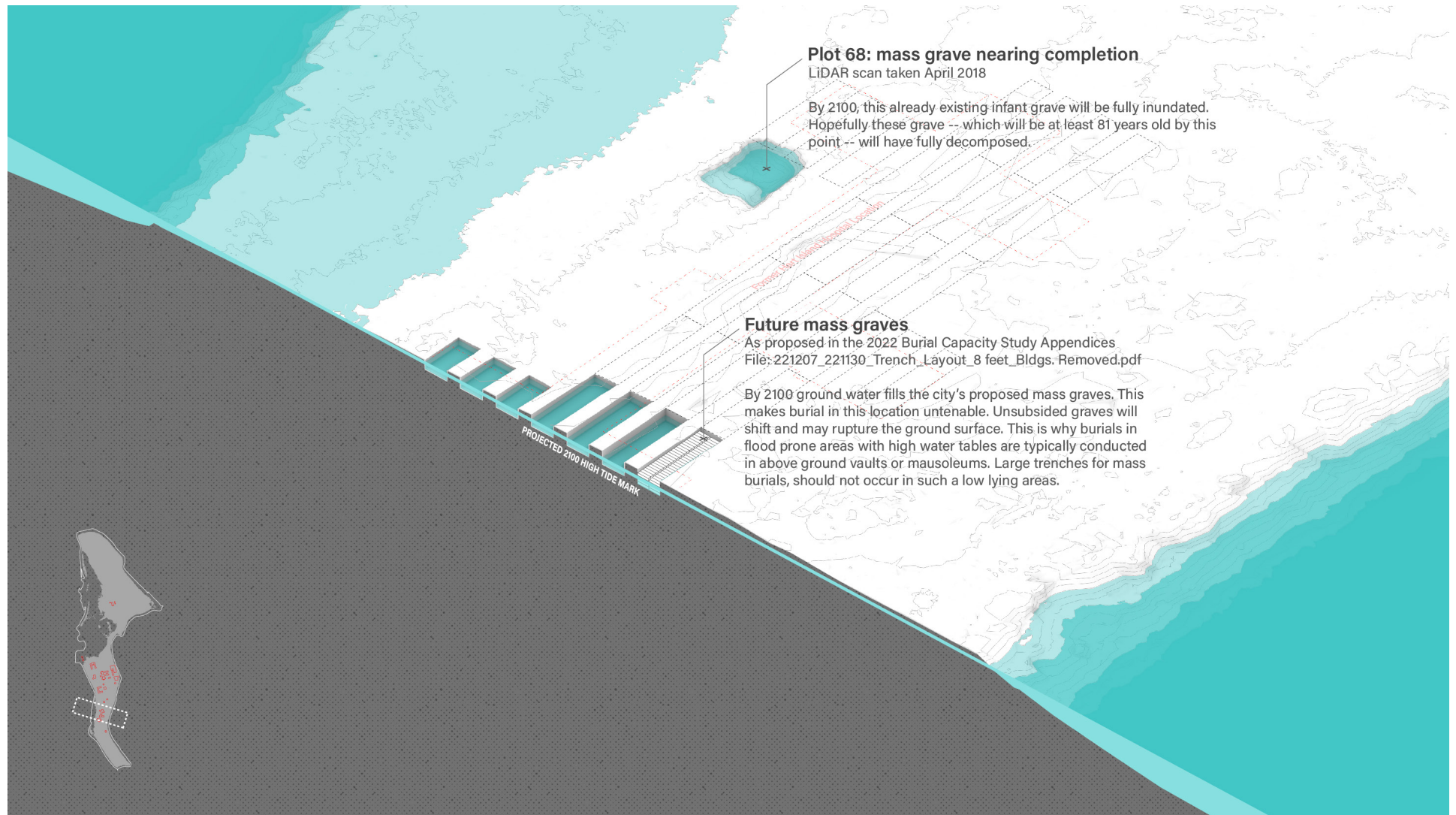


Figure 7. The city should not depend on this area of the island for future burials, and particularly not 8' deep mass graves. In fact, it may be imperative for the city to begin mitigating existing graves, such as Plot 68, that have already been placed in this area. Figure 7 maps the locations designated for future burial by the 2022 Burial Capacity Study onto the sea level rise projection for 2100. The area impacted represents more than 20% of the remaining burial space identified by the 2022 study, indicating that the city has significantly less area for mass graves on Hart Island than was previously thought.

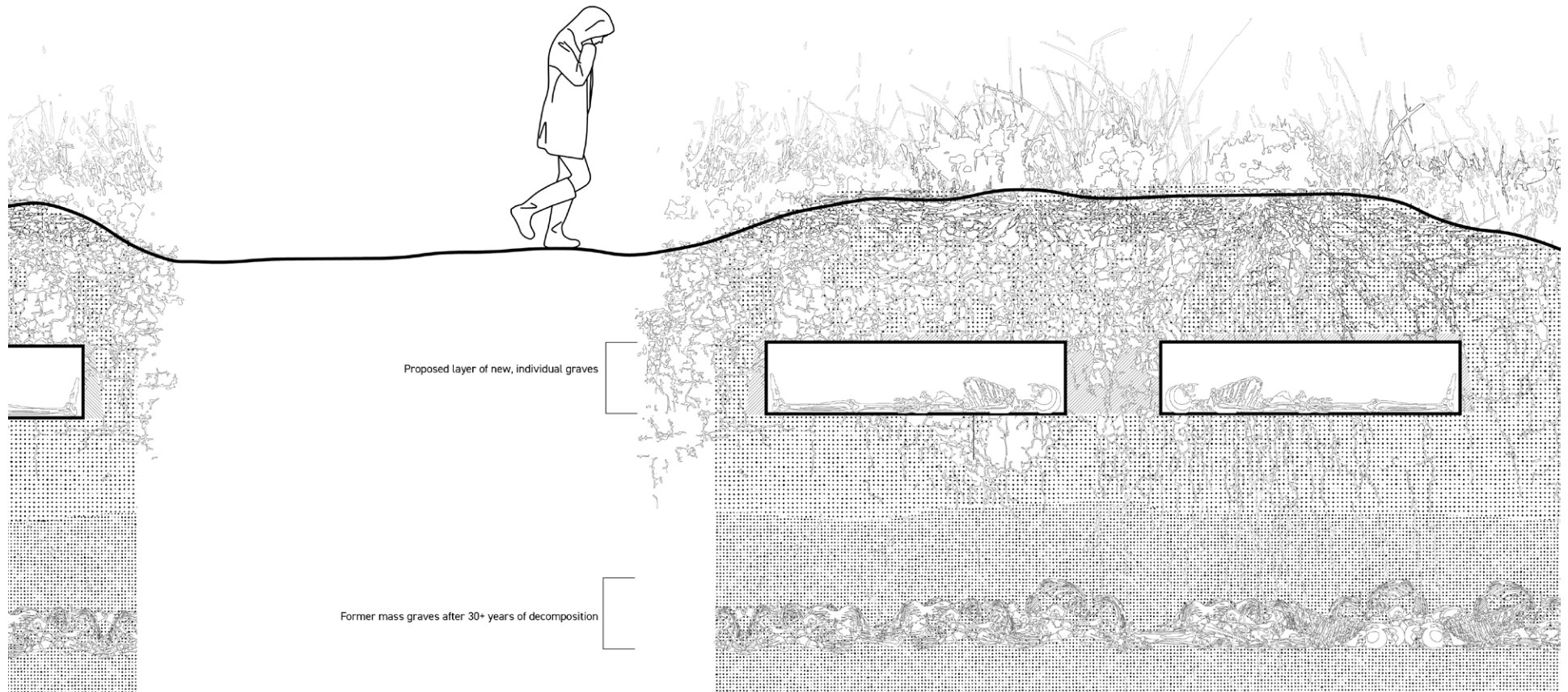
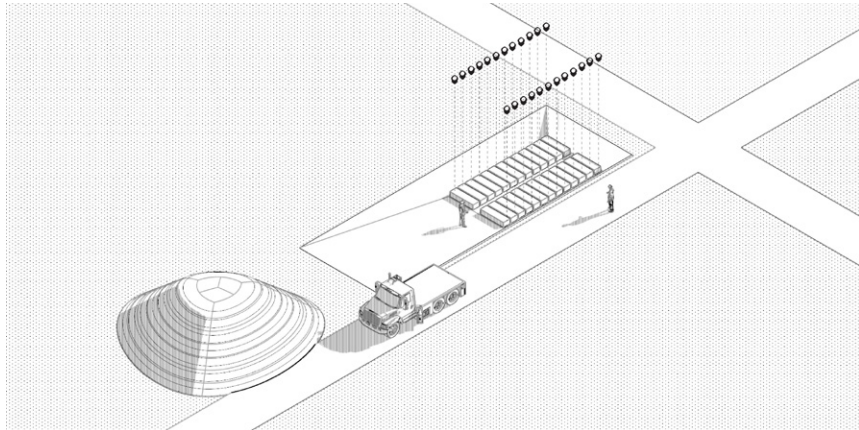
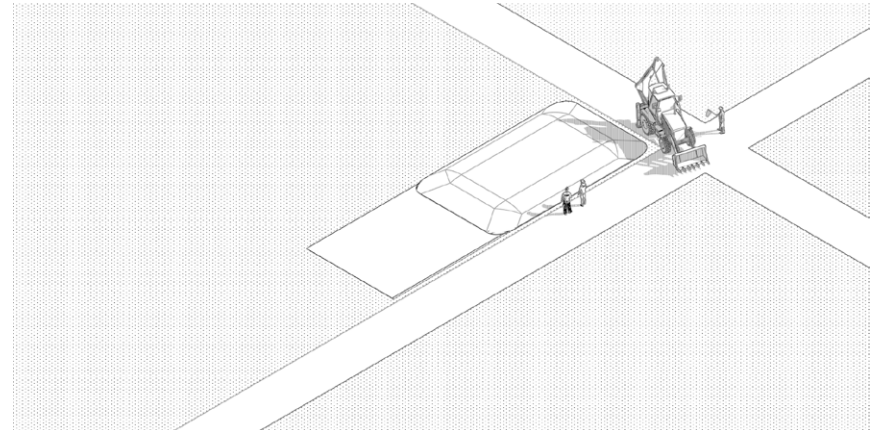


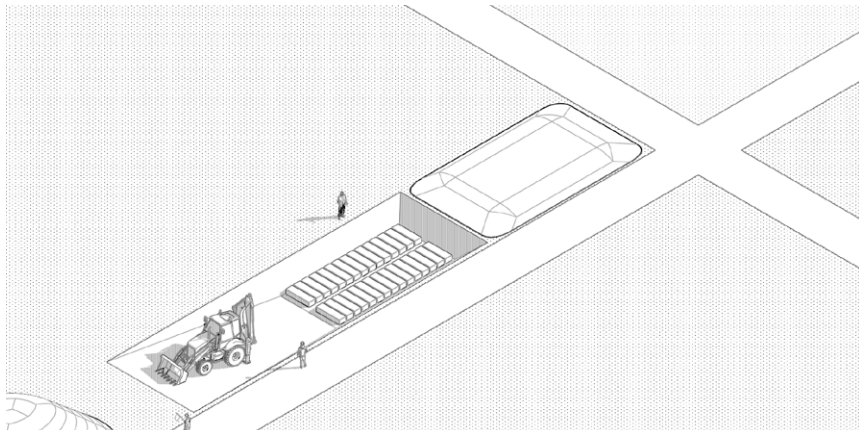
Figure 8. Because older mass graves are at least 4' below the surface, it is possible to add a layer of individual graves over the existing mass graves. We propose digging individual graves 3' deep, and then adding a layer of soil over the new graves to create a small mound. The mound makes the existence of the graves legible while complying with state requirements for 3' of soil over a grave. We recommend that the mounds be planted with deep rooted native meadow species to help prevent erosion on the island. Over time the mounds will subside, leaving the meadow as a marker of where new burials have been placed.



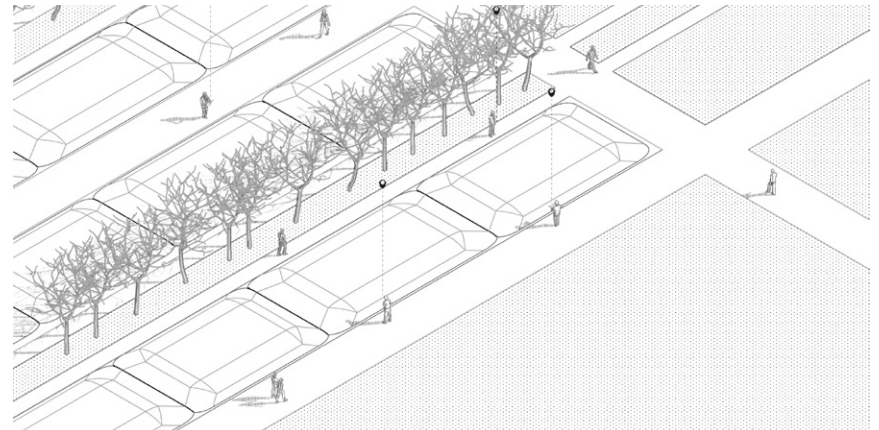
Step 1. In our proposal new graves are dug once a week and are sized to accommodate the burial needs for that week. Caskets are placed side by side, but only one casket deep. Each casket is then marked with a GPS tag to allow it to be easily located.



Step 2. The excavated soil is then placed back on top, creating a mound that is typically about two feet tall. This process ensures that all soil removed during excavation remains on site and provides the three feet of soil cover required by state law.



Step 3. The process repeats each week. Over time, the burial mounds would subside and become less apparent. Simultaneously, deep-rooted meadow plants would take their place, both visually and functionally, by helping to stabilize the island's soil. These meadow plantings would provide a better habitat for wildlife and require less maintenance than the current lawn, aligning with the city's sustainability and climate action goals.



Step 4. Hedgerows would be planted over time to make the island feel more personal and less vast. They would frame views of the Long Island Sound and assist with way finding. Hedgerows would contribute to the island's habitat value and act as windbreaks, making the area more pleasant in the winter and reducing the erosive force of the wind.

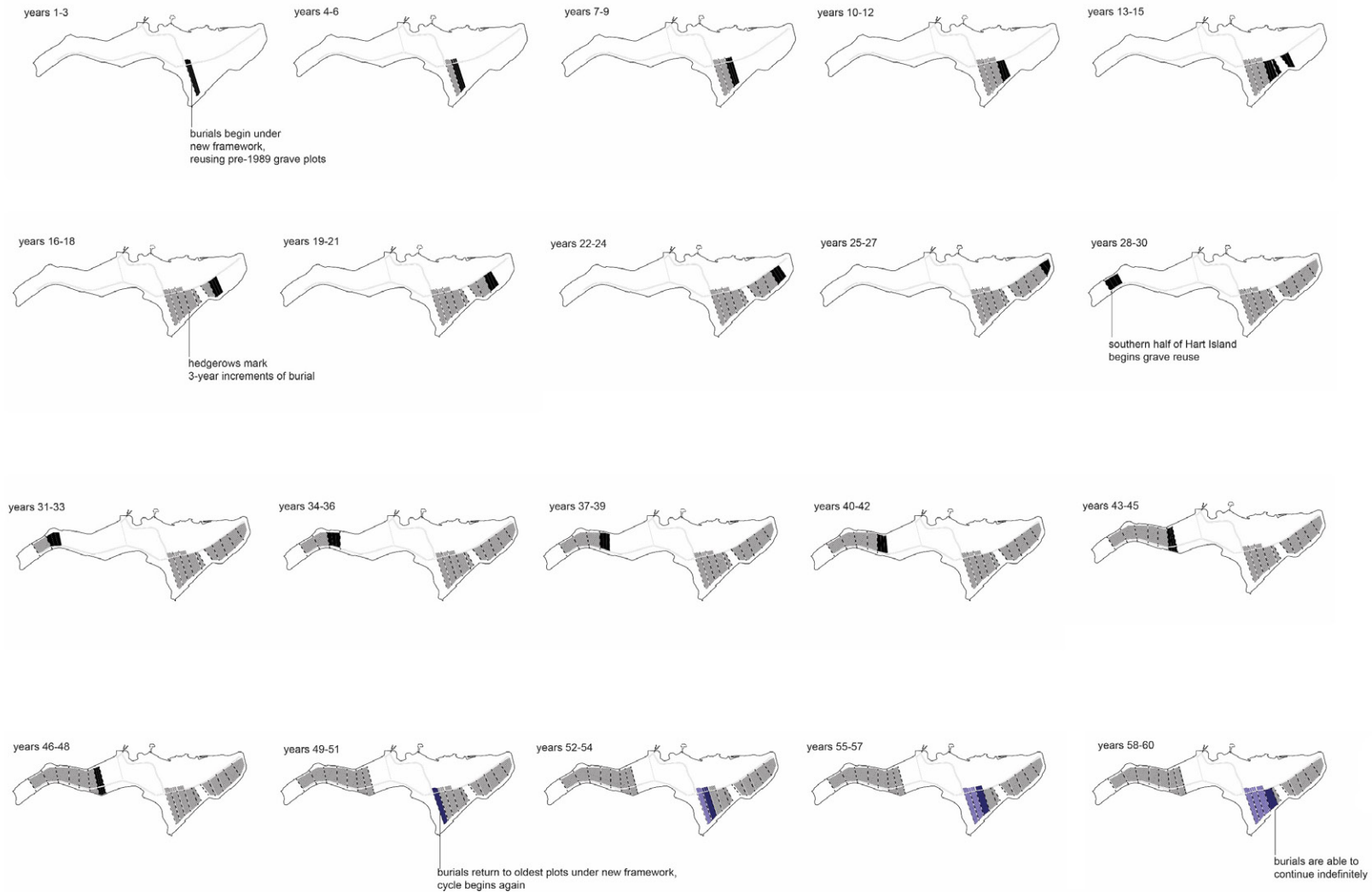


Figure 10. We estimate that at current rates, the city could continue this burial method for another thirty years. Beyond that, our proposal would allow the city to implement a straightforward grave reuse system, ensuring Hart Island remains an active burial site indefinitely. We believe our solution is more practical and more culturally suitable than the current mass burial practice. Additionally, it offers better environmental outcomes and creates a more respectful and comforting space for visiting families. We call this proposal Landscape of Hope.

Friends of Hart Island TESTIMONY

Michael Hager

10/16/25 10am ET at NY City Hall

My name is Michael Hager, I am a resident of member Bottcher's district, and I am the founder and CEO of Ready Aim Innovate. We center individual and community narratives to drive change. The most important thing in life is people, the essence of a person is their story. RAI created the Friends of Hart Island project to explore what it means to have death with dignity... after all, death is one of the most important parts of life – challenging as it is – we often don't pay attention to "end of life" issues until its too late.

It is difficult to talk about death. It is difficult for America's greatest city to handle pandemics, poverty, and human need on such a grand scale. Even so, people deserve dignity in death. Americans have expectations about what it means to be laid to rest, to be able to grieve, to be able to visit their deceased loved ones. These expectations are routinely NOT met currently when it comes to Hart Island. Are the folks laid to rest there less valuable to NY? There are war heroes laid to rest there. Are those resting on Hart Island less of a New Yorker than us? Every zipcode and every population in NY has a connection to this island.

It is not easy to think of a way forward, but we are begging NY City Hall and Government to consider the humanity, the history, and the need to recognize the countless contributions of our friends, family, and neighbors in Hart Island. Do not move graves. Do not stack graves. Do not prioritize the public over grieving families. Be the change we need – bring the dignity to our loved ones laid to rest on Hart Island.

Thank you.

Committee on General Welfare, Parks & Recreation and Health

I would like say I am in favor of of T2025-4144, T2025-4144, Int 1408-2025, Res. 0775-2025

Unclaimed bodies of dogs & other animals k*llled at NYCACC - PRIORITIZE Oversight Hearing on NYCACC - STATE of EMERGENCY - NYCACC is UNDERSTAFFED & too many animals are loosing their lives unnecessarily due to ACC mismanagement ...Find out where are the dogs and NYCACC taken for their burial

My name is Del Mar Leon and I from District 8

A NYC judge recently determined that a pet is considered a family member, I am here to lend a voice to all the NYC known as BOROUGHbred unclaimed bodies of dogs/pets that have found themselves against their will under the care on NYCAAnimalCareCenter where far too many, who are YOUNG, HEALTHY & with a VERY STRONG DESIRE to live have lost their lives unnecessarily,

Does the city know or have a plan in place where the unclaimed/stray dogs/pets who are k*llled at NYCACC go after they are k*llled?

I also would like formally ask the Health Committee at NYC Council to prioritize this matter and ask for an Animal Welfare & Oversight Committee to be created and an OVERSIGHT hearing to be scheduled as soon as possible in order to assess the mishandling of our animals under NYCACC care...

Last July 21 NYCACC claimed the shelter was over capacity with over 1000 animals under their care when in fact their website only reflected around 612 of which only 275 of those were dogs of different sizes. NYCACC closed for intake for a month or so yet they kept k*lling animals while many had fosters and or adopters interested yet not a NHP rescue tapped out and unable to pull the animal and not given the chance to extend their deadline. They also have been multiple cases where fosters have been discouraged by the shelter coordinator describing the animal in a negative light different than the way volunteers have described in the post when the animal only has hours left to live as a result of NYCACC deadlines.

In the past months, they have had numerous silent k*lls where dogs are not given their 3-day hold required by law or an opportunity to be seen for adoption & not even photo to post on social media...others have lost their lives as a result of botched surgeries. Their lives cut short due to what would be considered shelter mismanagement in addition to being understaffed in combination to an archaic old shelter system in need of an overhaul with more OVERSIGHT from the city.

I highly encourage all of you members of the Council to consider this matter as a state of emergency. I have dealt for the past year every single day of my life 24/7 and have been forced to neglect the ones I have been representing in the High k*ll shelters of California because the matter has become a serious matter here in NYC...no oversight no-one care to hear the outcome of these animals so I am here on their behalf... I would also like to bring up the possibility consider providing a burial site for these animals as it would actually give some sort of accountability as to what happens to the bodies of these animals after they are k*illed to ensure their bodies are not improperly used for other purposes.

I look forward to scheduling a meeting to further discuss this serious matter and providing solutions to improve this inefficient system that is costing the lives of far too many of our NYC animals who are supposed to be cared for as opposed to be given a death sentence.

Best Regards,
Del Mar Leon

City Council Testimony 10/15/2025 HART ISLAND My name is Elaine Joseph. In 1978, I had a baby girl who passed away at a hospital in the city. Her body was lost in the system between the hospital, the medical examiners office and is likely buried somewhere on Hart Island. I say "somewhere" because the burial records for babies between 1977 and 1981 have also been lost. It took me 31 years to finally find out where she is most likely buried. After advocating for gravesite visits on Hart Island since 2009, I was the first person to walk to a gravesite, although the exact location was a guesstimate location, on March 14, 2014. I spent another 5 years advocating to have the jurisdiction of the island transferred from the Dept of Correction, which was a living nightmare, to the Dept of Parks. This finally occurred in 2019. This was an improvement to the feeling of the visits, but there is more that is needed to make the visit feel like it is a welcoming and serene cemetery. As it stands now, visits are conducted by the Dept of Parks 2 days a month on weekends only. I would like to be able to visit more often and have regularly scheduled weekday hours as well. I don't like the fact that I have to sign up in advance to make a visit and must list my guests and only permitted 4 guests. The time for a visit is also limited right now to about an hour or less since they have a bus that circles the island with other visitors and comes back to pick us up. The Parks Dept is using Enforcement Officers to escort people to their gravesites. When they have public visits, Park Rangers escort them and they have a longer visit than families have to a loved ones grave. It brings back negative memories of having Correction Officers with guns and handcuffs by my side while I am at my baby's gravesite. I understand that there is an issue of transporting people via a ferry to the island. It would be most beneficial to those coming from all boros to not have to come to City Island to gain access to Hart Island. With all of the ferrys we now have in the city, there should be a way to figure out how we can have a ferry from each boro. I often sit along the waterway park on the Queens side of the Throggs Neck Bridge and look over at Hart Island and wish there was a simple ferry I could board during the week to go and visit the grave of my baby girl, Tomika. My final thoughts on the proposal to change the burial procedures is to please, not even consider covering the current graves with layers of dirt and burying additional bodies on top of the current graves. After over 47 years, I have come to terms with the fact that my daughter is buried somewhere on Hart Island and it would bring back all kinds of feelings if I had to now deal with the fact that there are bodies buried over hers.

Thank you for listening.

My name is Shirlene Cooper I was born and raised in Fort Green Projects, Brooklyn New York. My cousin Benjamin Bumper a couple of years my senior would always come by to visit me. He loved to eat and dance to The Floaters Song □ "FLOAT ON".

Many years later I found out he was homeless and passed away in the NYC Subway train station. We were not contacted or informed of his death by anyone and he was transported to HART ISLAND known as Potters Field. My family was devastated to hear this unfortunate news, because had we known he would have been given a more proper burial and last resting place.

There is no excuse for this inappropriate occurrence and miscommunication of lost family members. Once he was identified we should have been contacted immediately. My heart goes out to those who have similar issues with loved ones buried in HART ISLAND.

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Matthew Brune

Address: Chief Operating Officer

I represent: NYC IIRA/DSS

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Vincent Ruggiero III

Address: Executive Director of Mortuary

I represent: Response & Operations

Address: NYC OCME

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Charles Handraas

Address: Parks Supervisor

I represent: NYC Parks

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Sarah Neilson

Address: Chief of policy and Long-Range Planning

I represent: _____

Address: NYC Parks

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: MCH+ Drury

Address: Chief of Citywide Legislative Affairs

I represent: _____

Address: NYC Parks

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 4143 Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 10/16/2025

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: ELAINE JOSEPH

Address: 7547 184th ST, FRESH MEADOWS NY 11366

I represent: FAMILY OF HART ISLAND'S DECEASED

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 10/16/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: SHIRLENE COOPER

Address: [REDACTED]

I represent: RAI - ME

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 1408 Res. No. _____

☒ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Melinda Hunt

Address: PO Box 4327 NY NY 10163

I represent: The Hart Island Project

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 1408 Res. No. _____

☒ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Thomas F Berner

Address: PO Box 4327 NY NY 10163

I represent: The Hart Island Project

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: DR MR 1801

Address: [REDACTED]

I represent: K9RNYC

Address: QUE

◆ Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms ◆

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 10/16/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Tabitha Wood

Address: [REDACTED] nyny

I represent: 10-25

Address: _____

◆ Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms ◆

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: _____

Michael Hager

Address: _____

NY, NY 10019

I represent: _____

RAI Impact Equity Labs Inc

Address: _____

NY, NY 10017

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: _____

Elsie Solo

Address: _____

Brooklyn
10468

I represent: _____

Self - Hart Island

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms