

CITY COUNCIL  
CITY OF NEW YORK

----- X

TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

of the

COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND  
RECREATION

----- X

November 13, 2019  
Start: 2:21 p.m.  
Recess: 2:43 p.m.

HELD AT: 250 Broadway, Committee Room  
16th Floor

B E F O R E: Peter Koo  
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS: Peter Koo  
Adrienne E. Adams  
Joseph C. Borelli  
Justin Brannan  
Andrew Cohen  
Mark Gjonaj  
Andy King  
Francisco Moya  
Carlina Rivera  
Eric A. Ulrich  
Jimmy Van Bramer  
Ydanis Rodriguez

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

1  
2           CHAIRPERSON KOO: This committee meeting  
3 is in order. Good afternoon. I'm Council Member  
4 Peter Koo and I'm pleased to chair the Committee on  
5 Parks and Recreation. Today the committee will be  
6 voting on proposed Introduction 906-A, sponsored by  
7 Council Member Ydanis Rodriguez. This bill would  
8 transfer jurisdiction over Hart Island from the  
9 Department of Corrections to the Parks Department.  
10 Jurisdictions to the Parks Department would transfer  
11 no later than July 1, 2021, and possibly even earlier  
12 if the city begins using other locations for the  
13 purpose of conducting public burials. The committee  
14 recently considered the legislation at a hearing on  
15 May 30, 2019, that focused on issues related to Hart  
16 Island, where the administration and many advocates  
17 agreed that a transfer of jurisdiction from DOC to  
18 Parks is a sensible idea. I will be voting in favor  
19 of this legislation and urge all my colleagues to  
20 support this legislation as well. Thank you. And  
21 today we're going to ask the primary sponsor of this  
22 bill, Ydanis, to speak.

23           COUNCIL MEMBER RODRIGUEZ: Thank you,  
24 Chair, and all members of this committee of Park and  
25 to all my colleagues. As I said before to Speaker

2 Johnson and Melinda, you know, all respect to you and  
3 all the members of the Hart Island Foundation and  
4 everyone that you have been able to help to find a  
5 loved one buried in the largest public cemetery in  
6 the United States of America. So today this is about  
7 justice. This is about dignity. This is about  
8 respect. This is about changing the way you, how  
9 people had to go through all those process. After  
10 2014, because it took a lawsuit for the City of New  
11 York to allow family members or loved one or visitors  
12 to go and spend some time in the largest public  
13 cemetery and after the lawsuit, even today, it takes  
14 like two months for anyone to get a spot to go and  
15 visit the island. And if you are not a family member  
16 you're only allowed to walk to the chapel, like,  
17 chapel, like, you know, 200 feet. And you cannot  
18 move from there. But just going there and listening  
19 to the names that they have there you can see who are  
20 those people, who are the one million body buried in  
21 that island. They are immigrants, they are poorest,  
22 they are the blacks who after segregation was over,  
23 I'm sorry, after the Civil War, you know, many white  
24 people refused to be buried together with black  
25 individual and they were sent to be buried in that

2 location. The island was used for missiles. The  
3 island had been used for many things that probably we  
4 don't even know, and that's why it has been a shame  
5 that we are leaving behind that the most progressive  
6 city in the whole nation has been stop New Yorkers  
7 and visitors to go and give, give the [inaudible]  
8 respect. I am Catholic and as someone of faith, as  
9 many people have different belief, we know that after  
10 someone die you go once in a while, visiting friend,  
11 visiting that location of the loved one where they  
12 are buried. We have been denied the rights. And we  
13 end up in [inaudible] as a progressive city. So  
14 that's why for me, you know, this is a historical  
15 day. As a social study teacher that I had been, that  
16 I was for 13 year, this is teaching learning history.  
17 This is about opening a space. This is about  
18 demanding that the City of New York will make that  
19 place as the museum of the dead. What we should be  
20 learning for a hundred years of history, they are the  
21 immigrants, they are the black, they are the  
22 individual who died with the HIV and we thought that  
23 we will be infected of they will be close to us and  
24 we buried them together. And that's why when I went  
25 with the Speaker and he came back the other day, not

2 only the chairman of this committee now but the  
3 former chairman also. You know, he worked so hard  
4 for this bill. So today is a day for Elizabeth  
5 Crowley, who worked so hard when she used to be the  
6 chair of the Criminal Justice Committee. This is the  
7 day of the Speaker. This is the day that all New  
8 Yorkers say enough is enough. Most of the cemetery  
9 in this public cemetery they are under Park in our  
10 nation. Probably this is, like this is like one of  
11 the last one and I would like to thank the chairman  
12 of this committee, the members of this committee.  
13 [speaking in Spanish] Look at the schedule how often  
14 a bus leaves from South Ferry to Governors Island.  
15 There is different time and day. We need to  
16 establish the same schedule. We need to open that  
17 site, and that's what we're voting today and because  
18 of that I would like to say thank you, Chair, and  
19 thank you to all members of this committee.

20 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you, Council  
21 Member Rodriguez. Any members in this committee want  
22 to speak? So, counsel, call the bill?

23 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: William Martin,  
24 Committee Clerk, roll call vote, Committee on Parks  
25 and Recreation, Introduction 906-A. Chair Koo.

2 CHAIRPERSON KOO: I vote aye.

3 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Cohen.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER COHEN: Aye.

5 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Levine.

6 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: Permission to  
7 explain my vote briefly?

8 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Yes, yeah.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: This has really  
10 been a momentous 24 hours for those of us who care  
11 about the future of Hart Island. This is the third  
12 committee since yesterday to vote on a package of  
13 bills that are going to transform, transform the way  
14 New York City buries and cares for those who are  
15 marginalized in life. We've passed bills that will  
16 change the transportation to the island, that will  
17 change the burial process, that will ensure public  
18 input, but the foundation of what many of us consider  
19 the injustice of Hart Island is the fact that for  
20 generations it has been managed by the Department of  
21 Corrections. That's a shocking thing for many New  
22 Yorkers even to grapple with. It is inmates paid, I  
23 think less than a dollar an hour, who are burying  
24 these mass graves. And that has required the entire  
25 island to become a secure facility that the public

2 cannot visit, that even loved ones can only visit  
3 under scheduled armed escort. This is the treatment  
4 for people who have family buried on Hart Island and  
5 that will never be changed as long as it is a  
6 Department of Corrections facility. So this bill  
7 today to transfer jurisdiction where it belongs, to  
8 the Parks Department, is the lynchpin of our effort  
9 to convert this island into an open, dignified, green  
10 cemetery that the public can visit and that people  
11 with loved ones buried there can visit. The Parks  
12 Department manages Prospect Park, which has an active  
13 cemetery. The Parks Department manages Washington  
14 Square Park, which has a defunct cemetery that was  
15 discovered in excavations there. Many of our parks  
16 have bodies buried from past eras. This is no  
17 different and this is going to open up the  
18 possibility of a new era on Hart Island. I'm  
19 incredibly proud of this. She's been acknowledged a  
20 lot and she deserves one final shout-out from me.  
21 Melinda Hunt, an activist who for years was a voice  
22 in the wilderness and forced the city to grapple with  
23 this. This is a great victory. We're not going to  
24 do what council members usually do and celebrate and  
25 walk away. This now begins what will be a year's



2 long process of capital renovation, a new  
3 transportation network, of changing burial polices.  
4 There are going to be a lot of contentious issues  
5 here that we are going to continue to litigate and  
6 fight for as advocates. But today is definitely a  
7 day to celebrate a tremendous victory, a hard-fought  
8 victory, and so I will proudly be voting aye.

9 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Rivera.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER RIVERA: I vote aye.

11 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Adams.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER ADAMS: As a proud  
13 sponsor, cosponsor, of this legislation I'm  
14 incredibly proud of this moment. I'm incredibly  
15 proud of the Transportation Committee and of the  
16 Parks and Recreation Committee. This legislation is  
17 the beginning of restoration of dignity and hope to  
18 numerous families that should have never been put in  
19 this horribly compromised position in the first  
20 place. I am so very proud to vote aye.

21 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Ulrich.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER ULRICH: I vote aye.

23 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Brannan.

24 COUNCIL MEMBER BRANNAN: I vote aye.

1 COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND  
RECREATION

10

2 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: I have a vote of  
3 7 in the affirmative, zero in the negative, and no  
4 abstentions. The item has been adopted by the  
5 committee.

6 CHAIRPERSON KOO: The committee will open  
7 for another 15 minutes for council members to vote.  
8 [pause] We are joined by Council Member Gjonaj.

9 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Continuation  
10 roll call, Committee on Parks, Council Member Gjonaj.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: Thank you,  
12 Chairman. With permission, can I explain my vote?

13 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Yes.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: Hart Island means  
15 so much to the family members that have the estimated  
16 one million family members that are buried there.  
17 But it means a lot to my district as well. It, a  
18 society should be judged on how they treat the  
19 deceased. This bill, although well intended, doesn't  
20 take into consideration many of the unintended  
21 consequences or factors or stakeholders, in  
22 particular City Island. We know that we have an  
23 obligation to those that are buried there, to make  
24 sure that they're buried in decency and respectful  
25 means and that they should be treated that way. To

2 have a largest public burial ground in today's age be  
3 unmaintained, lack service, transportations, and  
4 options and visitation rights is a concern to all of  
5 us. But there's too much uncertainty regarding the  
6 future land use. Who will make that decision? Will  
7 this be a half-measure? And that transfer from  
8 Corrections to Parks Department doesn't even  
9 alleviate the concerns that we have. Parks  
10 Department isn't currently equipped or doesn't have  
11 the resources to maintain their existing parklands  
12 and responsibilities. And unless we make a  
13 commitment to the Parks Department or any agency or  
14 department to run and have the oversight of Hart  
15 Island, Potter's Field, and pledge the resources they  
16 need to do so will be another well-intended but not  
17 meet the actual or strive to meet the needs that we  
18 are all fighting for. So I can't stress enough the  
19 complete lack of faith my constituents and that I  
20 have in the Department of Parks and Recreation,  
21 because they have not been able to accomplish the  
22 most basic tasks of maintaining current parkland and  
23 parkways. It's common knowledge that the Department  
24 of Parks is overwhelmed by the vast number of parks  
25 on this current jurisdiction, which is noted almost

2 in every hearing. As such, adding another major  
3 responsibility, this isn't just a park, this is a  
4 cemetery, one that needs the utmost care and  
5 attention and requires the higher standard of  
6 maintenance. It would be irresponsible for us not to  
7 dedicate the resources for this, for Hart Island to  
8 be maintained properly. So I firmly stand behind the  
9 majority of those that have shared their concerns and  
10 therefore not because I am, and I want to make sure  
11 that you hear this loud and clear, something should  
12 have been done a long time ago. The first priority  
13 should have been to preserve those that are buried  
14 there, that their bones and their remains do not wash  
15 out into the Long Island Sound. The effects of  
16 Hurricane Sandy is still being felt today as that  
17 earth is being unwashed out into the bay. We began  
18 work. It can't happen so enough. So I stand firmly  
19 with those that have stressed concerns because of the  
20 lack of commitment that this is going to allow and  
21 without the dedicated streamlining of funding for  
22 anyone to oversee this very historic, this very  
23 sensitive island is one that may serve as an  
24 injustice. So I will be voting against the bill in  
25 its current form. And until I see something with a

2 real commitment that spells out the future and  
3 outlines the standard in care, I can't support a bill  
4 like this. Thank you.

5 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: The vote  
6 currently stands at 7 in the affirmative, 1 in the  
7 negative, and no abstentions.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: Thank you,  
9 Chairman.

10 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you. We are  
11 joined by a former council member, Elizabeth Crowley,  
12 the original sponsor of this bill, and we are happy  
13 to have her say a few words.

14 ELIZABETH CROWLEY: Good afternoon. It's  
15 a pleasure to be back here today at the New York City  
16 Council. I want to thank council committee chair,  
17 Peter Koo, of the Parks and Recreation Committee, and  
18 the entire council, especially the speaker, Corey  
19 Johnson, as well as Council Member Mark Levine, who  
20 had a hearing about three years ago on the same bill  
21 and going back about eight years ago, I believe, when  
22 I first met Melinda Hunt of the Hart Island Project,  
23 I became passionate about fighting for the families  
24 and those who were buried on Hart Island, our city's  
25 potter's field. So over the years we made

2 incremental changes and were able to gain access more  
3 and more. However, today's vote puts us in a place  
4 where we've come a long way and we're bringing about  
5 real justice and real reform by providing access to  
6 this island to the public and making it a park once  
7 and for all. So I'm grateful to be here today to  
8 give my full support, and to be here as a former New  
9 York City Council member who championed the cause for  
10 the people and the families, and so it's a good day  
11 for the city. It's a good day for the City Council,  
12 and it's a good day for the families of loved one who  
13 are buried on Hart Island. I look forward to  
14 visiting soon with all of you and many, many New  
15 Yorkers who will be gaining access because of this  
16 important legislation. Thank you for your good work.  
17 And it's good to see everybody back here today.  
18 Thank you.

19 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you, Elizabeth  
20 Crowley, thank you. And so this meeting will be  
21 adjourned. [gavel]

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 December 3, 2019