New Attention From City Hall

by Peter B. Fleischer
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New York City's waterways and waterfronts have received special attention from both sides of City Hall this year, with the new mayor highlighting waterfront revitalization in his State of the City address, and the new City Council creating a Waterfronts Committee chaired by Brooklyn Councilmember David Yassky.

Yassky, speaking from the steps of City Hall, recently identified the city's "worst waterfront wastes" - areas along the waterfront that have great potential but are being neglected -- including the underused Staten Island Home Port, the mouth of the Flushing River in Queens, The Bronx's access-starved South East Coast and the giant salt pile on the Harlem River in Manhattan.". He called on the Bloomberg administration to review all city-owned, waterfront parcels, of which there are almost 200.

"You can not stop investing in the future because this year's budget is tight," Yassky said.

Yassky favors the creation of a comprehensive citywide waterfront plan. He praised the scores of volunteer organizations throughout the city that work to provide waterfront access for their communities. He stressed that he seeks "projects that bring people to the water, get them to use it, show them what is at stake and thereby build ongoing support for a waterfront agenda". His waterfront priorities include street-end parks, housing, open space, and ferries.

After Yassky's comments, Carter Craft, program director for the advocacy group, Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance, noted that more than a dozen, city and state agencies hold jurisdiction over the waterfront, and called for improved coordination among the public agencies.

Because of the budget crunch, ending forty years of coastal decay will require plans that are inexpensive or that profoundly catch the public imagination. State legislative support, bureaucratic coordination and community solidarity will also be necessary.

To advance a comprehensive waterfront program, new locations will need to be found for existing municipal uses. Developing contaminated land at waterfront sites requires legislation. Ferry route expansion needs public subsidy or private capital. The creative imagination of volunteer organizations and their inexpensive labor will need to be tapped. New York's

waterbound citizens will need to relearn their proximity to the sea and perhaps be newly taught its history. The list of what is needed is lengthy.

Waterfront resurgence will not occur overnight or by fiat. The three hundred-year development of New York harbor was incremental, entrepreneurial, and organic -- diverse harbor uses arose for the most part from local needs, as well as acts of God.

Today's ongoing efforts by the city's people to reclaim the waters are rooted in pioneering acts. From the Bronx River Alliance's twenty year struggle to restore its namesake river to the River Project's marine research in Tribeca, from the power boat fleets of Jamaica Bay seeking to extend maritime tradition to Floating the Apple's building and launching historic vessels, New Yorkers have already begun to reclaim their maritime heritage.

We need an inventory of what is already being done on the waterfront alongside the list of what has not been done, and both the council and the mayor should aim to assist these efforts. Newer, bigger plans should be harmonious with the numerous, popular, pioneering efforts that abound on city shores. The coast is large and diverse enough for nature, recreation, transportation and economic activity. A renaissance for both harbor tunnels and harbor herons is possible.

Peter B. Fleischer, currently writing a book on the New York City waterfront, was formerly a transportation and environment policy advisor to New York City Mayors David Dinkins and Rudy Giuliani.