by Peter B. Fleischer
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In this densely populated metropolis, the task of getting people to work, home and play is a complex and important undertaking. It is therefore an unfortunate side effect, that transportation on or along New York's waterways is among the biggest deterrents to recreation in and around the water. The shared use ethic that allows for a workable equilibrium in the city's streets, intersections and parks is now missing at the shore.

Wakes, the powerful, fast moving waves generated by the engines of some but not all boats can cause damage and be dangerous to other boats, property and people. This watery scourge has been noted recently as an ongoing, unregulated harbor menace. Ferries, hustling to maintain ever-expanding schedules, have adversely impacted marinas, harbor and dinner-cruise companies, fishermen and small boaters. Wake-caused waves from Hudson River ferries can reach distant Manhattan seawalls with powerful impact long after the vessel has passed. Damage from wakes can be devastating to moored vessels, dangerous to small craft on the water and sufficiently threatening as to preclude waterfront activity in advance.

Damage and inconvenience aside, few wake-sufferers actively oppose ferry traffic, a commuter alternative that helps reduce air pollution and roadway congestion. Still, the question remains, must ferries cause damaging wakes?

Evidence in New York harbor suggests otherwise. For years, ferry companies have operated "fast ferries", boats capable of thirty miles per hour and more, which, by design, generated minimal wakes. Powerful harbor tugboats, cruise ships and other large and industrial vessels operating in the Hudson produce smaller wakes without negative impact. The vessels with the most dangerous wakes, today, are slower, older boats. Their re-design or replacement would largely eliminate the threat.

Recent decisions by the Hudson River Park Trust may reveal "precluded use". The Trust, the very slow builder of the narrow, mostly stone and concrete "park" being developed in "medicine drop" steps along Manhattan's West Side has decided to eliminate "get-downs". Get-downs are waterfront spots, protected by guardrail gates, where city park visitors may descend a few steps to actually reach the water. Safety concerns, wakes included, have led to a park that will likely be built to preclude water access, access that is historic and currently available elsewhere by

design.

Ferry wakes are not the only transportation threat to waterfront access. Rail lines are a threat as well. Tracks and accompanying fence parallel the Bronx coast from the Westchester/Riverdale border to Hunts Point at the confluence of the Bronx and East Rivers. South of Riverdale, along a ten-mile stretch of shore, there are only two legal access points where peninsula-dwelling Bronx residents can reach the surrounding waters. Amtrak, Metro-North and freight lines form an iron curtain, denying water access, a basic right to a half million people.

A rising clamor for waterfront access has emerged. The Bronx River is being restored. Fishermen avoid fences and scramble over debris. Teenagers jump into the Harlem River from the rocky cliffs of the Spuyten Duyvil. Hunt's Point residents seek funding and support for a waterfront park. Their proposal needs cooperation from local rail and truck users.

Government holds the key to safe, shared use and access. The City Council has called for an inventory of waterfront uses. Mayor Bloomberg has called for shoreline economic development. Ferry companies rely on city, state and federal support, as do the railroads. Public funding should be linked to behavior that recognizes access and shared use as a New York virtue on land and at sea. For people living on an island, reaching the water should be a birthright not a life risk.

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