



Chairwoman

Donna Milrod
Deutsche Bank

Kent Barwick
Municipal Art Society

Peg Breen
NY Landmarks Conservancy

Tonio Burgos
Tonio Burgos and Associates,
Inc / Nyprocoa, Inc.

Michael Burke
Statue Cruises

Albert Butzel
Albert K. Butzel Law Office

Jay Clayton
Sullivan & Cromwell

Ian Danic
Electra Information Systems

Helena Durst
Durst Organization

Kenneth Fisher
Cozen O'Connor

Amy Jedlicka
Trinity Real Estate

Edith Kean
Landscape Designer

Richard Kennedy
Cushman & Wakefield, Inc.

Michael Klein
McKenna Long & Aldridge

Robert Levine
RAL Companies and Affiliates LLC

Amelia Rea Maguire
University of Miami Business School

Sean McDevitt
Maren Group

Sara Mirski
Recycled House

Cristyne Nicholas
Nicholas & Lence Communications

Marc Ricks
Goldman Sachs

Judith Rivkin
Christodora

Jay Schippers
Housing Resource Foundation

Thomas Secunda
Bloomberg LP

H. Claude Shostal
Regional Plan Association

Ivan Thornton
Fiduciary Management Group

Robert Yaro
Regional Plan Association

Executive Director

Robert Pirani
Regional Plan Association

*Organization for
affiliation only*

**Testimony of Robert Pirani
Executive Director**

**New York City Council
Committee on Lower Manhattan Redevelopment
Committee on Waterfronts
November 30, 2011**

RE: Oversight - Update on Governors Island

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and, more importantly, your continued interest in the future of Governors Island – truly one of the special places in New York. The City Council, through its budget and legislative responsibilities, clearly has an important role to play in the future of the Island. We appreciate your leadership on this issue.

Since 1995, the Governors Island Alliance has worked to celebrate the Island's rich history, create memorable parks and public spaces, and ensure appropriate reuse of the Island and its historic structures. We are successfully growing a constituency for the Island and its public resources through our Board of Directors, volunteers, and thousands of members.

I am pleased to echo the report from The Trust for Governors Island and the National Park Service about the progress made over the last year. **Of particular note, I want to thank the Mayor and the Council for their important capital investment in the Island last fiscal year. As you have heard, this funding has been put to work rehabilitating historic buildings, establishing potable water and other needed infrastructure, and building the first phase of the park.**

The result will be not just a better Island for its hundreds of thousands of visitors but also, critically, an Island that will be attractive to private sector investors. Such interest is critical for the Island redevelopment, and especially to forward the positive reuse the more than 50 nationally significant historic buildings on the Island.

Last year, the Mayor requested proposals for an applied engineering campus on any of several sites around the City. Despite the Island's suitability, only one of the many proposals received was for Governors Island. In conversations with university representatives and city officials, the reason is clear: The Island was viewed as long term venture as opposed to a shovel-ready site: long on charm and short on practicality.

The capital commitment made last year by the Mayor and Council is critical toward changing this perception and reality. The anticipated approval of the Draft Generic Environmental Impact Statement will enable work to begin on some critically needed public improvements. We salute the hard work of the staff and leadership of the Trust, the National Monument, the Mayor, Council, and other elected officials in making this happen.

But it is clear that the redevelopment of the Island still faces many considerable challenges. I want to highlight these for you and **ask that the Council continue its leadership to help the City address them by ensuring that**

1. **Planning for the Island continues to move forward;**

4 Irving Place, 7th Fl.
New York, NY 10003
tel: 646.820.7556
fax: 212.253.5666
email: info@governorsislandalliance.org
www.governorsislandalliance.org
twitter: @govisalliance

2. **There are sufficient resources to execute these plans; and**
3. **Address the recurring problem of helicopter noise.**

1. **Moving forward on planning for the Island**

The proposed Phase I Park improvements and the proposed creation of needed water, transportation, and communications infrastructure will transform the Island. **We urge the Council to help ensure that the project continues to move forward by supporting the approval of the Generic Environmental Impact Statement (GEIS) now under review so these improvements can move forward expeditiously.**

The decisions to focus park improvements around Liggett Hall, the historic district, and move forward on the sports fields are excellent choices for this initial action. The designs are spectacular and well thought out. The provision of potable water and modern telecommunications are clearly a priority. Removing and replacing the sea wall outside of the historic district with a rip-rap revetment is a creative engineering solution that will not only save public money, but is likely to better protect the island's shoreline and improve its ecology at the same time.

While we appreciate the need for creation of a generic environmental impact statement, with more detailed analysis for Phase I of the Park Plan and less details on the later phases, it does require that the Trust take care to ensure that decisions made now about the Phase I Park, Island circulation and storm water management consider how this construction will be affected by any future changes the development zones and historic district.

More importantly, the Trust makes clear that it is their expectation that any future development on the Island will require creation of a special zoning district and Island-specific design guidelines. Those decisions will be critically important, especially as the Trust appropriately anticipates that RFP's for the Island will be issued incrementally.

As the Trust moves forward with the next phases of planning, the Park and Open Space Master Plan and/or rezoning should be sure to address the Park's status within the larger systems of federal, state, and city parks, and options for its long term stewardship. Regardless of who has responsibility for its day-to-day management, **the 87 acres that is subject of the Park and Public Space Plan should be mapped as public parkland that will afford it the protection in perpetuity that this public investment deserves. The Council can help make this happen during the rezoning process if not before.**

The Council could also help ensure that the plans encourage public maritime use, especially along the protected northern end of the Island. The area was historically used by the Army and Coast Guard for their marina. Pier 101 is currently used by ferry operators and the Downtown Boathouse and the adjoining Pier 102, owned by the National Park Service, will soon be opened for such uses. The Harbor School Marine Science Technology Center – which will include a boat house - is also located along this stretch.

2. **Ensure adequate capital and operating funding going forward.**

We are thrilled that the Mayor and Council allocated \$ 77 million to forward improvements to the Island this past fiscal year. This is a substantial investment,

especially in this economic climate. I would to particularly thank the Council for allocating funding for the Harbor School's Marine Science and Technology Center.

Over the next two years, the Mayor has proposed more than \$ 250 million in additional capital funding. We urge that the Council support this investment.

Providing these funds is critical to meeting the public's interest in the Island. Most critically, more than one million square feet of historic buildings remain empty for most of the year. Preserving these irreplaceable assets requires that they be occupied year round. There are also 33 acres for new development that can add life to the Island and the economy of the City. These tenants will defray yearly City expenditures by undertaking routine maintenance and paying for utilities and ensure that Island stay lively all year long. But the only way to attract this investment is by continuing the plans now underway.

The current operating budget for The Trust for Governors Island is approximately \$ 11 million. Like every public agency this is considerably less than it was just a few years ago. It is funding that is critical to the maintenance of the Island's historic buildings, and to enable continued free public access to the Island over the summer season. **We urge the Council to continue to provide this modest amount to ensure that New Yorkers and visitors can continue to enjoy the Island.** In a city starved for open space resources, Governors Island provides an affordable and close to home summer destination. We estimate that the roughly 100,000 visitors to the Island from outside the New York metropolitan area contributed about \$ 15 million to the City's economy. This visitation and brand identity is critical to the marketing of the Island and its historic buildings to private investors. **In particular, we feel it is critical to maintain free ferry service.**

I would also note that the Island, like the rest of New York City, should have access as needed to the maintenance services of city agencies like the Departments of Sanitation, Transportation, and Police. Of particular note is the Fire Department's provision of fire service to the Island. By removing the fire company from the Island, the City has taken an unacceptable risk with the Island's work force and recently rehabilitated historic landmarks. These historic buildings are the keystone of the Island's revitalization and uniqueness. Response times to a fire on the Island are, at best, three times and more likely six times the four minute standard travel time recommended by the National Fire Protective Association for first responders (and roughly the current city average). **While we are sympathetic to the current budget situation, we ask that the Council move to reinstate a full time fire company on the Island.**

3. Helicopter noise

The popularity of helicopter tours has created near continuous flights over the Island and its National Park. These noisy intrusions disrupt Island programs and reduce the value of this public asset. We understand that our Congressional representatives, EDC, and the tour operators are talking about ways of reducing the impact of these flights, including staggering flight times, increasing altitude, and ensuring that flights stay over water and preferably west of the Island. But if these discussions are not fruitful we ask that the Council consider legislative means of addressing the situation.

Thank you. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.