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PREPARED TESTIMONY OF PAUL GERTNER, CHAIR OF THE HARBOR RING COMMITTEE

BEFORE THE MTA TRANSPORTATION REINVENTION COMMITTEE

Hello, my name is Paul Gertner. I am a resident of Brooklyn and Chair of the Harbor Ring Committee.

Our committee was started in 2011 to advocate for a pedestrian/bicycle pathway around the entire New York Harbor. Our committee members include staff from Regional Plan Association, National Park Service, and the law firm of DLA Piper, which supplies pro bono support. Also some of us are active in Transportation Alternatives, of which I am on the Advisory Council. While these organizations are supportive of our mission we operate independent of their oversight.

Much of the proposed pathway is already in place in the form of dedicated paths in both New York and New Jersey. Other portions are passable on regular streets and sidewalks which can eventually be upgraded to protected paths. However the missing link in all of this is the absence of a pathway on the Verrazano Bridge, which is operated by the MTA’s Bridges and Tunnels Corporation. Our map is available on line, along with other information at [www.harborring.org](http://www.harborring.org). We have also published a route map, copies of which are being supplied to this Commission.

Regarding the Verrazano, newspaper accounts document Brooklyn residents protesting the absence of a path on the bridge’s opening day, 50 years ago this November. In 1997 the city’s Department of City Planning financed a feasibility study of a pathway by Ammann & Whitney, the bridge’s designers. The study showed how the existing structure and access ramps could accommodate a pathway without any impact on traffic lanes. The cost estimate at the time was $26.5 million, roughly $47 million today, including maintenance costs. Nothing happened following this study.

In November 2012, NYU’s Rudin Center for Transportation issued a report entitled Transportation During and After Hurricane Sandy. In the face of gas shortages, the study reported that “the recent expansion in the city’s bicycle infrastructure provided a contingency option for commuters in Brooklyn and Queens”. With even the Staten Island ferry down for several days there was no such option for residents of Staten Island and no viable alternative for residents of either borough to cross the bridge. The study recommended that bike infrastructure continue to be improved including an evaluation of a Verrazano path.

Other important reasons for a pathway are for everyday bike commuting, for tourism and for economic development. Regarding the later, the north shore of Staten Island has received increased attention lately for real estate and tourist development. The New York Wheel and planned outlet malls are largely intended to draw tourists off the ferry. A large new residential development on the harbor, between the ferry and Fort Wadsworth, is planned at Stapleton. The National Park Service is working to improve bike connections between the fort, which is adjacent the bridge and the ferry. A pathway could link all of these attractions to both the ferry and to the Brooklyn Greenway path system on the other side of the bridge.

The importance of bike infrastructure as a locational amenity, particularly along the city’s waterfront, has been reported in the press and is conventional wisdom to anyone who has used these facilities. For instance the west side of Manhattan path is said to be the busiest in the country. The popularity of the Brooklyn Bridge Park speaks for itself. Finally the popularity of bridge paths for tourists, such as the Brooklyn and Golden Gate bridges is well known. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey has recognized these benefits and has formally declared making bike and pedestrian access to its bridges an official policy. Note that the rebuilt Bayonne Bridge will have a greatly expanded path and the new Goethals Bridge will have a pathway for the first time. The following is a statement from the PANY Bike Plan:

**An increasing number of people are discovering bicycling not only as a leisure-time activity with great health benefits, but also as a socially responsible and green commuting option. In keeping with our mission to meet the critical transportation needs of the bi-state region, The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey supports bicycling as an important and sustainable mode of travel. We seek to meet emerging demand by integrating improved bicycle access, safe bicycle lanes, and secure bicycle parking and storage into existing Port Authority buildings, roadways and other facilities owned or operated by the Port Authority.**

Isn’t it time MTA Bridges and Tunnels adapts the same plan?

In 2013 MTA Bridges and Tunnels issued an RFP to prepare a Master Plan for a bike path, as part of a larger engineering study to reconfigure access ramps on the bridge. The winning proposal by Parsons Brinckerhoff (PB) recommended that the MTA secure public input into the bike portion of the study. According to the MTA’s experts:

**For a Master Plan to have credibility, it must at some point involve the users, stakeholders and local communities in its formulation. It must also follow a process that is transparent, inclusive, flexible and updated on a regular basis.**

The PB contract was awarded in December 2013, but left out any mention of public input. The contract itself was kept from the public by the MTA and was only accessible via a FOIL request from our attorneys. While we applaud and support the MTA in investing in this study, we note that the 1997 study was very detailed and showed proved the feasibility. We understand that it needs to be updated, particularly in light of more recent security concerns, but the basic findings should remain. However we agree with the MTA’s own experts that public input is essential in order to insure a full accounting of the projects potential benefits. The concern is that if for some reason the MTA decides against a path based on a less than comprehensive estimate of its value, and if ramp redesign proceeds without a path, the possibility of a path could be eliminated for the foreseeable future.

We are asking your Commission to join us in getting MTA Bridges and Tunnels to make their planning process more transparent. And further, given what we already know from the 1997 study, we ask you to call on the MTA to start preparing now, in advance of the Master Plan, for next steps of engineering and capital budgeting.

I thank you for your time today. I would be happy to take any questions now or via email.

Paul Gertner

paulgertner@gmail.com