

Testimony of Merritt Birnbaum
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The Friends of Governors Island
Before the New York City Council's Waterfronts Committee

November 14, 2016

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of The Friends of Governors Island, formerly Governors Island Alliance.

Founded in 1995 to advocate for the turnover of Governors Island from the federal government to the people of New York, we are the independent nonprofit that supports the Island with volunteers, financial resources and advocacy. Our goal is to ensure the continued growth and vitality of this remarkable resource for all New Yorkers. Working in partnership with the Trust for Governors Island and the National Park Service, we run the Island's membership and volunteer programs, raise money to supplement public funding, and advocate for measures that improve access to and enjoyment of the Island by the public.

With its central location, shared journey by boat, and lack of permanent residents, Governors Island is one of the few green spaces in New York City routinely enjoyed by community members of all five boroughs. A focus of the Friends' mission is increasing visitorship from landlocked neighborhoods that lack immediate access to large, safe open green spaces. We conduct an annual survey to determine geographic distribution and develop strategies for diversifying visitorship. This year, the Island welcomed more than 580,000 visitors, and our survey revealed that 72% were New York City residents. From a sample size of roughly 1,800 people, 88% of all New York City zip codes were represented, and no single zip code accounted for more than 2.5% of visitors.

While Manhattan and Brooklyn continue to make up the largest shares of NYC visitorship, we were heartened that 13% of 2016 visitors hailed from Queens, despite the relative distance and lack of direct transportation routes. Our planned agenda for 2017 includes targeted outreach to schools and camps in lower income neighborhoods in the outer boroughs to encourage more groups to take advantage of the Island.

During a time when seasonal visitorship is at an all-time high, and in keeping with the Mayor's vision to activate the Island as a 365-day per year hub of innovation, our work to ensure that all New Yorkers can access and enjoy the Island has never been more important. We look forward to working with our partners and the City Council to ensure that all New Yorkers feel that Governors Island is their Island.

Today I would like to draw attention to one issue that continues to negatively impact every single activity on the Island – from seasonal cultural programs to the year-round secondary education provided by the 430-seat Urban Assembly New York Harbor School – the unending barrage of tourist helicopter flights over New York Harbor. The Friends' has long advocated for a full ban on these noisy, polluting helicopters that ruin the visitor

experience and provide no discernible benefit to the economic health of our city.

Last year, working with community members and City and State elected officials, we organized public rallies in support of Council-proposed legislation to ban these non-essential flights, of which there were 59,000 in 2015 alone. That's over 320 takeoffs and landings every day.

In February 2016, in response to our collective efforts, the City reached an agreement with the tourist helicopter operators to prohibit flights over Governors Island, suspend all flights on Sundays, and reduce the total number of flights by half by 2017. We were pleased to support this important step toward addressing the problem.

I cannot underscore more strongly the difference in quality of life we now experience on Sundays during the public season. For one day each week, the docents, park rangers, artists, performers, musicians and other programmers can be heard by their audiences. The noise of birds, insects and breezes are audible in our landscapes – and a tranquil retreat is provided to those living in one of the noisiest cities on the planet.

While the Sunday ban has had an unbelievable impact on that one day, unfortunately, the other pieces of the deal have fallen short of their target.

Section 7 of the Concession Agreement mandated a 20% reduction in the number of flights by June 1, a further 20% reduction by October 1, and another 10% reduction by the end of the year for a total decrease of 50%. Based on our observations, this reduction has not been honored. Even considering that tours are no longer flying on Sundays, there has been an observable increase in flights over the past several months. Beginning early Monday morning and continuing until Saturday evening, we estimate there are 25-35 flights per hour. That amounts to 50-70 hourly takeoffs and landings, which is consistent with 2015 levels – and nowhere near the promised 40% reduction. We would like an update from the City on its process for monitoring and enforcing the reductions, as well as a copy of any reports provided by the industry on the flight schedules.

Furthermore, Section 12 of the Concession Agreement calls for ongoing environmental reviews at the Downtown Manhattan Heliport. We respectfully request copies be made public of any reports of the air quality at this location.

I want to add one anecdote: we recently had a film crew on the Island for five days. They were hired under a grant we received to create a marketing video for Governors Island. The process of conducting any type of interview over the course of that filming was ludicrous. It didn't matter the time of day or the day of the week - the din was unending, and any time a person began speaking on camera we had to stop them within 30 seconds because the passing helicopters rendered the audio unusable.

I urge the Waterfront Committee to look into this issue and look forward to hearing how the City Council is ensuring that the helicopter operators are adhering to the Concession Agreement.