



## Public Access Work Group

### Meeting summary

April 21, 2016

11:30 a.m.

17 Battery Place, Suite 915

### Overview

On April 21, the Public Access Work Group convened for a meeting to look back at the baseline assessment of public access and stewardship in the NY-NJ Harbor Estuary developed by the NY-NJ Harbor & Estuary Program and the US Forest Service Urban Field Station, ***Connecting with our Waterways: Public Access and Its Stewardship in the NY-NJ Harbor Estuary***, and to discuss public access goals for the NY-NJ Harbor & Estuary Program. The meeting included brief presentations on the recently-released report by Kate Boicourt (Hudson River Foundation, NY-NJ HEP) and Michelle Johnson (USFS), and by Rob Pirani (Hudson River Foundation, NY-NJ HEP) on the NY-NJ Harbor & Estuary Program's Action Plan revision, followed by group discussion.

The current public access goal for the NY-NJ Harbor & Estuary Program (HEP) and target statement for the Hudson-Raritan Estuary Comprehensive Restoration Plan is to *"improve public access; improve direct access to and from the water and create linkages to other recreational areas, as well as provide increased opportunities for fishing, boating, swimming, hiking, education or passive recreation."* In addition, the current HEP Action Plan contains priority actions (below) which may have shifted or been completed since the last Action Plan.

### 2011-2016 HEP Action Plan priority actions

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- 3.1 Identify areas within the region where public access is limited and opportunities to develop access should be explored more actively in partnership with local advocacy organizations.
- 3.2 Develop a nomination and recording process whereby public access sites will receive recognition and be included/tracked.
- 3.3 Work to increase the visibility and need for public access to be placed higher on the agenda of public agencies involved in waterfront development.
- 3.4 Support the activities of partner organizations that promote and or enhance opportunities for access.
- 3.5 Develop/deliver public education concerning water safety, especially regarding multiple users
- 3.6 Develop a comprehensive Estuary-wide water trail map
- 3.7 Coordinate efforts to ensure that public access is coordinated with restoration opportunities

To address these shifts in the next iteration of its Action Plan, NY-NJ HEP is conducting listening sessions throughout the harbor, including more focused topic area-specific sessions with experts such as this meeting with with the Public Access Work Group. A synthesized summary of the group discussion is highlighted below, formatted to inform these priorities.

## Group discussion

- A. Current state of public access:** the *Connecting with our Waterways* report provides one baseline measurement of the current state of access in which 37% of the NY-NJ Harbor Estuary's linear waterfront edge consists of a public park or otherwise publicly-accessible property or publicly-owned wildlife area. By another measure, only 17% of the population living within one half-mile of the waterfront has access to a waterfront public space of some kind. This baseline suggests that further ground needs to be gained before goals for access are achieved, but also highlights a need to further define goals and potential actions regarding how we can increase that access and where (physically and programmatically) efforts should be placed. The quality (sufficient funding, programming, maintenance) and level (can you touch the water, can you launch or dock a boat) of access at waterfront public spaces remains less-defined and more qualitative.
- B. Goals / potential priority action areas and actions:** the group discussed potential goals within the overarching Public Access Goal that could improve access to the water in the future, centering on the following themes.
- 1. Increase public access quality and quantity:** in addition to increasing the physical extent (and equitable distribution) of accessible waterfront, there was expressed a need to highlight examples or standards for quality public waterfront spaces. Perspectives on increasing the quality of access also centered on the various levels of access (can you touch the water, launch a boat, etc.) throughout the harbor and increasing maintenance or stewardship in higher need areas. Measures of quality may shift depending on public access typology (e.g. in sensitive wildlife areas, constructing a boat launch may not be considered an increase to quality). **Potential actions include:**
    - i. Identify sites or regions that have the highest potential for increased access and work with partners to increase their visibility and viability.**
    - ii. Highlight success stories.** Lucy Robson suggested looking at [Green Flag Ireland](#) as a potential model. The NY-NJ Harbor & Estuary Program investigated a few approaches to assessing access quality using desktop analysis and assessment data provided by stewardship organizations. However, the extent of data was not considered sufficient for formal or quantitative analysis methods at this time. This information was collected and catalogued, however, as user/steward perspectives on access ([Appendix C: Site Quality as Defined by Assessment Respondents](#)), which could be used for finer-scale analyses, particularly by partners working closer to the ground level.
    - iii. Analyze and define goals for direct access** – how much? Where? And for what scale are we aiming?
    - iv. Evaluate opportunities within local planning and zoning code to increase the quantity and quality of public access.** Explore opportunities at the planning and zoning level to encourage expansion of access in certain areas of highest need, or to increase or otherwise ensure the quality of that access.
    - v. Improve ability of organizations to conduct on-water programming:** in addition to funding for on-water educational programs, work with partners to seek opportunities to reduce the barriers to getting on the water. For example, public parks and individual boating programs usually have liability coverage for their activities, but liability policy presents a barrier to on-water activities in some public spaces.

2. **Increase support for programming in areas of highest need:** we have a regional view of areas where increased programming may be needed to bring people to the waterfront as well as stewardship groups' impressions of where increased programming or funding for programming may be needed. Increased funding and focus should be placed in these areas. **Potential actions:**
  - i. **Share site quality information with partners that conduct programming at the local and planning scale** as a resource for more detailed needs interpretation and informing local action.
  - ii. **Identify overlaps between the types of programming or resources that are more generally needed in higher need areas** (e.g. health/recreation, air quality, open space, etc.), **and ways in which waterfront programming or increased access might help address those issues** as well as increasing the number of people getting to and on the water and learning about the estuary.
  - iii. **Target grant-giving programs toward areas of need:** emphasize higher need areas within the Hudson River Foundation and NY-NJ HEP grants programs and share information with partners who provide similar grants programs in the Harbor region.
3. **Support and expand outreach and awareness about public access opportunities and safety:** harbor-wide, awareness of opportunities for public access is limited, and many residents of the NY-NJ Harbor Estuary area do not perceive of the waterways as safe either due to health concerns, inability to swim, or boat traffic. Boat traffic and navigational safety varies throughout the harbor; in the most urban/active reaches, some experience or an experienced guide are important. **Potential actions:**
  - i. **Support outreach through grant programs and partners**, including community organizations or municipalities involved in planning or public programming (e.g. NJDEP's outreach to municipalities conducting public access plans or community boards in New York City). Conduct informational briefings of elected officials about the current state of access in the areas they manage.
  - ii. **Revise the harbor-wide print (and potentially on-line) water trail map** and increase communication about public waterfront programming (particularly boating) activities. This could also increase awareness of safety and distribution of launch and landing/pull-out points.
4. **Increase the safety of public access:** in addition to the perceptions of safety in the harbor, there are many actual safety considerations that need to be addressed to improve public access. However, actual levels of safety vary throughout the harbor, are not well-understood, and are not necessarily well-matched with perceived levels of safety. Water quality impacts, actual or perceived, are of concern to those that even can swim or may have an interest in wading or getting onto a boat. And impacts are complicated to understand / be aware of (even for the well-versed), as one area may be safe for primary contact one week, but not immediately after following a rain event. **Potential actions:**
  - i. **Undertake a more detailed analysis of the actual and perceived safety of the Harbor Estuary's waterways for various and means to address safety concerns of harbor waters** through waterfront planning (e.g. revision of NYC's Waterfront Plan or other municipal plans), recreational and commercial waterway user education, facility improvement, or other means.
  - ii. **Improve and increase communication about immediate water quality concerns** (e.g. CSO events).

**Next steps and follow-up:** Following the public listening sessions, NY-NJ HEP will synthesize these goals and potential priority actions for review and refinement by the Public Access Work Group in summer 2016.

### **Attendees**

Helena Andreyko, Hudson River Foundation  
Graeme Birchall, Downtown Boathouse  
Kate Boicourt, Hudson River Foundation  
Rob Buchanan, NYC Water Trail Association  
Hugh Carola, Hackensack Riverkeeper  
Laurie Howard, Passaic River Coalition  
Michelle Johnson, US Forest Service Urban Field Station  
Andrea Leshak, NY/NJ Baykeeper  
Robert Pirani, Hudson River Foundation  
Lucy Robson, New Yorkers For Parks  
Jose Soegaard, Waterfront Alliance  
Ahmed Tigani, Manhattan Borough President's Office  
Matthew Washington, Manhattan Borough President's Office  
Allan Zaretsky, NYCDPCP