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Director

## Summary of Discussion and Next Steps from Randall's Island Workshop December 13, 2006

On December 13, 2006, the NYU-Wagner Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management hosted a workshop with the Randall's Island Sports Foundation (RISF) and with New York planning and transportation leaders to address transportation access to the Island as well as on Island circulation.

### Background

Allison C. de Cerreño, director of the Rudin Center, provided welcoming remarks and outlined the goals for the meeting. She noted that while the RISF had been working for some time to increase access to the island, with the current construction timelines, transportation has become a more urgent matter. The goal of the day's discussion was, thus, to review current plans and determine a series of actionable steps to be taken so that RISF can implement an integrated and sustainable transportation strategy for the island.

Aimee Boden, executive director of RISF, provided a brief historical background of RISF and the steps taken to date regarding transportation to and on the island. According to Ms. Boden, the longstanding issue of access to the island became especially clear when RISF organized several large-scale summer programs in 1994. With upwards of 30,000 people arriving on the island each day, it quickly became apparent that safe, low-cost, and regular transportation was important, especially for those without cars. Since then, there have been numerous special events held on the island. While they occur over a shorter period of time, they again demonstrate the limitations of the current transportation network to bring people to the island on a more regular basis.

Randall's Island has many improvement projects that have already begun or are slated to begin in the next few years. These projects include a Water Park, a 20-court Tennis Center, a Visitors/Nature Center, additional pathway sections, and extensive environmental restoration. Sixty-five new and improved playing fields will also begin construction in 2007. The expansion and upgrade of park facilities will inevitably bring more people to the island and hastens the need to improve island access and, potentially, mass transit service to Randall's Island. Currently, the majority of park visitors arrive by automobile, but since there will not be a substantial amount of new parking built on the island, it is imperative that alternative modes of transportation be identified.

Thus, the key challenge is to identify, develop and encourage alternate modes of transportation to the island, including bus, ferry, walking, and biking.

### Discussion

The discussion touched on all of these points, as well as on potential transportation demand management (TDM) and on-island access. With respect to TDM, several in the group noted that there should be a fee for parking that would vary based upon time of day and season as well as type of event (the latter of which is now done to a degree). However, such fees should be coordinated with provision of alternate modes of transportation in order to be truly effective at encouraging people to shift their preferred mode of transport from the car to either public or non-motorized transportation.

With respect to on-island transportation, the representatives from RISF explained that there are already a number of bikeways and pedestrian walkways (in some cases shared, in other cases separated) around the island. However, recognizing that tolerances for walking vary, additional thought must be given to accommodating those who are unable or unwilling to walk longer distances, particularly when vehicular access is being discouraged. Potential solutions include golf cart-like vehicles, trolleys, and shuttles.

**Public Transportation.** Currently, there is limited bus service to the island. The M-35 is the only bus that makes stops on the island but service is infrequent and many are already uncomfortable using this option since the M-35 is used by a large number of individuals who use this route to access the shelters and psychiatric hospital on the island. The M-60, which has been experiencing a growth in ridership runs past the island, and several members of the group asked whether a stop could be added on the Island. However, MTA representatives noted that making even one stop on the island would defeat the purpose of the M-60 since it would add substantially to the current commute for everyone else. Thus, this is not a likely option.

The MTA representatives also stressed the need for more data since it is data and projections that drive decisions for adding bus service, whether it is new routes, extended routes, or expanded times of service. Beyond the data needs, there are serious operational concerns as well since the current configuration on the bridge ramps makes crossing over in certain spots dangerous. Some of the planned changes on the ramps may solve this, but that remains to be seen. An alternative, at least for those looking for access from the Bronx, would be to add an additional stop near the anticipated future pedestrian crossing. Further study relating to bus turn around and lay over at this location is required. There was some discussion around the table about potentially moving the pedestrian crossing several blocks west to make bus access easier, but this may not be feasible.

Of note, at special events, buses move more than 13,000 people per hour on and off the island. However, as noted before, these are not sustained movements over a long period of time. Also, currently such arrangements, while they have been very successful, are made on an ad hoc basis. Given the likely draw of the Water Park and the other facilities, such arrangements need to become more permanent and institutionalized so there is a regular process in place to move large numbers of people via public transportation onto and off the island each day.

While much of the discussion focused on the Bronx, and a moderate amount on Manhattan (there is also pedestrian access already in place from Manhattan and a number of bus and subway stops within close distance of them), Queens remains a more difficult challenge. Despite the recent improvements made to the Queens pedestrian ramp of the Triborough Bridge – including a new drop down location that significantly shortens the walking distance – the journey still remains a prohibitively long one for your average park user. In addition, there is currently no regular bus service from Queens (though for special events, there is an express bus for this purpose). No obvious alternatives are apparent from Queens for improved pedestrian access and, without data, the MTA representatives suggested, it would be too early to discuss potential shifts and/or additions to Queens bus service.

**Ferries.** As an island, ferry service holds tremendous appeal and, indeed, there is a new ferry dock and ferries have been providing service for special events since 1996. Current special event service is provided by NY Waterway, but additional carriers may become involved to fill specific new needs. There are plans to expand ferry service in other parts of the city, but mostly in the southern part of Manhattan, so opening up the route to Randall's Island may not be feasible. Again, data is important here, to demonstrate potential demand. It is quite possible there would be enough demand to make ferry service appealing for certain seasons or certain days during peak season.

Other issues arise related to ferry service. In particular, the issue of safety and crowd control as people await the ferries on either side. A representative from New York City DOT noted that this has been a concern during special events. Who exactly should be responsible for these crowds remains unaddressed; again, the arrangements have been on an ad hoc basis. If ferries are to become a more regular means of transport to/from the island, these relationships would need to be institutionalized as well. (One person noted the possibility of amphibious vehicles and suggested they might be worth evaluating.)

**Bicycles and Pedestrians.** As noted earlier, there are several footbridges/bicycle bridges to the island, and several more being considered. Footbridges/bicycle bridges are an obvious and important part of any access plan for Randall's Island. However, in order for footbridges to be a significant transportation option they must first be safe. They need to be well lit and with sufficient number of people using them so that they are perceived as and are, in actuality, safe alternatives. If bicycling is to become a serious alternative for access, the regulations that force individuals to walk their bicycles instead of riding may also need to

be addressed on the Triborough Bridge – especially for Queens-bound access. Once on the island, there are a number of bike paths and there is discussion of linking the island with the New York City Greenway.

**Broad Issues.** Several broad issues were raised which are again stressed here:

- Formal coordination needs to occur at an institutional level to make the current special events ad hoc arrangements more regular for the planned use of the park. This means coordinating between RISF, NYCDOT, MTA, the NYPD, and the parks police, and perhaps others to discuss issues of crowd control on both sides of the waterways, reverse flow lanes on and off the island, express bus service, and ferry service, among other things.
- Data is needed to justify new or modified routes and/or attract interest in alternative modes.
- Security and safety need to be addressed more formally.

### **Next Steps**

Several steps were identified that will help move this process forward for RISF. They are noted below.

1. Data is needed on demand, assignments and crime. RISF should continue to work with the company building the Water Park by utilizing their projections of numbers and locations from which they think visitors will likely be coming to the island.
2. RISF might consider reaching out to the following stakeholders:
  - a. Park and City police – likely a session should be held with representatives from the local New York City Police Department precinct, park police and the MTA, as well as with other stakeholders involved with either bus or ferry service. This would aid in the coordination of efforts and institutionalization of processes.
  - b. Public Schools – school buses are often used to access the island so it would make sense to bring the New York City public schools into the discussion related to needs and potential alternatives.
  - c. Other Stakeholders – It was recommended that RISF continue to coordinate with the Harlem River Task Force and CIVITAS.
3. Funding sources
  - a. Now is the time to reach out to Congressional delegates regarding potential funding in the new transportation bill.
  - b. Identify other potential funding sources by looking at where other groups obtain funds. The following, in particular, were mentioned: the South Bronx Greenway Project and Sustainable South Bronx and Hunts Point.
  - c. Encourage the creation of a business improvement district, working with the private entities and concessionaries already on or interested in coming to the island. A business district would then be in a better position to help obtain alternate sources of funding.
4. Follow up meetings
  - a. RISF will hold meetings with each of the surrounding Boroughs, including elected officials, Community Boards and advocacy groups, in order to identify specific issues and advance transportation initiatives from particular locations in these Boroughs.
  - b. RISF will seek the advice of these representatives in how best to reach out to the communities at large with plans for increased Park access.
  - c. RISF will follow up with Workshop participants in order to advance particular transportation initiatives.