Ferry Transportation in the Outer Boroughs of New York City

Bhavana Lalwani, Susan Pak, Lisa Puran

“We’re the ultimate coastal city. But somehow we haven’t had a true ferry system in decades…we need to right this wrong.”

-- Mayor Bill De Blasio

Resolution 2005 – 4001

Resolution calling for the New York City Council to implement a ferry system in the outer boroughs of New York City, targeting areas such as Astoria, the South Bronx, Southern Brooklyn, Lower East Side, and the Rockaways.
History of the Ferry System & Need for New Established Routes

WHEREAS, In New York City, the Staten Island Ferry and East River Ferry provide an essential and alternative method of transportation connecting the boroughs of Staten Island, Queens, Brooklyn and Manhattan. A major concern, which led to this resolution, is that many other residents near waterfront communities have to travel quite a distance to get to the nearest bus or subway. For example, in Astoria, it takes a long time for the people living near the waterfronts to reach the N and Q trains, which are the “lifeblood of Astoria.” Therefore, if we have the alternative transportation of ferries, it will tie all the boroughs together in a feasible way and make it easier for commuters who do not live near a bus or subway. This development will also help resolve the overcrowding issues in the subways and reduce the use of cars in the city. Ferries will provide a faster and efficient way to get to the outer boroughs. They are environmentally friendly since they make use of natural waterways and run on biodiesel fuel. Many ferries linking the outer boroughs were discontinued because of economic development, recently the Rockaway ferries being one of them. Currently, only the Staten Island ferry and East River ferry are functioning. Mayor de Blasio is trying to implement the five-borough ferry service, bringing back the ferry system. The fares would be the same as taking a subway or a bus. He is trying to connect Wall Street and midtown of Manhattan to isolated areas like Red Hook in Brooklyn and the Rockaways in Queens. Many people support this, including Councilman Ulrich and Councilman Constantinides, as it is an efficient, and sustainable method of transportation.
1.1 The Staten Island Ferry is one of the last remaining vestiges of the ferry system in New York City. In the 18th century, private individuals with “periaugers” conducted the ferry service. They were shallow-draft, twin-mast sailboats, which were used for local traffic in New York harbor. In the early 19th century, the former New York governor, Daniel D. Tompkins obtained a charter for Richmond Turnpike Company. The company was planning to build a highway across Staten Island, but it was granted the right to run a ferry in the area instead. The company is the direct ancestor to the Staten Island Ferry. The company ran the first powered ferry from New York to Staten Island in 1817, the steam-powered Nautilus. It cost 25 cents and was half price for children. Captain John De Forest, who was the brother-in-law of Cornelius Vanderbilt, commanded the Nautilus. The ferry became significant in the 1950s when Staten Island developed rapidly. However, the poor conditions and the limited schedule was the main problems of the boats. When the Staten Island Railway opened in 1860, it caused an increase in traffic, so newer boats were acquired. In 1884, the competing ferry services controlled by Vanderbilt were sold to the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and operated by the Staten Island Rapid Transit Railroad, which became known as Staten Island Railway. The accident on June 14, 1901 caused the City of New York to control the ferries.

A Jersey Central ferry struck the ferry as it was leaving the port, causing the ferry to sink immediately. Five passengers ended up missing and were assumed to have drowned. The ferry service was under the City’s Department of Docks and Ferries in 1905. It is the only non-vehicular mode of transportation between Staten Island and Manhattan and it is also at no cost. Today, the ferry provides service to around 22 million people a year with 70,000 passengers a day not including weekends from St. George on Staten Island to Whitehall Street in lower Manhattan so that is 109 daily trips. It runs 24 hours and 7 days a week. It is a 5-mile ride that is 25 minutes, with a view of the New York Harbor. The Staten Island Ferry is run by the City of New York to transport people to and from Staten Island. A rough estimate of 37,180 trips are made per year.
1.2 We first interviewed commuters from Staten Island who have used or currently use ferries to commute to Manhattan to get some insight regarding the ferry system. Many of the commuters from Staten Island support the idea of ferries with some few exceptions. We interviewed three commuters from Staten Island, with two supporting the idea of expanding the ferry system to other boroughs. The two commuters that support the idea of expanding the ferry to other boroughs use it on a daily basis whereas the other commuter uses the express bus service. This could be the reason why the commuter disagrees with the idea of expanding the ferry system. The commuter who disagrees has stated, “I don’t think it’s a good idea to expand because the other boroughs have public transportation such as trains and buses that connect them. Staten Island does not because it is an island.” Another reason for this difference is that the two commuters are well known about the isolated neighborhoods in other boroughs, which could be the reason why the two agree with the idea of ferries being expanded. One of the two commuters that agree to the idea of ferries being implemented is from the personal experience. The commuter thinks that it’s a good idea to bring access to the ferries that have long commutes as an alternative or if it is less time consuming. To that specific commuter, the ferry has been beneficial and she would like to see the ferry expand and connect to Midtown Manhattan, as it would reduce her travel time to school. The other commuter agrees that it is a good idea if the ferry will efficiently bring service to the other boroughs. The commuter pointed out the concerns with economics and infrastructure and briefly mentioned about the private ferry operators that serve as commuter ferries. The commuter’s perspective is that the ferry has the potential to make transit easier around the urban island like Manhattan since there is no traffic in the river yet. Still, there are questions in terms of operations and efficiency. All three interviewees agreed on the efficiency of the ferries. The ferry offers a pleasant, calm ride and is punctual at most times. Their only complaint was that some of the ferries are so old, that they lack in durability. They also all commented that the ferry does not shorten their commute since they need to take another train after. Their commute may also be delayed if there is traffic and/or bad weather condition. For all three commuters, the fastest way to go to Manhattan would be taking the express bus but it is a more expensive alternative.
1.3 The East River Ferry is a second current ferry service. Although this is a private ferry run by the NY Waterway, it operates effectively through parts of Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. The ferry runs every 20 minutes on weekends. It costs $4 a ticket on weekdays and $6 on weekends. This is a major concern for riders because many transfer to trains or buses and have to purchase metro cards in addition to the ferry ticket. Mayor De Blasio plans to price the new ferry ticket the same as a metro card and possibly create a ‘one card’ system in which commuters can use the same card to pay for ferry and MTA transit. This system, although beneficial, may take time to implement due to issues with pricing the metro card, processing transfers, and installing card-swiping equipment at ferry terminals.

The NY Waterway was founded by Arthur Edward Imperatore, Sr. He purchased 2.5 miles of the Weehawken, New Jersey waterfront and established the NY Waterway in 1986. After establishing multiple routes between New York and New Jersey, in 2011, the NY Waterway began operating the East River route between Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. The ferry is subsidized by the City of New York. The original route was intended for commuter purposes, but because of fares and efficiency issues, it has become more friendly to tourists. Many commuters have complained about ferry delays during peak hours in the mornings. If the ferry were to be operated using the one fare card system, commuters would greatly benefit from it.

WHEREAS, the ferry system in the outer boroughs of Queens and Lower East Side would improve the lives of daily commuters. Transportation plays a significant part for a daily New Yorker. The ferry system will promote environmental sustainability and also provide New Yorkers an alternative for transportation. The two councilmen both mentioned using the diesel fuels for the ferries. Nicholas A. Widzowski, who works under Councilman Constantinides, mentioned how people are concerned with using food as fuel so he’s aiming to use waste products for fuel like fats, grease, and etc. instead of using food. Councilman Ulrich also mentioned the uses of the biodiesel fuel, which can take hundreds of cars off the road. In addition, he made a comment how the ferries are a very sustainable source since they run on the water. Climate change is becoming a major concern in all transportation methods, and thus, the ferry system will help reduce those effects.
2.1: Ferry Service in The Rockaways

2.1 A reestablished ferry service in the Rockaways would benefit the local community that previously used it. Councilman Eric Ulrich of District 32 is part of the New York City Council as the representative for the Ozone Park, Howard Beach, and Rockaway areas of southern Queens. We received the opportunity to interview him about his views with implementing a ferry system in this area of the city. As expected, Councilman Ulrich is in complete favor of connecting the Rockaways with Lower Manhattan via water transportation for reasons that extend into the areas of sustainability, efficiency, and overall, improvement in well-being for the Rockaway community. One of the reasons why Councilman Ulrich is in favor of the ferry system has to do with the temporary ferry system that was implemented during Hurricane Sandy. During the superstorm, the MTA temporarily ceased service, with the A train closing down altogether due to damage. With many residents of the Rockaways relying on the A train to get to and from the heart of Manhattan, Councilman Ulrich, along with many members of the New York City Council including Mayor de Blasio, implemented a temporary ferry system that departed from Beach 108 St. and Beach Channel Drive and traveled all the way to Pier 11 in Lower Manhattan. Councilman Ulrich commented that this particular ferry was only $2 for a single ride, or $4 round trip, making it cheaper than the MTA fare. The Rockaway ferry was also faster than the train, since it was only a 35 minute ride to the city as opposed to over an hour on the A train. When the Rockaway ferry ceased to exist in late 2014, many of the residents of this forgotten district protested the removal of the ferry and even started online petitions to keep the ferry system running.

Councilman Ulrich obviously understands the needs of his district and also supports bringing the proposed Rockaway ferry back as it would address many of the problems this district has. First, the Rockaway peninsula is one of the farthest points from Manhattan via train. However, using water transportation, there is a clear, straight path between the Rockaway peninsula and Manhattan that would cut travel time by more than 50%. Councilman Ulrich believes that the lack of adequate transit options in Queens, with only the A train serving the southern Queens area, calls for more alternative transportation options, such as a ferry system. Additionally, Councilman Ulrich understands the importance of sustainability in regards to the ferry system. Ferries in New York City run on biodiesel fuel, which is a step up from the regular diesel the ferries previously used. This allows for cleaner air and hence less greenhouse gas emissions. This point can be extended to the decrease of cars that would be taken off the road. The idea is that if more people decide to rely on the ferry system to get into the city, it would result in less cars being on the road. Less cars mean less gas emissions and less congestion on the roads, resulting in more efficiently running roadways. The most important reason that explains why the ferry system is sustainable, as mentioned earlier, is simply due to the fact that the ferry system is running on water. Water is all around New York City and rather than clogging the mainland, water can be another source of transportation that oftentimes goes unused. Hence, Ulrich argues the sustainability of the ferry system.

Being the district representative of the Rockaways, Councilman Ulrich finds that his constituents completely support the return of a ferry system to the Rockaways. When asked about potential problems that ferries in the past were known to make such as the noise problem in Lower Manhattan, Councilman Ulrich replied stating that, “the people of the Rockaways want the ferry system and because they want it, they will adapt to the noise. They are very adaptable people.”
The members of the Rockaways have made it publicly clear that they would like to bring the Rockaway ferry back, with examples of petitions plastered all over the Internet. In addition, there is a petition online about bringing the ferry system back now rather than waiting all the way until 2017. Councilman Ulrich understands his peoples’ needs and hence is fighting to bring back a ferry system to the Rockaways.

Councilman Eric Ulrich is in full support of the ferry system because, during the aftermath of the storm, his district in the Rockaways heavily relied on the ferry system. The Rockaway ferry proved extremely useful, and even necessary during this time, and improved the lives of his constituents. The removal of the ferry system has resulted in backlash from the people of the Rockaways, calling to bring it back. Not only is the ferry system a great alternative form of transportation rather than relying on the A train or buses that never run according to schedule, but it is environmentally friendly as well. The ferry system is sustainable since it is run on water rather than congesting the mainland even more and uses alternative fuel methods. Councilman Ulrich argued that the ferry system will be reliable, fast, and cheap and if it will improve the lives of the people, then it should be done.
2.2 A ferry system connecting Astoria and the Lower East Side would greatly assist the patrons living in the areas of Astoria with lack of adequate transit options. Councilman Costa Constantinides of District 22 is part of the New York City Council as a representative of Astoria, as well as the Woodside and Jackson Heights areas of Queens. In addition to Councilman Ulrich, Councilman Constantinides is also in favor of implementing a ferry system to service the Astoria area by connecting with Lower Manhattan for reasons including sustainability, improved economic development, and efficiency.

To further explore the implementation of the ferry system in Astoria, we met with Constantinides and his policy director, Nicholas A. Widzowski. Councilman Constantinides is highly optimistic about the ferry service in his district, Astoria. Astoria is surrounded by the East River and what better way to travel then make use of its natural waterway. As mentioned previously, Astoria is only accessibly by local buses and 2 train lines, the N and Q. There are no trains in the center of their district; the closest train stop is Steinway St. Anyone who lives in the outer parts has to rely on buses to get to the main hub of Astoria and buses that have proved time and time again their unreliability and sporadic nature. The district had an express bus, the QM22, but its service was discontinued in 2010. It takes an hour to get into Manhattan or elsewhere within Queens. The proposed ferry system would link Astoria, Long Island City North, Roosevelt Island, and 34th St. on the Lower East Side line. Additionally, Astoria, being the neighborhood in Queens that is the closest to Manhattan, has been seeing a population boom in the past couple of years. Having a ferry system would service the people of Astoria because there will be an alternative method of transportation rather than relying solely on the N and Q trains, that have been seeing overcrowding issues recently. An ideal system, according to Mr. Widzowski would link Astoria to and the rest of western Queens to Brooklyn, which can be made possible by connecting the East River Ferry Route to the one in Astoria.

One of the issues we brought up was Hurricane Sandy and the impact of this super storm on the Astoria community. The ferry system could have been used to prevent damage from future storms like Hurricane Sandy. With 60% of NYC power coming from Western Queens, the power outage in this area affects the entire city. A large part of Astoria’s housing projects were devastated by Sandy. The councilman argued that ferries would have been useful in providing an alternative mode of transportation for people to travel to and from the city when the N and Q lines were not running. Ferries could have also helped in bringing in supplies to those who needed it rather than relying on cars or trucks that would have seen difficulty driving during this time. Sandy did not affect this particular part of the city as it had with the Rockaways so the Astoria district is more neutral on this topic than the Rockaway district. However, regardless, Councilman Constantinides was sympathetic to the situation in the Rockaways and hence wants a ferry system in Astoria to help assist with future storms that could result in disastrous consequences.

Councilman Constantinides also argued about the sustainability of the ferries. Similar to that of Councilman Ulrich, Councilman Constantinides’ account on sustainability also revolved around the switch to biodiesel fuel, the use of water as an alternative for which modes of transportation can use, and the decrease in vehicular congestion. Ferries are cheaper, would make transportation easier, and would help improve the environment.

Additionally, ferries could definitely encourage economic development and help tie the outer boroughs together. Ferries would increase transit options to Astoria, hence promoting tourism and new potential residents to the area. This mode of transportation would definitely lead to an increase in new development programs such as riverside parks. Moreover, having a ferry system that could not only connect Astoria with the Lower East Side but can also make stops along Western Brooklyn can improve those areas as well as provide an alternative route between Queens and Brooklyn.
With many of the MTA lines catering to Manhattan, it is oftentimes hard to find routes between the boroughs of, for example, Queens and Brooklyn rather than relying on the G train that runs with residual delays on the daily. The ferry system, as the councilman argued, can provide a revolutionary concept in transportation – connecting the outer boroughs while at the same time connecting back to the heart of New York City, Manhattan.

Councilman Constantinides believes that the ferry system is important for not only the reasons mentioned by Councilman Ulrich such as sustainability and efficiency, but also in serving the community better. By having a ferry system that runs down the East River from Astoria to the Lower East Side and make pit stops in Brooklyn and possibly even to Staten Island, commuters from the outer boroughs would have an easier time getting to different boroughs without going through Manhattan. Hence, having the ferry to serve Astoria can greatly impact this district.

2.3 The Lower East Side ferry line is set to start running from Grand St, Manhattan, to Long Island City, East 34th Street, East 23rd Street, Grand Street and Pier 11/Wall Street in 2018. To create a ferry system at Grand Street is a major step considering the hustle and bustle in the area. Also, many residents of the area live in public housing and are underserved by the transportation. The ferry will help reduce the current traffic on roads and on mass transit. Many residents of the Lower East Side also believe it will increase tourism, as it would attract visitors to the neighborhood and support local businesses in the area, specifically in Chinatown and Little Italy. Although we were not able to meet with Councilwoman Rosie Mendez to further discuss her views on the ferry service, we believe it would positively impact the area, since the current East River ferry, which stops at Wall St. has gained a large ridership. Connecting the area of lower Manhattan to midtown would make it so much easier for riders seeking a short trip around Manhattan, as opposed to getting on the crowded trains during rush hours.
Resolved

RESOLVED, that the Council of City of New York implement the ferry system to outer boroughs of New York City is very important for it ties New York city together, it’s environmentally sustainable, and will be an option of transportation for the commuters in New York City.

In order to establish the ferry system, it is important to raise awareness about the system and to educate residents about the advantage of ferry service. For example, a Staten Island commuter did not believe in the expansion of ferries outside of her borough because she was not aware of similar areas throughout the city that do not have sufficient access to mass transit.

The ferry system can help improve the overall outlook of NYC and foster a new form of transportation if it is efficient, timely, and cost effective. The biggest concern is the subsidy the government needs to offer in order to run the ferry system. With the government losing money in implementing ferries, it may not seem feasible to do so. However, if an appropriate fare price is calculated, the system may not be highly subsidized and can continue to support residents. We can become the eco-friendly, green city we hope to be by making use of what our landscape naturally offers, water.

4/26/15
B.L, S.P, L.P