Public Hearing of the Public Design Commission
Examining the Reconstruction of a portion of the Coney Island Boardwalk
March 12, 2012
Testimony of New Yorkers for Parks

New Yorkers for Parks is the citywide research and advocacy organization championing quality parks and open spaces for all New Yorkers in all neighborhoods. Adequate and equitable distribution of open spaces, and the resources to support them, has been the paramount goal of New Yorkers for Parks for more than 100 years.

With that mission in mind, our testimony will address the reconstruction of the 5-block area of Coney Island Boardwalk being considered by the Commission today. First, it is important to keep in mind that unlike many capital-intensive City agencies, the Parks Department has no consistent discretionary Mayoral budget and is thus completely reliant on City Council and Borough President discretionary funds for capital improvement projects like the Boardwalk. Large-scale influxes like the state grant that will fund the section under current discussion are infrequent and undependable. Over the past decade, the Parks Department has received an average annual allocation of approximately $1 million for upkeep and reconstruction of boardwalks, and we have no reason to believe that this amount will change in the foreseeable future. One million dollars sounds like a lot of money, but it must be divided between the boardwalks at Coney Island, Rockaway and the Staten Island beaches. And to put that amount into additional perspective, the total cost of replacing the Coney Island Boardwalk, taking every potential material into consideration, is between $84 and $128 million. So, at a rate of somewhere less than $1 million per year, it will take between 84 and 128 years, at a minimum, to replace the Boardwalk. This reality highlights the importance of choosing a material with a long lifespan. Whatever material is selected must have substantial durability over time and in the face of Coney Island's unique conditions in order to maintain its structural integrity during the inevitably long periods between replacement.

Our testimony will briefly address four of the numerous materials considered in this process: tropical hardwood, southern yellow pine, black locust, and a recycled plastic and concrete hybrid. Tropical

hardwood has been used on the Boardwalk since 1923, and it has proven to be the most decay-resistant wood available. However, its cost is high; its lifespan is shorter than some other materials available on today's market; and, most importantly, City agencies are under a mayoral mandate to drastically reduce the amount of rain forest woods that they use. For these reasons, tropical hardwood is no longer an option for the Coney Island Boardwalk.

In an effort to preserve the historic character of the Boardwalk, a number of advocates have proposed the use of locally harvested woods, specifically southern yellow pine and black locust. While southern yellow pine is one of the least expensive options under consideration, it is a soft wood estimated to last just five to eight years of heavy visitor traffic and oceanfront conditions. This short life expectancy, considered alongside the economic reality that it would be replaced on a cycle of at least 97 years, means that a southern yellow pine boardwalk would be in a state of severe decay for approximately 89 years of its approximately 97-year life. This would mean significant closures of the Boardwalk for decades, impacting residents and visitors of Coney Island and Brighton Beach, stifling local businesses, and slowing economic growth and vitality across the peninsula. Black locust, while a durable and long-lasting wood, is currently unavailable in the quantity, grade, and size specifications that the boardwalk demands. For this reason, it is not a viable option for the Boardwalk.

Finally, the recycled plastic and concrete hybrid proposal. This option is also costly. At $112 per square foot, it will take more than 100 years to complete the full Boardwalk – assuming that funding for boardwalks maintains its current pattern. The critical advantage of this option, though, is its significantly longer lifespan: between 40 and 60 years. This type of durability is far more safe and sustainable than southern yellow pine.

While far from perfect, the recycled plastic and concrete option would create not only a far more long-lasting and cost-efficient boardwalk, but also one resulting in fewer durability-related closures over time. Also, it strikes a balance between cost-efficiency and aesthetics: the recycled plastic isn't wood, but looks a lot like it. It's worth remembering that the Department is making every effort to maintain the Boardwalk's appearance by avoiding the far cheaper, yet less attractive, all-concrete route.

It's also worth remembering that this is a 5-block pilot project subject to the grim reality of the Parks Department's current capital project budget. Perhaps in the future, a cost effective, durable local wood will become available. But the locally harvested wood options currently under discussion do not meet

the needs of the Boardwalk and are not feasible. The Parks Department's proposed recycled plastic and concrete solution best ensures the long-term sustainability and durability of the Coney Island Boardwalk.