Bullet Points

- For over 350 years the maritime world on the Manhattan waterfront drove the rise of the City of New York to commercial dominance of the country’s economy.

- Cotton and slavery fueled the American economy during the 19th century. The evil of slavery was a national sin not just for the South. The maritime prosperity of New York was tied to slavery and cotton.

- Manhattan’s shoreline remained a place apart, a world of piers, shipping, longshoremen and crime. The public was excluded from the waterfront.

- Control of the waterfront, New York’s priceless asset, remained contested; an epic struggle between public and private interest that continues to the present day.

- Since colonial times, an army of day laborers, the longshoremen, provided the backbreaking and dangerous work needed on the docks. Exploited by the daily “shapeup” where corrupt bosses picked men to load or unload ships, the longshoremen and their families lived lives of quiet desperation.

- An epic conflict for the “soul of the waterfront” pitted Catholic labor priests against the corrupt labor unions and organized crime captured in the Academy Award winning movie, “On the Waterfront” in 1954.

- A revolution along the waterfront began in the early 1950s as the container, a metal box 8’ high, 8’ wide and 40’ long, changed the world of shipping and eventually the economy of the world.

- The container, unloaded by a giant crane, replaced thousands of hours of longshoremen’s labor. All of the piers and wharves lining the waterfront were soon obsolete and the maritime shore of Manhattan was abandoned.

- In the 60s and 70s the decline of the waterfront mirrored the near death of New York. Crime soared, the middle class left for the suburbs, abandoned piers, warehouses and factories followed. Many neighborhoods throughout the City resembled Berlin at the end of WWII.

- Slowly and painfully New York recovered and the waterfront was reborn. No longer a place of commerce, waterfront parks and expensive housing have replaced the immigrant neighborhoods. Museums, restaurants and shopping fill the adjacent streets. New Yorkers and millions of visitors now enjoy the shore.

- The rebuilding of the waterfront has been a complicated private/public enterprise. A key question remains: Is the waterfront a place for all to enjoy or and enclave for the well to do?
• For over 350 years the development of the maritime world expanded Manhattan Island out into the East and Hudson rivers, adding over 2,000 of “made-land.” All of the new land lies a few feet above high tide.

• Hurricane Sandy devastated the shoreline and caused millions of dollars of damage to the buildings along the waterfront standing on made land that once was underwater.

• Climate change and sea rise presents the Manhattan waterfront with a challenge that will not go away. Where will New York find the billions of dollars needed to protect the City’s precious asset – the magnificent shoreline?