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**COMMITTEE ON RESILIENCY AND WATERFRONTS**

*Hon. Justin L. Brannan., Chair*

**COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION**

*Hon. Peter Koo, Chair*

**December 9, 2019**

**Oversight: Governors Island**

# Introduction

On December 9, 2019, the Committee on Resiliency and Waterfronts, chaired by Council Member Justin Brannan and the Committee on Parks and Recreation, chaired by Council Member Peter Koo, will hold a joint oversight hearing entitled, “Governors Island.” Representatives from the Trust for Governors Island, the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), National Parks Service, waterfront advocates, parks advocates, community organizations, as well as other concerned community groups have been invited to testify.

# Background

## History of Governors Island

Governors Island (the Island) is located in the Upper New York Bay, off the southern tip of Manhattan, approximately one-half mile from the Battery and one-third mile from Red Hook, Brooklyn and is within the Borough of Manhattan. The Island has a long and distinguished history as a military facility, first used by the British in 1664 as a means of fortifying the New York Harbor, and following the transfer of the Island from the state of New York to the United States (U.S.) government for military use in 1800, was later used by the U.S. Army and the U.S. Coast Guard.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Island consists of 172 acres and currently contains 225 structures.[[2]](#footnote-2) The 92-acre northern section, containing 102 buildings, including Fort Jay and Castle William, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is also a New York City Historic District.[[3]](#footnote-3) The southern 80 acres were created in the early part of the twentieth century with landfill from the Lexington Avenue subway line construction. The buildings on the southern portion of the Island consist mostly of low-rise residential, administrative and support services formerly used by the Coast Guard.

In 1966, the Island was transferred to the U.S. Coast Guard, eventually becoming home to the largest United States Coast Guard base.[[4]](#footnote-4) At its peak, approximately 3,000 personnel were stationed on the Island with another 1500 personnel who commuted to the Island.[[5]](#footnote-5) In 1995, the Coast Guard closed its facilities on the Island as a cost cutting measure and all personnel were relocated by September 1996.[[6]](#footnote-6)

## The Transfer of the Island to New York City

Section 9101 of The Balanced Budget Act of 1997 directed the United States General Services Administration (GSA), the federal agency with jurisdiction over the Island and with responsibility for the conveyance of excess and surplus federal real property, to sell all interests of the United States in Governors Island at “fair market value,” reserving a “right of first offer” to New York State and New York City.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In January 2001, President Bill Clinton designated the Island’s historic district, including Fort Jay and Castle William, as a National Monument in order to enhance the public purpose uses of the Island.[[8]](#footnote-8) On January 31, 2003, the GSA transferred the Island’s National Monument property, totaling 22 acres on the northern part of the Island, to the Department of the Interior, to be managed by the National Parks Service (NPS), and the remainder of the Island to the Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation (GIPEC), a New York not-for-profit corporation formed by New York State for the purpose of owning, redeveloping and managing the Island and the predecessor to the Trust for Governors Island (TGI).[[9]](#footnote-9)

According to the terms of the deed transferring ownership of the Island, GIPEC, the State and the City must develop and adopt a master plan for the preservation, re-development and use of Governors Island.[[10]](#footnote-10) As part of the transfer, a series of deed restrictions were imposed on development of the Island.[[11]](#footnote-11) For example, the Island must remain accessible to the public in perpetuity and at least 90 acres must be used for parkland, educational and open space uses.[[12]](#footnote-12) Permitted uses include entertainment facilities; housing for caretakers and managers of Governors Island and police and fire facilities; short-term and extended stay accommodations; cultural and arts facilities; hospitality uses including hotels and conference/banquet facilities; commercial office space; retail, service and dining facilities; public works; health facilities; and other public, commercial and mixed-used purposes.[[13]](#footnote-13) Prohibited uses include most residential uses; industrial or manufacturing uses; casino or gaming uses; parking, except for vehicles used for operation and maintenance or visitor transportation; and electric power generating stations, unless used only to supply Governors Island.[[14]](#footnote-14)

On April 11, 2010, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Governor David A. Paterson, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and State Senator Daniel L. Squadron announced a long-term development, funding and governance agreement in which the City would have primary responsibility to develop and operate the Island.[[15]](#footnote-15) The plan included the creation of TGI to oversee future operations on the Island. The TGI board of directors is comprised of 13 members, four of whom are nominated by local officials.[[16]](#footnote-16) On July 14, 2010, the City and State completed the transfer of ownership of the Island to the City.[[17]](#footnote-17)

## National Park Service’s Operation of the Island’s National Monument

In 2003, the National Park Service (NPS) announced its intention to create a General Management Plan (GMP) to set out a long-term approach to management of the National Monument. The GMP incorporates various zoning and management prescriptions to ensure resource preservation and public enjoyment of the Monument.

In 2012, Castle Williams was opened following a $6 million rehabilitation project to remove hazardous materials, address structural stabilization, provide visitor access, install fire and safety systems, and install outdoor interpretative exhibits.[[18]](#footnote-18) That year, over 60,000 visitors explored the interior of the castle and 5,000 visitors were able to take special rooftop tours to view the New York Harbor. In addition, $300,000 was allocated by the NPS for repairs to Fort Jay’s roofs.[[19]](#footnote-19) In October 2012, the Monument suffered extensive damage following Hurricane Sandy, including damage to its barge gangway, shelter, outdoor exhibits, and certain equipment at Castle Williams.

Current Tenants

*New York Harbor School*

In 2006, GIPEC officials announced their intention to designate the New York Harbor School, a small New York City Department of Education high school that was previously situated at Bushwick High School in Brooklyn, as the first Island “partner.” The Harbor School was one of the respondents to GIPEC’s February 2006 RFP seeking development partners. In fall 2010, The Harbor School began its first year in its new home on the Island. As the Island’s first permanent tenant since 1996, the School is located in a former medical clinic and has state-of-the-art science labs, fitness rooms, metal and wood working shops for marine technology, art and music rooms, and an outdoor recreation area.[[20]](#footnote-20) In addition to offering Career and Technical Education certification in marine science/aquaculture, marine technology, marine policy and scuba diving, the school has also signed an agreement with the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to assist in implementing best environmental practices in their facility and to develop a curriculum focused on preserving the environment.[[21]](#footnote-21) In 2013, the school opened a Marine Science and Technology Center. Currently, the school has 435 students who are enrolled in New York State Regents-based courses and one of six career and technical education programs.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The Billion Oyster Project (BOP), a long-term plan to restore one billion live oysters to the New York Harbor over the next 20 years, began at the Harbor School. BOP works with local, state and federal agencies, such as the New York City Department of Environmental Protection, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to monitor this restoration project.[[23]](#footnote-23) So far, 30,000,000 oysters have been restored, 19.7 trillion gallons of water has been filtered and 72,500 pounds of nitrogen have been removed from the Hudson River.[[24]](#footnote-24)

*Lower Manhattan Cultural Council*

In September 2019, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) opened LMCC’s Art Center at Governors Island, a 40,000 square foot building that includes artist studios, galleries, performance spaces and a café.[[25]](#footnote-25) The LMCC was founded in 1973, and initially used public plazas and parks to hold free lunchtime concerts and evening performances for the public.[[26]](#footnote-26) The LMCC’s Art Center at Governors Island serves as its first permanent space for nineteen Artists-in-Residence.[[27]](#footnote-27)

*QC Terme*

Projected to open in 2021, QC Terme, a destination day spa and wellness center, will become a commercial tenant of the Island, occupying approximately 80,000 square feet in Buildings 111, 112 and 114 on the northern part of the Island.[[28]](#footnote-28) The destination spa will offer rejuvenation and other opportunities for its guests to enjoy the Island.[[29]](#footnote-29)

# Redevelopment of Governors Island

## Project Principles

As previously mentioned, the redevelopment of the Island must satisfy a number of objectives required by the deed transfer from GSA. Furthermore, TGI delineated a series of project objectives that also must be satisfied, which are as follows:

* *Protect, rehabilitate and re-use historic buildings and landscapes*: Many of the buildings on the Island are historic landmarks and must be maintained.
* *Eliminate blighted conditions*: The Island’s infrastructure must be renovated to comply with building accessibility requirements and to allow for, among other things, the provision of potable water and electrical service.
* *Create a major resource with public access*: The deed transfer specifically requires acreage for open space, cultural amenities and educational opportunities.
* *Provide for maximum opportunity for participation by private enterprises, consistent with the needs of the municipality*: The development must balance the need for public-minded development having high design standards with the ability to attract private sector partners to endow the Island with a sound economic future.
* *Sustainable development*: The Island must be as financially self-sustaining as possible over the long-term life of the island.[[30]](#footnote-30)

## Historic Preservation

The northernmost 92 acres of the Island are a New York City Historic District[[31]](#footnote-31) and a federal National Historic Landmark District.[[32]](#footnote-32) Covenants in the deed require TGI to develop this section of the Island in accordance with the Governors Island Preservation and Design Manual, released on January 28, 2003, which prohibits construction, alteration, modification or other work affecting the integrity or appearance of that portion of the Island without prior consultation with the New York State Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation and the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission.

**Redevelopment of the Island’s Open Space**

On December 19, 2007, Governor Eliot Spitzer and Mayor Bloomberg announced the selection of design firm, West 8, to design the Island’s future open space, including a new park and promenade.[[33]](#footnote-33) The design featured new hills created from recycled materials, and free bicycle rentals for visitors. The team envisioned visitors riding bicycles at the water’s edge or climbing new hills to experience panoramic views of New York Harbor. Their ideas for the Historic District included restoring its landscapes and enlivening them with targeted improvements such as seating and new walkways which could be used to experience the Island’s historic character.[[34]](#footnote-34) In May 2012, Phase I of the project broke ground, which included redevelopment of 30 acres of parkland. Phase I included the creation of Liggett Terrace, a sunny, six-acre plaza with seasonal plantings, seating, water features and public art; Hammock Grove, an open ten-acre space that is home to 1,500 new trees, play areas and 50 hammocks; and the Play Lawn, 14 acres for play and relaxation that includes two natural turf ball fields sized for adult softball and Little League baseball. Phase I of the project was completed and opened to the public in 2014.

The Hills – Phase II of the project – was completed in July 2016.[[35]](#footnote-35) The southern portion of the Island now consists of four Hills: Grassy Hill, Slide Hill, Discovery Hill and Outlook Hill.[[36]](#footnote-36) The Hills are 25 to 70 feet above the Island, and the summit of the tallest Hill provides visitors with a 360-degree panorama of the Statue of Liberty, New York Harbor and the Lower Manhattan skyline.[[37]](#footnote-37) The Hills cover 10 acres and are made of recycled construction and fill materials and also consists of approximately 41,000 shrubs and 860 trees.[[38]](#footnote-38)

**Ferry Service**

Currently, the Island is open seven days a week from May 1st until October 31st.[[39]](#footnote-39) During the open season, ferry service runs from Lower Manhattan every day from the Battery Maritime Building at 10 South Street and service from Brooklyn runs from Pier 6, Brooklyn Bridge on Saturdays, Sundays, Memorial Day and Labor Day.[[40]](#footnote-40) Service fares for Brooklyn and Manhattan ferries are $3 round trip for adults and children over 12, and $1 for seniors on all weekday ferries and on afternoon ferries on Saturdays and Sundays.[[41]](#footnote-41) Children under 12 ride free at all times and morning ferries on Saturdays and Sundays from Manhattan and Brooklyn are free for all.[[42]](#footnote-42) In June 2019, the Trust added a new 400-passenger ferry that increased the frequency of trips between Lower Manhattan and Soissons Landing on the weekends, with service running every 20 minutes.[[43]](#footnote-43) Also last season, the City’s NYC Ferry service offered additional connections to Governors Island’s Yankee Pier by means of a ferry service from Wall Street/Pier 11.[[44]](#footnote-44)

**Current Development Plans**

In February 2016, Mayor De Blasio announced that the City wanted to transform 33 acres of the south side of the Island into an ‘Innovation Cluster’ bringing together innovators, entrepreneurs and educators to generate new ideas, economic activity and jobs.[[45]](#footnote-45) The plan involves keeping the Island open year-round and has the potential to create several million square feet of educational, cultural, research and retail uses.[[46]](#footnote-46) The plan would create thousands of permanent and construction jobs and potentially generate tens of billions of dollars in new economic activity and tax revenue over the next 30 years.[[47]](#footnote-47)

In August 2018, the City initiated the public review process for rezoning the southern portion of the Island in an effort to free up approximately 4.5 million square feet for mixed-use purposes, including commercial, academic, cultural and institutional development.[[48]](#footnote-48) The rezoning encompasses 33 acres across two zones previously established for new development.[[49]](#footnote-49) The sites include an approximately 7-acre parcel on the western side of the Island and an approximately 26-acre parcel on the eastern side of the Island.[[50]](#footnote-50) In October 2019, it was reported that TGI is studying the idea of developing a center for climate adaptation research on the Island.[[51]](#footnote-51) An RFP for development has not been open to the public yet, but TGI is currently seeking consultants to explore the idea of developing a center for climate adaptation research which could also serve to pay for the Island’s maintenance.[[52]](#footnote-52)

# Conclusion

Governors Island continues to offer an opportunity to create a new and exciting destination for all New Yorkers and visitors. The Committees looks forward to learning more about updated plans for the development of Governors Island. The Committees expect to receive testimony regarding current funding issues, and any concerns about other matters including access to the Island as raised by advocates, businesses and the general public. The Committees look forward to ensuring that the Island remains safe and open for all visitors.

1. GIPEC, “Brief History of Governors Island,” *available at* <http://www.govisland.com/PDFs/GIHistory_timeline.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Available at:* http://www.nycago.org/Organs/NYC/html/StCorneliusCenturion.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The designation occurred on June 18, 1996. *See* http://www.nyc.gov/html/lpc/downloads/pdf/maps/governors\_island.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *See,* Governors Island Website *available at:* https://govisland.com/history [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Available at:* https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1999-02-08/html/99-2722.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. GIPEC, “Brief History of Governors Island,” *available at* <http://www.govisland.com/PDFs/GIHistory_timeline.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Available at:* https://military.wikia.org/wiki/Governors\_Island [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Trust Deed, § 2.1(b). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *See,* Governors Island Website *available at:* https://govisland.com/history [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. GIPEC, “Governors Island Land Use Improvement and Civic Project General Project Plan,” January 18, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Id*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Id*. These restrictions are in place for 50 years. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Press Release of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, “Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Governor Paterson, Assembly Speaker Silver, and Senator Squadron Announce Agreement on Development, Funding and Governance of Governors Island,” April 11, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *See,* Governors Island Website *available at:* https://govisland.com/about [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *See,* New York Law School, *Leslie Koch Discusses the Future of Governors Island*, October 15, 2010, *available at:* https://www.citylandnyc.org/leslie-koch-discusses-the-future-of-governors-island/ [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Testimony of Patti Reilly, Superintendent of Governors Island National Monument, Feb. 25, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Id*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Office of the Mayor Press Release, “Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein Join School Leaders and Students for the Urban Assembly New York Harbor School Ribbon-Cutting Ceremony,” October 4, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Id*. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *See,* The Urban Assembly New York Harbor School Website *available at:* https://www.newyorkharborschool.org/history.html [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *See,* The Urban Assembly New York Harbor School Website *available at:* https://www.newyorkharborschool.org/billionoysterproject.html [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *See,* Billion Oyster Project Website *available at:* https://billionoysterproject.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *See,* Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Website *available at:* https://lmcc.net/about/history/ [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *See,* Governors Island Website *available at:* https://govisland.com/real-estate/current-tenants [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Id*. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. GIPEC, “Governors Island Land Use Improvement and Civic Project General Project Plan,” January 18, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Designated June 18, 1996. *See* http://www.nyc.gov/html/lpc/downloads/pdf/maps/governors\_island.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Designated February 4, 1985. *See* http://www.cr.nps.gov/nhl/designations/Lists/NY01.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. GIPEC Press Release, “Governor Eliot Spitzer and Mayor Michael Bloomberg Announce the Selection of Team to Design Park and Open Space on Governors Island: Design Team Led by Acclaimed Firm West 8 Will Plan a Destination Park and Great Promenade for New York City and the Region” (Dec. 19, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Id*. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Available at:* https://govisland.com/the-park [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Jeremiah Budin, “*Man-Made Hills Rise on Transforming Governors Island,*” Curbed, March 26, 2015, http://ny.curbed.com/archives/2015/03/26/manmade\_hills\_rise\_on\_transforming\_governors\_island.php. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *See,* Governors Island Website, New Park and Public Spaces. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Jennifer Fermino, “*The Hills, An Extraordinary $71M Park With Art Exhibits and Hiking Paths, Opens on Governors Island,*” The Daily News, July 19, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *See,* Governors Island Website *available at:* https://govisland.com/visit-the-island/ferry [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *See,* Governors Island Website *available at:* https://govisland.com/blog/governors-island-announces-2019-public-season [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *See,* Governors Island Website *available at:* https://govisland.com/blog/governors-island-announces-2019-public-season [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Office of the Mayor Press Release, “*Mayor de Blasio Announces Transformation of Governors Island into a Year-Round Destination,*” February 4, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *See,* Governors Island Website *available at:* https://govisland.com/blog/de-blasio-administration-announces-next-step-in-transformation-of-governors-island-into-year-round-hub-for-education-innovation-and-recreation [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Christopher Flavelle, “*New York City Wants to Put a Climate Change ‘Laboratory’ on Governors Island,*” New York Times, October 6, 2019, *available at:* https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/06/climate/governors-island-climate-change-new-york.html [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-52)