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Comprehensive Plan to Protect Jamaica Bay Announced

Draft Plan a Call to Action to Improve Water Quality and Save Disappearing Wetlands

NEW YORK (June 29, 2006) – The Jamaica Bay Watershed Protection Plan Advisory Committee today released its draft plan to protect and restore Jamaica Bay's water quality and unique marsh islands. The report's recommendations are intended to form the basis of a final Jamaica Bay watershed protection plan to save the bay's wildlife and provide a healthy resource for neighboring communities.

"For too long, Jamaica Bay has been treated as a sewage dump rather than a national treasure," said Brad Sewell, Jamaica Bay Watershed Protection Plan Advisory Committee Co-Chair and Director of the NY/NJ Harbor-Bight Project for the Natural Resources Defense Council. "Jamaica Bay's resources are in jeopardy, and we hope that our recommendations will spur immediate action to help get the bay back on track."

At the current rate of loss, scientists predict that the bay's distinctive marsh islands will vanish completely in less than twenty years. Poor, and in some places deteriorating, water quality remains a continuing problem for the bay, and may even be causing marsh loss.

In response to this crisis, in 2005 the City of New York enacted Local Law 71, requiring the city's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to develop a watershed protection plan for the bay, and establishing a seven-member committee to advise DEP and the City Council in plan creation and provide specific plan goals and recommendations. Today's report is the first step in this landmark process, and was developed with significant input from both the scientific community and public. The committee highlighted fifteen of its recommendations as priority recommendations deserving immediate attention.

"The protection plan that is currently being developed is essential to saving, preserving and restoring Jamaica Bay – one of this city's most cherished environmental treasures. And the Advisory Committee is essential to making this plan as effective as possible," said Council Member James F. Gennaro, Environmental Protection Committee Chair and author of Local Law 71. "I applaud the Advisory Committee for their tremendous commitment and hard work, and I look forward to reading their report and recommendations for better safeguarding the bay."

Councilmember Gennaro recently introduced legislation to extend DEP's deadline for submission of the final plan by one year to September 1, 2007; the legislation also makes the committee's recommendations "preliminary" and allows eleven more months to develop a final plan, until June 1, 2007. If the process is amended, the committee will use the opportunity to collect additional public and agency feedback on its work.

"This is one of DEP's most urgent and important projects," said DEP Commissioner, Emily Lloyd. "The preservation of the Jamaica Bay watershed is essential to maintaining its function as an ecological wetland as well as a recreational location for city residents who use the bay for fishing and boating. Over the years, Jamaica Bay has been harmed by overdevelopment and pollution. DEP's current mission is to investigate sources affecting pollution and to develop an action plan for the future. I want to thank the members of the Advisory Committee on their continuing work and we look forward to reviewing these recommendations."

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Jamaica Bay's more than 25,000 acres of open water, marsh, meadowland, beaches, dunes and forests provide critical habitat for more than 80 fish species and many threatened and endangered species, such as the peregrine falcon and the Atlantic Ridley sea turtle. The bay is considered one of the best bird-watching locations in the western hemisphere; it is a key stopover along the Eastern Flyway migration route and is visited by nearly 20 percent of the continent's species of birds every year.

The wetlands also serve as flood protection and shoreline erosion control for bay's surrounding homes and businesses in Brooklyn and Queens. More than five hundred thousand New Yorkers live in the Jamaica Bay watershed/sewershed, and the bay is a popular fishing and boating area.

The exact cause of the bay's marsh loss is unclear; recent studies have focused on excessive sulfides in sediments due to water pollution, as well as a reduction in the amount of sediment washing up on the marshes due to a hardening of the bay's perimeter and the deep dredging that has occurred in sections of the bay. Nitrogen-rich wastewater and overflows from sewage treatment plants and stormwater runoff contribute to harmful algae blooms that deplete oxygen from the bay's water; when dissolved oxygen levels dip too low, wildlife that cannot swim away dies.

"We look forward to hearing DEP's, the Council's and the public's response to our initial recommendations – it will take all of us working together to solve the bay's problems and ensure that the area is provided the protection and resources it deserves," said Doug Adamo, Jamaica Bay Watershed Protection Plan Advisory Committee Co-Chair and Chief of the Division of Natural Resources at Gateway National Recreation Area. Other committee members are Manny Caughman, Community Activist; Len Houston, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; Dan Mundy, Jamaica Bay Eco Watchers; Dr. R. Lawrence Swanson, Stony Brook University; and Christopher Zeppie, The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

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