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Testimony of Tyler Nims, Executive Director, Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform

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I am Tyler Nims, Executive Director of the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform, sometimes known as the Lippman Commission after our chairperson Judge Jonathan Lippman. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

The effort to close the jails on Rikers Island has driven change across the justice system in our city. Now, as the dream of shutting down those jails draws nearer to reality, it is time to begin to make real plans to transform the island from a place of misery to a resource for the city's future. This process will take time. It will demand careful study, extensive community engagement, especially in the Bronx and Queens, and leadership from the Council, the Administration, and stakeholders throughout the city. We have to get started now, and these bills are the right place to begin.

In 2016, as our Commission was tasked with examining whether the jails on Rikers could be shut down, we also explored whether the island could be repurposed for a better use. Our analysis was guided by three key principles. First, that the island must be used for the benefit of the public. Second, that plans for the island's future should be directed towards the long-term needs of the city. And third, that the future use of the island has to reflect its painful history and its impact on so many communities, with the recognition that while the City cannot undo this history, it must acknowledge the past and make amends.

We looked at the island's assets, primarily its large size, central location in the Inner Sound, and its height above 100- and 500-year floodplain levels. We also took a hard look at the challenges. Rikers is isolated, accessible only by a single, narrow bridge that is nearly a mile long. The closest subway station is two and a half miles away. In many areas, the landfill that composes most of the island is still settling. Organic waste emits harmful methane gas. And finally, because the island is underneath LaGuardia flightpaths, there are elevated noise levels and limits on building height.

For many of the same reasons that make Rikers such an awful site for jails, we concluded that housing or commercial development was not feasible, particularly without massive and expensive investments in new transit corridors and soil mitigation.

Instead, the most sensible future uses take advantage of the island's relative isolation, rather than trying to overcome it. Using the island for green infrastructure—as envisioned by the Renewable Rikers bills—would help answer the mounting environmental and sustainability crises that we face as a city and as a society.

The City and State have set ambitious but necessary goals for the decades ahead: a massive increase in renewable energy, huge reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, much cleaner water in our rivers and bays, and the elimination of landfill waste.

Our Commission's initial studies, performed by urban planners at HR&A and a team of environmental consultants, transportation experts, and engineers, make clear that using Rikers for environmental purposes would be a great boost towards achieving these goals.

We projected that infrastructure like a state-of-the-art wastewater treatment plant, large-scale solar energy installation and an energy storage system, energy-from-waste and composting facilities, would bring the City 40 percent closer to its zero waste goals, help stem the flow of

sewage into our waterways, and reduce emissions by the equivalent of 150,000 cars. It would also generate hundreds of millions of dollars in economic activity and thousands of jobs, both permanent and construction. The current sites of wastewater and fossil-fueled power plants could be repurposed to provide jobs, open space, housing, and more.

Our initial analysis hints at the island's vast potential. Intros 1591, 1592, and 1593 would set the City on a path towards realizing this potential.

In Johannesburg, in South Africa, there was an infamous jail called the Old Fort. Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela were locked up there, along with many, many others whose suffering is not discussed in history class. Now that old jail is the site of South Africa's new Constitutional Court, an institution that is dedicated to resolving the historical wrongs of apartheid and oppression and to bringing into reality a new South Africa.

Let's make Rikers Island into another shining example of transformation. Let's turn a symbol of despair into a symbol of hope. These bills are the right place to start.