

Alexa Wutt: This is Alexa Wutt from Michigan Sea Grant at the National Working Waterfront Symposium in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Today is May 16th. So, Roland, if I could have you please state and spell your name, give your occupation and town, and give today's date.

Roland Lewis: Okay. My name is Roland Lewis, R-O-L-A-N-D, L-E-W-I-S. I'm the president and CEO of the Waterfront Alliance based in New York City.

AW: Very cool. So, what makes your working waterfront important to your community?

RL: Well, New York has the largest port on the Eastern seaboard. I think with the new opening of the Panama Canal, we're probably going to be number two in the nation, maybe number one before long. The maritime support industry, the barges, the tugs, ship repair facilities that support that port are critical for the maritime ecosystem, for that port to survive and for the region to survive. All our goods, not all, but the vast majority of the goods that come into New York area come by boat. If we didn't have that port working, we'd be choking on fumes. Our roads would be crumbling. So, we need maritime in the port.

AW: What is the story of this working waterfront and your involvement with that?

RL: Well, the story is old as the nation, right? [laughter] New York was a port before it was a city. You go back to the earliest days, Henry Hudson was looking for that great northwest passage. He died a failure. He never found it and died on a block of ice up there [laughter] when his crew mutinied, along with his son. That's another story. He did find an amazing natural harbor in Hudson River, named after him of course. That port grew. We're celebrating the 200th anniversary of the thing that catapulted New York to the city that we know, love, and hate today, which was the opening of the Erie Canal 200 years ago. It was called Clinton's Folly. Governor Clinton, DeWitt Clinton, said, "I want to build a ditch connecting the Great Lakes, where we are right now, and the hinterland in the Mississippi River and everything in the interior of the United States to the port of New York and by extension then, to Europe, so goods can travel back and forth." New York, before that point was, you know, probably very much equivalent to Baltimore or Boston or Philadelphia or any other Eastern seaboard cities, you know, prominent and important but not paramount as it became. But with the opening of the canal, all of a sudden that port became the place for commerce. The vast majority of goods from the United States started going through the port, and insurance, banking, all those other things that followed the port and the maritime business, creating culture and everything else that became – made New York what it is today. So, without that port, without maritime, New York would not be New York.

AW: Are you finding that there are any challenges with the port as it approaches this twenty-first century?

RL: Oh, yes. Well, people have rediscovered the waterfront. Frankly, every coast could be a Gold Coast. People want to be near the water, live near the water, enjoy the water, which is wonderful. My organization supports it and wants connection to the water. But if you end up making a condo where every tug operation or barge facility or the actual port facilities are, you will cut off your nose and spite your face. It'll be a disaster, environmentally and economically,

for the city. So, protecting that – now, we have 520 miles of coastline in New York City and another 200 in the Jersey side. Probably about 25 linear miles is important for maritime use. You need to protect that zealously. One of the things my organization does is try to work with the working waterfront to make sure that zoning decisions and esplanade decisions and other things that could affect how the working waterfront survives and flourishes, continues. Going forward, thinking progressively, as I said earlier, the port is growing, but there are new things, like deep water wind, offshore wind power which is a new wonderful phenomena that's going to be – as I'd like to say, that we are the Saudi Arabia of wind off the eastern seaboard. That giant forest of turbines that will someday be out there need maritime support. There's a place where they have to bring those things in by barge, assemble them, service them. So, that's a new twenty-first century opportunity and challenge. If we lose those port facilities, we will lose those jobs and possibly the way of leveraging that power source, that green power source we all need to save the planet.

AW: Now, I am not familiar with how far the wind turbines are from the shore, but do you find that the community and the fishermen have any conflicting interests with the wind turbines?

RL: There are some people who like view corridors about – so, negotiating that. But there's plenty of room out there for these things. I've seen in a video recently, folks in Block Island where they built five of them off the shore there. They liked the view. [laughter] They're majestic. They twirl. They're helping to save the planet. So, I think we all can accommodate them. We want to make sure they're there. The wildlife that's in the water is protected, the whales that are now once again reappearing off the New York shore. They can go whale watching off in New York City. Did you know that?

AW: I did not.

RL: Now you know that.

AW: Have you had any recent successes, any big successes for protecting these waterfronts through zoning or any other [inaudible]?

RL: There's a work in progress with a company called Miller's Launch, which is like the Swiss army knife of maritime facilities. They have a hundred boats. They're tucked into, from the smallest to the biggest. But they're there to service any kind of vessel, movie shoots, you name it. If it goes on in the water, they're there to help. They were threatened. There was a large mall development right north of them, a large condo development right south of them. The city was saying, "Well, we have these two large non-maritime developments. Let's make a nice esplanade to connect them to." The problem was the esplanade would have gone right through Miller's Launch. So, my organization basically tried to translate the needs and wants of this vital maritime to the sort of bottom line dollar-cents of approach that the city was taking and find a middle ground. Frankly, these guys are very good at running boats and maintaining this maritime facility. They're not so good at spreadsheets and long-range economic projections. By turn, the guys that run the city's economic development organization aren't so good at running tugs. [laughter] So, finding the right consultants to talk to them or giving them the vocabulary and the right designers to talk to them using some of the design guidelines I'll be talking about

here at this conference as sort of a common language. We're reasonably sure that this maritime use will be preserved and given a long-term lease. So, that's a success that we're excited about.

AW: You had mentioned that work expansion is a little bit of a challenge. Are there any other emerging issues coming forward with this waterfront?

RL: Well, I think the emerging issue for all of us that live on my home planet, Earth is that of sea level rise and climate change. We had Sandy hit New York City, New Jersey, very hard. Building back what we had in place in the face of sea level rise is a mistake and a challenge to be addressed. So, finding design solutions that will help all kinds of facilities including the Working Waterfront Maritime, I think is the big one. I think real estate is a huge issue. Sensible national policy about maritime is probably something that needs to be addressed, above my pay grade as I work locally. But there's seems to be a number of ports competing with each other. Other nations don't have this sort of chaotic planning about their maritime facilities. We should probably be a little bit more strategic as we compete internationally.

AW: So, how can the National Working Waterfront Network support you and the work that you are doing, going forward?

RL: I think the session I'm missing right now is probably a key. As I like to say to my staff, "We're all in sales. We're trying to tell stories. We're trying to tell the world. If this organization can help us and help others tell the story of the working waterfront in a more compelling and to-the-heart way, you know, that these are about jobs, this is about the environment, it's about heritage, it's about a lot of things that people care about, I think would be a great thing. So, this network, I think, is important and is a resource that we should all use and, you know, in concert together across the nation.

AW: Related to that then, what are the tools of the network or information that you need to better address your working waterfront challenges?

RL: Well, I think great data about the number of jobs, great economic data about the long-term benefits of the working waterfront versus the short shot that you get with the ratables and the construction jobs of a condo, I think are particularly important. So, that kind of hardcore research would be useful. The fact that this network exists should be probably more prominently known. Probably a political arm of this organization would be helpful, that engages political leaders about the importance of this. Imagine if we had a working waterfront caucus in the Congress, would that be a good thing? I agree, Alexa. [laughter]

AW: So, I guess one final question is what would your vision for this community be for the future? If you had a blank piece of paper and you could write what the future of this working waterfront was going to be.

RL: Well, I think it would be a celebrated and beloved part of America. We're maritime country. We started this way. We still are this way. I just go back to communications. Finding a way to tell our story in a better way is probably what we want to achieve. Is that what you asked?

AW: Yes, I was just asking what your vision for this community was for the future.

RL: That's all right. [laughter]

AW: Anything else you wanted to add?

RL: No, I've said everything, I think. You want some clarification probably, right?

Kaitlyn Clark: A few about the [inaudible] stuff. But we can do that.

AW: Thank you so much.

RL: I have spoken. I call for the violent overthrow of the United States government. [laughter]

[end of transcript]