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A mighty ferry connection between two far west sides

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BY JESSICA LAPPIN | For centuries the Hudson River was filled with the sounds of ships, barges, people and commerce. The daily life of the river was the daily life of our city. Tragically, we abused this great resource and polluted it to near extinction and in the process put our relationship to the river into mothballs. In more recent decades, our collective sense of the river has been one rooted in gratitude for the heroic work done to restore the Hudson's ecological health. Slowly people have returned to recreational use on the water and slowly a full range of possibilities are emerging to reconnect New Yorkers to their river. This time with a more mature sense of stewardship and sustainability.

This week I got to experience a piece of what this future may look like as New York Water Taxi inaugurated a new service connecting the far west side of Manhattan with Downtown. A key to a vibrant New York is a vibrant multi-modal transportation network. This ferry service provides yet another option for getting to Lower Manhattan. Reintroducing the mighty Hudson as a commuting thoroughfare is an important step in responsibly reawakening our commercial relationship to the river.

The trip between Pier 84 near the Javits Center and Battery Park City provides another link to one of the fastest-growing neighborhoods in the region. Every sector of the Lower Manhattan economy is booming and can help make this a bustling connection. Lower Manhattan isn't your father's FiDi anymore. While Downtown is still home to countless firms in the financial, real estate and insurance sectors, it has also become a top choice for media, creative and tech firms: 800 and counting. Lower Manhattan has also become a truly 24/7 community, due in large part to the growing residential population, which has more than doubled since 9/11. There are now 61,000 residents living south of Chambers St.

And, on top of that there's a retail revolution under way. In the next two years, more than 1.5 million square feet of new or repositioned retail space will come online. What does this mean for New Yorkers? That Lower Manhattan will be a true destination and home to some of the world's most sought after shops and restaurants. More and more people will be looking to travel from Midtown to Downtown and more ferry options are an exciting way to harness this demand.

It all makes perfect sense. While Lower Manhattan already has an incredibly rich transit network: 12 subway lines, 30 bus routes, the PATH, 25 CitiBike stations, and the free Downtown Connection bus sponsored by my organization, the Alliance for Downtown New York, the demand for more transit capacity only grows with the neighborhood's ongoing renaissance.

And as Lower Manhattan draws more employees and visitors, many will come from transit-poor neighborhoods – including the Far West Side, which is also growing quickly but remains sparsely served by the city's mass-transit network. While Pier 84 and nearby amenities are revitalizing the Hudson waterfront in Midtown, it's a long, long walk to the nearest subway line that can bring you Downtown.

The new ferry line could indeed be a template for water routes all over the city. The transportation infrastructure, so vital to the economic development of the entire metropolitan region, will benefit from a strengthened network of fast and reliable ferry service.

It took New York City more than a century to rediscover and resuscitate its natural waterfront assets. Hudson River Park and Lower Manhattan are just two of the many development success stories along miles of waterfront in all five boroughs. It's time to use one of our greatest assets, the Hudson, and all our waterways, to truly lace the city together.

Jessica Lappin is president of the Alliance for Downtown New York, which manages Lower Manhattan's business improvement district.

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