Testimony on behalf of the Times Square Alliance  
Intro. 1149-2016: Licensing Ticket Sellers  
New York City Council on Consumer Affairs  
April 12, 2016

Thank you Chairman Espinal, Council Member Garodnick, and Members of the Committee on Consumer Affairs for allowing me the opportunity to testify today. My name is Caitlin Lewis, Director of External Affairs for the Times Square Alliance. Tim Tompkins is out of town for a long-scheduled commitment, so I have been asked to testify.

The Times Square Alliance supports Intro. 1149-2016, which is consistent with and fulfills one of the Times Square Task Force recommendations from the last fall. The Alliance does not support banning ticket sellers from the pedestrian plazas, however we do support requiring a license for ticket sellers, as well as reasonable time, place and manner restrictions, as needed.

Times Square is one of the world’s most iconic locations. Approximately 450,000 pedestrians pass through the area daily, and over 39 million tourists visit Times Square annually. The creation of the pedestrian plazas in 2009 added new space for visitors and locals to sit and relax, take in the spectacular sights, or simply pass through the area with ease. At the same time, this new space has become a magnet for commercial activity, with up to 181 ticket sellers of various types vending in Times Square on a given Saturday night.

There are many legitimate ticket sellers in Times Square who earn an honest living by providing visitors with the opportunity to take a sightseeing tour, see a comedy show, or partake in the countless entertainment options that Times Square is known for. Those individuals should be allowed to continue making a living on the Times Square plazas. However, some less scrupulous ticket hawkers resort to fraudulent and deceptive means to make a quick dollar off of unsuspecting tourists. The instances of aggressive and fraudulent ticket sales in Times Square are well-documented: theatergoers tricked into spending hundreds of dollars on fake “Hamilton” tickets, visitors promised comedy shows with celebrity headliners like Tina Fey, and New Year’s Eve revelers sold tickets to non-existent ball drop parties. Some engage in aggressive or intrusive tactics. These practices perpetuate negative perceptions of Times Square, leading some New Yorkers and tourists to avoid both the sellers in general and the area entirely. In fact, in an October 2015 survey, 61% of Times Square employees reported having had a negative interaction with a commercial solicitor of some sort, with half of those employees saying that interaction made them feel less safe.

New Yorkers and visitors have also taken to social media to document these negative experiences, further amplifying the message that Times Square is a place to avoid. On Trip Advisor, someone named Alex wrote, “We were sold $20 tickets off a street vendor in Times Square who lied to us about who was going to be appearing, telling us ‘Seth McFarlane’ and ‘Tina Fey’ we’re going to be performing along with a host of other comedians I’d recognised. They weren’t there... I feel completely swindled out of my money and like we’ve been
completely taken advantage of.” In a Yelp review of a Times Square comedy club, Antonia wrote: “What a scam! They have a street team that harasses you on the street then completely lies to your face about who is performing that night.” And on Twitter, several users mentioned ticket sellers offering to sell them drugs. Dozens of testimonials documenting similar tales can be found online, a sampling of which are attached to my testimony.

Times Square is home to dozens of entertainment venues and almost 40 Broadway theaters. These venues drive our thriving tourism economy. Hawkers that deliberately mislead visitors, or that are especially aggressive in approaching them, not only threaten the hundreds of thousands of tourism-related jobs citywide, but also the livelihood of the legitimate and hardworking ticket sellers trying making a living on the plazas and sidewalks of Times Square. It is worth nothing that a 2012 study showed that Times Square directly and indirectly is responsible for one-tenth of all New York City jobs, and that 61% of the people who work in Times Square – many in the tourism industry – work north of 96th Street or in the outer boroughs. Annual direct spending on hotels, entertainment and retail in Times Square is $4.8 billion, and Broadway-related spending infused the City with approximately $12.6 billion during the 2014-2015 theater season. In addition, Times Square has 20 percent of the hotel rooms in the City. For this level of economic activity and job creation to continue, we must ensure that Times Square is welcoming to both New Yorkers and tourists.

The Times Square Alliance urges the Council to pass this sensible legislation that will establish a clear licensing scheme and give the City the tools to better protect consumers and thereby enhance the reputations of the many honest, hardworking and legitimate ticket sellers in the area.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.