



PUBLIC TESTIMONY OF WATERFRONT ALLIANCE

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New York City Council Committee on Resiliency and Waterfronts

RE: Storm Oversight and Int. 0076

Submitted by Tyler Taba, Senior Manager for Climate Policy, Waterfront Alliance

Thank you, Chair Kagan and Council Members. My name is Tyler Taba, Senior Manager for Climate Policy at Waterfront Alliance, an alliance of more than 1,100 organizations, businesses, and individuals. Waterfront Alliance is the leader in waterfront revitalization, climate resilience, and advocacy for the New York-New Jersey Harbor region.

We are committed to sustainability and to mitigating the effects of climate change across the region's hundreds of miles of waterfront. We spearhead the Rise to Resilience coalition of 100+ groups advocating for policy related to climate resilience and we run the Waterfront Edge Design Guidelines (WEDG) program for promoting innovation in climate design.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing. Regarding storm preparedness, I would like to address the need for adequate funding levels in New York City's budget that reflect a commitment to overall climate preparedness. A climate resilient budget lays the foundation for storm preparedness, by making long-term investments in community engagement, green infrastructure, grey-infrastructure upgrades, and climate adaptation. These **pre-storm** investments are extremely important when we talk about preparedness.

NYC's preliminary budget proposal urges fiscal responsibility for New York City, but without proper investments in climate resilience and adaptation we will spend billions of dollars in recovery efforts following storms that we are unprepared for (like Sandy, Ida, and Henri). Storm preparedness means investing in protection upfront, by funding neighborhood planning efforts through the Five Borough Climate Adaptation Plan (Local Law 122), resiliency in NYCHA properties, enhancing resiliency retrofit programs, and expanding holistic green infrastructure solutions.

For starters, we must ensure that New York City understands where vulnerabilities exist at a hyper-local, community level through data collection, analysis, and neighborhood planning and engagement. This process has taken place in some neighborhoods already (i.e., Resilient Edgemere, East Side Coastal Resilience, Financial District and Seaport Climate Resilience Master Plan), but a coordinated, fully funded plan for citywide adaptation and resilience that



can be completed within a reasonable timeframe does not exist. Last year, the City Council passed Intro 1620, now Local Law 122, which establishes a Five Borough Climate Adaptation Plan to be led by the now-Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice (MOCEJ).

Local Law 122 has the potential to be the backbone for climate resiliency in New York City but only if adequately funding, sustained, and prioritized. More specifically, we strongly recommend the neighborhood planning component of this plan remain at the forefront of the city's holistic approach to advancing solutions that will allow the city to solve overlapping environmental, social and economic challenges simultaneously.

More specifically, neighborhood planning is a fundamental storm preparedness strategy. It allows communities to assess their risks at a hyper-local level; make decisions that make sense and best fit their needs; and ultimately position themselves to secure funding and resources for on the ground projects. This will be a long-term, ongoing process that must remain funded and sustained at the city level.

Along the same lines, New York City must be prepared to leverage the historic levels of federal funding that are being made available for resilience and adaptation projects. There is no single solution to climate change, especially along the 520 miles of diverse coastline in our city. Federal dollars provide an opportunity to jumpstart climate projects, where the city and state are unable to allocate adequate resources. Part of the process of leveraging federal funding is outlining clear and well thought out projects. For this reason, we encourage stronger collaboration among city agencies, lawmakers, and communities to plan and secure funding for innovative projects that protect areas most unprepared for the impacts of climate change.

I'd like to re-emphasize the importance of pre-storm investments. Every \$1 invested in mitigation yields \$6 in future loss reduction, according to the National Institute of Building Sciences. Storm preparedness means shifting our investments in climate resilience to proactive funding, rather than reactive. Fiscal responsibility does not mean shaving off funding today, to spend significantly more tomorrow. It means spending more today to save significantly more tomorrow.

In the near term, the City must prepare to respond to the upcoming release of the proposed designs for the New York–New Jersey Harbor and Tributaries Study (NYNJHATS) and what it means for our region. This project, led by the U.S Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), is a direct federal response to protecting the region from the next Hurricane Sandy. It could provide a historic opportunity to protect a significant portion of vulnerable coastline. In May, the Corps is set to release their tentatively selected plan for this massive infrastructure project. Certainly, the



project that is selected is highly important, and equally is the commitment to community engagement.

As the region is facing a confluence of heavier precipitation, sea level rise, and storm surge, multilayered solutions will be needed in the plan. The federal Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) includes language directing “the Corps to make all necessary efforts to engage community groups and incorporate impacts of low-frequency precipitation and sea level rise in the study.”

About two years ago, the Corps proposed, as part of several alternatives, a massive storm surge barrier as part of the NYNJHATS plan. Experts were concerned with this proposal, because it did not take a multi-hazard approach to climate risk (i.e., sea level rise, extreme precipitation, etc.).

The goal for this project is for the Corps to “investigate measures to manage future flood risk in ways that support the long-term resilience and sustainability of the coastal ecosystem and surrounding communities, and reduce the economic costs and risks associated with flood and storm events.” Waterfront Alliance does not support a storm surge barrier, alone, for the Army Corps’ response to this goal.

Rise to Resilience has a longstanding history of communicating with the Army Corps on the need for robust community engagement. The Corps has historically struggled with their community engagement process, largely because they are limited in capacity to support meaningful public engagement necessary to develop a publicly supported plan. To date, the onus has been on USACE internal staff to conduct this engagement through public meetings, despite the agency’s limited resources to conduct this work. New York State and New York City are much better positioned to conduct outreach and drive input into the study and plan development.

Based on the timeline we have seen; we are calling for an extension of the Corp’s public engagement process. We encourage the Council to call the Army Corps for a hearing once the NYNJHATS proposal is introduced. New York City should coordinate strongly with the Corps to ensure that NYNJHATS works in tandem with, and complementary to, the efforts the city will undertake to develop and implement multiple climate hazard resilience projects in the most vulnerable communities.

Regarding Int. 0076, Waterfront Alliance supports the establishment of a program to provide financial assistance for purchasing and installing a backwater valve. Homeowners throughout



New York City have faced costly damages from sewer backups into their homes during storm and flood events. This poses major health risks as well, as damages to personal belongings, for residents in flood prone communities. Combined sewer system overflows occur once a week in NYC, on average.¹ Installation of backwater valves can protect residents, their finances, and property.

Affordable solutions for climate retrofits, like what is being proposed in this bill, are necessary to protect flood vulnerable communities. As mentioned earlier, there is no single solution to tackling climate change. Waterfront Alliance is supportive of increasing resilience and adaptation retrofits that address sea level rise and flooding concerns. This includes installation of green infrastructure, basement filling, home elevation, raising mechanicals, flood vents, and backwater valves. Not only do these retrofits protect residents, but they also save money by reducing damages during flood events. Residents also save money as these retrofits can reduce flood insurance rates.

In many cases, homeowners are unaware of retrofit programs. There are abundant resources for solar panel installation (and generally for mitigation retrofits), but the same can't be said for resilience retrofits. We encourage the City Council to consider outreach to communities, especially environmental justice communities, when rolling out these programs. Information should be shared in multiple languages to ensure residents understand how these retrofits are helpful.

In summary, New York City must view climate solutions through a holistic, comprehensive lens. City agencies and lawmakers need to speak with New Yorkers **before** disasters to discuss how they can be prepared for storms. Being physically out in the community is still the most effective way to support residents, understand their needs, and work together to find solutions. Where there is a way for homeowners and residents to be more resilient to climate change, an incentive or technical assistance program should follow. Climate solutions will include planning, funding, natural, and hard infrastructure. Like our coastline, they are unique and diverse.

Thank you for the opportunity to present on these topics. I look forward to continuing this conversation with you and to working with you to protect New York's people, infrastructure, and natural systems.

¹ <https://www.floodhelpny.org/en/mitigation/backwater-valve>