

# **PUBLIC TESTIMONY OF WATERFRONT ALLIANCE**

**September 15, 2022**

## **Oversight Hearing of the New York City Council Committee on Resiliency and Waterfronts and Committee on Parks and Recreation RE: Resiliency of the City's Beaches and Waterfronts**

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

Thank you, Chairs Kagan, Krishnan, and Council Members, for hosting this oversight hearing today. I am 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 making climate resilience an urgent policy priority and we run the Waterfront Edge Design Guidelines (WEDG) program for promoting innovation in climate design.

I am grateful for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing. Climate disasters across the country and in New York City have become more frequent and intense. In the 2010s alone, they cost the nation \$81 billion per year – up from \$18 billion per year in the 1980s. New York City's beaches and waterfronts are the forefront of these climate disasters. Flooding is not just the most expensive climate-related disaster in New York – it also disrupts the livelihoods of millions of New Yorkers who live, work, recreate, and rely on infrastructure, along the waterfront.

Climate resilience must be baked into every aspect of our waterfront. That includes housing, parks and boardwalks, shorelines, and all the infrastructure that make up the waterfront. Waterfront Alliance has been at the forefront of advocacy for climate resilience through calls for comprehensive planning, like AdaptNYC, adequate levels of funding for resiliency projects, pre-storm investments, increasing community awareness around flood risk, and prioritization of green infrastructure solutions.

Aging infrastructure, hardened shoreline design, trash and dumping are just some of the physical barriers that persist in New York City's parks, along with lack of funding, particularly in lower-income communities of color. Waterfront parks figure centrally into New York City's open space and pose unique challenges and opportunities in terms of parks operations and maintenance. In fact, roughly half of the land managed by the NYC Parks Department is directly on the water. That proximity to the shoreline makes these beautiful open spaces especially vulnerable to flooding, storm surges, and other consequences of extreme weather. At the same time, the recreational and educational opportunities – from boating to fishing to learning about marine life – are what makes our waterfront parks truly magical.

The co-benefits of parks are irrefutable: from climate resilience to mental health and physical wellness, parks investments pay dividends. The waterfront facilities maintained by the NYC Parks Department are 76 years old, on average, which is a long stretch for infrastructure that takes constant abuse from water and weather.

When Hurricane Sandy battered the region, the storm swamped 5,700 acres of the city's parkland and spawned \$800 million in damages. Hurricane Ida had similar impacts. We need to bake more resilient features into park designs, upgrades, and retrofits.

The first edition of AdaptNYC is slated to be released at the end of the month. We look forward to reviewing the work of the Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice (MOCEJ) and continuing to be a partner to the City to ensure that engagement, planning, and projects are reaching the most flood vulnerable communities. In anticipation of the rollout of AdaptNYC, Waterfront Alliance would like to reiterate that a reactive process to climate projects is not up to the sustained challenges that the coming decades present. A unifying 520-mile climate blueprint is essential before making decisions about resiliency investments.

- Take Zoning for Coastal Flood Resiliency and MOCR's Climate Design Guidelines to the next level by creating a model for private developers that incentivizes resilient design. This might include loans, grants, expedited permitting review or other resources. Similar programs have been developed to accelerate provisions in Local Law 97. Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) financing is helping to unlock the \$20 billion retrofit market opportunity resulting from NYC's building emissions law. Similar provisions for resiliency should be explored by the City and State.
- A comprehensive climate resiliency plan will need to look beyond resilient design and density limits by identifying and pursuing strategies and tools to discourage or prevent development in areas at high risk of tidal flooding. The draft goals do not call out "managed retreat" by name, rather referring to "housing mobility." The references to "housing mobility" should include greater explanation of how communities would be engaged in these land use conversations.
- Center environmental justice in resilience planning through vulnerability assessments developed in partnership with environmental justice organizations that look at social, demographic, and climate hazards, among other issues.
- Call for increased support and funding for community planning efforts.
- Ensure communities and parts of the City most threatened by climate change are prioritized for all strategies under all goals related to resiliency.
- Provide enhanced resources to the most threatened and underinvested communities, residents, and businesses to build a common understanding of local climate risks.
- Ensure small businesses relied upon by communities, and especially those most in the most vulnerable areas that provide essential services after disaster, are included in all principles and goals related to resilience.

- In every part of the draft plan include language that explains and emphasizes the importance of carbon free, off grid, and renewable energy use commitments such as electric ferries, site equipment such as electric trucks, and other site features such as solar panels.

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