



PUBLIC TESTIMONY OF WATERFRONT ALLIANCE

October 26, 2022

Oversight Hearing of the New York City Council Committee on Resiliency and Waterfronts and Committee on Parks and Recreation RE: 10th Anniversary of Superstorm Sandy

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

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Thank you, Chair Kagan 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.

While Sandy affected neighborhoods across New York City, the storm hit five coastal areas particularly hard—the Brooklyn-Queens Waterfront, the East and South Shores of Staten Island, South Queens, Southern Brooklyn, and Southern Manhattan. Three of the five areas (the East and South Shores of Staten Island, South Queens, and Southern Brooklyn) were directly exposed to storm surge and destructive waves along the shore, and all experienced widespread inundation. Across the five areas—which are home to 685,000 people—physical and economic damage was extensive and long-lasting. In areas with particularly strong flooding, subway systems were paralyzed. Over 8 million people lost power during the storm. Outages were seen for days in some places, while outlying areas were without power for weeks.

Long after the storm, in some cases up to five years later, residents were still rebuilding, with many relocating to higher ground. Thousands of people were temporarily left homeless, and more than 20,000 households were displaced a year after the storm hit. At the time it hit, Sandy was the fourth most expensive storm in U.S. history. The government of New York City estimates that \$19 billion in



damage was inflicted on the city alone.¹ Even up to five years after Sandy, more than a thousand New Jersey residents reported still being unable to return home.²

Climate disasters across the country and in New York City have become more frequent and intense. In the 2010's alone, they cost the nation \$81 billion per year – up from \$18 billion per year in the 1980s. 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.

From now on, climate resilience must be a part of every decision that is made having to do with waterfronts and coastlines. 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.

Below are a few of Waterfront Alliance's recommendations for continuing to push for climate resilience throughout New York City, in response to Sandy and beyond.

Five Borough Climate Adaptation Plan (AdaptNYC) and Other Climate Plans

First and foremost, I would like to reiterate Waterfront Alliance's strong support for a Five-Borough Comprehensive Climate Adaptation Plan, AdaptNYC.

Several advocates, including member of our Rise to Resilience coalition, worked together to pass Local Law 122 that required the city to develop a Comprehensive Resilience Plan by the end of September. To date, a plan for developing either comprehensive resilience plans for individual neighborhoods or a single comprehensive plan have not been released. The Waterfront Alliance has recommended to the city that Local Law 122 be implemented by first developing comprehensive plans for the neighborhoods and communities most impacted by climate hazards and least likely to have the means and resources to recover from major climate impacts or disasters. The plans should be structured to attract federal and state funding that is now available through for the first time in generations.

It is critical that the City Council follow up on this important legislation that was passed to ensure that it is successfully implemented.

¹ <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/cdbgdr/about/About%20Hurricane%20Sandy.page>

² https://www.nj.com/ocean/2017/10/the_fallout_from_hurricane_sandy_5_years_later.html



Moreover, we recommend that the Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice (MOCEJ) develop a transparent overview of the series of planning efforts and reports coming out over the next few months and years. This effort should aim to inform the public about the City's vision for climate impacts and environmental justice by pulling together pieces from major plans like PlaNYC, AdaptNYC, Environmental Justice for All Report, and the Comprehensive Waterfront Plan. We encourage the city to coordinate this effort among agencies, elected officials, and funding opportunities to ensure there is a comprehensive and coordinated planning process across the five boroughs.

We also encourage the city to commit to the NYC Comprehensive Waterfront Plan (CWP) as a guiding vision for the first term, and develop an action agenda in conjunction with the NYC Waterfront Management Advisory Board that includes metrics, timelines and milestones for CWP implementation.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' New York - New Jersey Harbor and Tributaries Study

Additionally, a major response to Sandy was the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) New York-New Jersey Harbor and Tributaries Study (NYNJHATS). Last month, the Corps released their Tentatively Selected Plan (TSP), which looks to bring on a series of shoreline-based measures and smaller gates. It is not yet clear what exactly these shoreline-based measures will look like, but there is a sense of optimism that USACE is eyeing more natural and nature-based solutions along many of New York and New Jersey's most flood vulnerable communities. The gates - proposed for places like Arthur Kill, Jamaica Bay, Gowanus Canal, and Newtown Creek - are included in the mix.

Waterfront Alliance, earlier this year, recommended to Mayor Adams that his administration dedicate staff, attention and visibility to the NYNJHAT's project, making the city a partner in that process and through public engagement.

Waterfront Alliance has been working with more than 20 other environment, community, and climate justice-focused organizations to push for a more extended, iterative, and robust engagement process. As Council members, you can also play a role by working closely with the city to ensure that community members and organizations in your district are aware of opportunities to join public information sessions and other forums for input, and calling on the city, State, and USACE for a more extended, iterative process.

Prioritize Green Infrastructure and Nature-Based Solutions

Waterfront Alliance and the Rise to Resilience coalition have been leading advocacy efforts around the implementation of green infrastructure and nature-based solutions wherever possible.

All green infrastructure projects require a long-term and ongoing maintenance commitment for it to function as designed. DEP and other agencies must develop full life cycle analyses and strategies for all



infrastructure and coordinate maintenance plans for all city climate infrastructure while emphasizing the unique needs of green infrastructure.

Similarly, two particular initiatives should be prioritized to expand green infrastructure solutions.

First, we recommend the prioritization of the Wetlands Management Framework for NYC. More specifically, the proposal within the Framework to transfer 93 acres of publicly owned property to the jurisdiction of NYC Parks and acquire 50 additional acres of privately-owned land to be managed as wetlands. Wetlands provide protection to the communities nearby, helping attenuate wave energy, stabilize shorelines, and reduce nuisance flooding.

Second, building on the success of the Saw Mill Creek Wetland Mitigation Bank, commit to prioritizing more wetlands mitigation banks. Although significant wetlands are preserved within the city parks system as well as on state and federal lands, many coastal and freshwater wetlands throughout the city are still in private hands or on land under the jurisdiction of other agencies.

Conduct Additional Hearings to Address Climate Resilience

We are grateful for Council Member Kagan's leadership as chair of this committee and recommend that more City Council hearings are scheduled over the next few months to expand upon the conversations we are having today.

Waterfront Alliance strongly recommends this committee host a hearing on the U.S Army Corps of Engineers NYNJHATS project. The project will have major implications for New York City residents and deserves the attention of the City Council.

The committee should consider a hearing on the bill that passed last year, NYC's Climate Resilient Design Guidelines, directs the city to develop resilient design guidelines that will ensure that all public infrastructure, from schools to streets, is built to withstand climate threats. It is critical that the Council engage with the Mayor's Office to ensure that these design guidelines advance, that they are informed by your constituents, and that there is also a clear path toward their requirement for private as well as public infrastructure.

We recommend the committee host a hearing on the plan to accelerate climate resilience and the Climate Strong Communities initiative that have been released by the administration today.

Lastly, we recommend this committee host a hearing on Local Law 122.

The risks of climate change have showed themselves in the years after Sandy. It's clear that 10 years later, vulnerabilities to people, infrastructure, and our natural environment still exist. Waterfront Alliance will continue to call for an increase in funding and adequate staffing for resiliency efforts across New York City. Let this remembrance of Hurricane Sandy serve as a moment of reflection. Where challenges exist,



opportunities await. We stand ready to partner with you all to transform, make resilient, and revitalize our coastlines to prevent devastation from storms like Sandy.