



New York City Council
Committee on Resiliency and Waterfronts and Committee on Environmental Protection
Hearing on Citywide Resiliency, Int. 1620-2019
October 28, 2019
Emily Walker, Director of Outreach and Programs

Good afternoon, my name is Emily Walker, and I am the Director of Outreach and Programs at New Yorkers for Parks (NY4P). I would like to thank the City Council Committees on Resiliency and Waterfronts and Environmental Protection for holding this important hearing today.

On this day, the 7th anniversary of Superstorm Sandy, we believe the conversation about a citywide resiliency plan is of urgent importance. Additionally, with multiple resiliency projects in the pipeline now, we see a need for the City to plan for a comprehensive approach to protect the vulnerable coastline and waterfronts of the five boroughs. We therefore support the proposed Intro 1620, which would require a semi-regular, citywide comprehensive planning process for our entire shoreline. As evidenced by Sandy, water impacted all five boroughs of this city. We acknowledge that the City has to move forward with some expediency to initiate vitally-needed resiliency projects in Lower Manhattan, but we also know that water doesn't discriminate, and that the other stretches of our waterfront will require similar projects in the not-too-distant future.

We are concerned that the current resiliency plans moving forward in Lower Manhattan are being done with a piecemeal approach. This will mean that significant stretches of the waterfront will be closed for renovation and reconstruction at overlapping intervals, with a variety of City agencies overseeing these disparate projects. While those in the know are aware of the jurisdictional boundaries of these spaces, to the average New Yorker, they are waterfront parks and esplanades that will soon be taken offline for a number of years. We do not feel there has been sufficient interagency coordination of these projects, and we would hope that Intro 1620 would help address this issue moving forward.

Making our waterfront and coastline more resilient to future storms and sea level rise will require a great amount of interagency coordination and transparency, but it will also require a process to allow the public to provide input on any projects that move forward. Many of our waterfront communities are also frontline communities that are most vulnerable to climate change and long-term environmental justice issues. Engaging these New Yorkers early and often in any citywide resiliency planning will be key to getting it done right. We suggest that the City create a task force with five borough representation to help ensure that any future citywide resiliency planning is done in coordination with New Yorkers who represent the communities most impacted by climate change.

We also would ask the Council to consider the funding needed to truly implement a citywide resiliency plan for our waterfront. The cost of the East Side Coastal Resiliency Project alone is projected to be over \$1.4 billion. This is a tremendous amount of funding for just one small piece of our waterfront. Will the Office of Management and Budget fund these efforts in a five borough strategy, or will specific agencies be responsible for the funding needed to implement these projects moving forward? We believe this is an issue of equity, and significant funding must be allocated for the citywide resiliency projects that we know will be necessary to protect our coastal communities.

New Yorkers for Parks and the Municipal Art Society recently co-authored a report called “Bright Ideas”, in which we call for New York City to create a position for a Director of the Public Realm. Having this ombudsman-type role carved out to ensure that citywide development and planning happens in a thoughtful, equitable way would go a long way toward improving the efficacy of a proposal such as the one we are discussing today. A five borough resiliency plan will require a truly comprehensive strategy, and we suggest that the City take seriously the suggestion to create a role for this.

Finally, one of NY4P’s weightiest concerns relating to public open space and parks will always be the question of long-term maintenance. For too long, New York City has failed to dedicate permanent and meaningful funding for baselined, year-round maintenance and operations staff lines. We were encouraged by the investments made by the City in the FY20 budget, but we know many of those positions are still not permanent, and will not meet the sum of tremendous needs of our parks system. As we contemplate a citywide resiliency plan for our waterfront and coastline, we must also plan for baselined maintenance positions. Simply put, maintenance is a matter of protecting our capital investments, and we think any conversation about what will be billions of dollars in construction is a nonstarter without an appropriate, permanent commitment to more full-time maintenance and operations staff to help maintain these important public spaces.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak. I welcome any questions you may have.

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*For over 100 years, [New Yorkers for Parks](http://www.ny4p.org) (NY4P) has built, protected, and promoted parks and open spaces in New York City. Today, NY4P is the citywide independent organization championing quality parks and open spaces for all New Yorkers in all neighborhoods.
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