



**New York City Council Committees on Parks & Recreation & Environmental Protection
Oversight Hearing: The Status of the East Side Coastal Resiliency Project
January 23, 2019
Lynn Kelly, Executive Director**

Good afternoon, my name is Lynn Kelly, and I am the Executive Director of New Yorkers for Parks (NY4P). I would like to thank the City Council Committees on Parks and Recreation and Environmental Protection for inviting us to speak about this important project today.

We want to begin by stating that we understand the challenge that faces the City as it seeks to balance the complex engineering needs of this project with the realities of the location itself. It is true that East River Park has but one point of entry for vehicles, that it is adjacent to thousands of units of middle-income and NYCHA housing, is adjacent to the 14th Street ConEdison facility, and that it is surrounded by a major highway on one side and a large river on the other. To that end, we can especially appreciate that the City has sought to find ways to mitigate the quality of life issues related to construction that will impact the thousands of New Yorkers who live alongside this stretch of the East River. We also understand that it is not a matter of “if” the next Sandy happens, but “when”. The need to revitalize East River Park as a public open space that can also offer flood protection for the neighborhood is urgent and essential to the protection of the residents of the East Village and Lower East Side.

However, as the City has sought to minimize the disruptions that a major capital project would cause, we also want to reiterate that the residents who would be impacted by said construction are also residents who have waited for over six years to see any meaningful changes to their cherished local park.

NY4P was supportive of the Rebuild By Design process when it began in 2013, and participated in some of the many community meetings that took place over the years that related to the reconstruction of East River Park. To engage in a years-long public process of soliciting meaningful feedback from residents is a tremendous exercise of trust-building, and we believe shows the best of what government and external partners can do to proactively engage the public around their local open spaces. We share the concern that the process by which the new redesign of the park was made public, even if well-intended, constituted a breach of trust for the thousands of residents and the many organizations that helped drive the conversation about what they wanted to see in their park.

While we can understand the City’s argument that the process of rebuilding the park in its entirety will result in a space that is more resilient in the long-term, we also feel that the design considerations and issues that the City seeks to address could have been identified and made public far earlier in the process. In a community that lost hundreds of trees post-Sandy, it is a sad irony that the mature trees that survived the storm will now be lost altogether for the reconstruction of the park. As the only major open space accessible

to many of the residents who live nearby, the complete loss of this decades-old canopy will be profound. Additionally, community stewards such as the Lower East Side Ecology Center, whose organization calls East River Park home, have worked for years to incorporate resilient, native plantings into the park – the forward-thinking work done by countless volunteers will be lost in the proposed redesign.

NY4P is also concerned about the fairly recent investments made by the City to improve the park. As mentioned in the Center for an Urban Future “A New Leaf” report, the Esplanade itself, which needed extensive repairs after over 60 years without, took almost a decade to be completed, many years beyond the estimates that had been provided to the community, and only re-opened in 2010. Additionally, the track and field located near the East 6th Street entrance to the park recently reopened after a nearly \$3 million investment. There are also two projects currently in the design and procurement stages of the capital process that fall within the park. It is unclear how those projects will now proceed in line with the City’s new plans for the park.

While the City estimates the park could be rebuilt and re-opened to the public in a three year span of time, we have serious concerns about the City’s ability to meet that timeframe. Due to factors that we believe are in large part out of the control of NYC Parks and other capital-intensive agencies, we know that the ability to complete large-scale capital improvements is often lengthy and subject to unforeseen delays. This is a community that has already waited for years to have a re-opened esplanade, has taken years to provide detailed input about what they want to see in their park, and is now being told they will not have access to their park at all while it is being rebuilt completely, and potentially that the plans they helped create will not be used. We believe trust has been broken, and the lack of clarity around the decision to not use the input provided by residents and park users, as well as the now vastly inflated cost of rebuilding the park, have done little to assuage the concerns of residents.

The City should do all it can to articulate how the community-driven design concepts are being incorporated into the new redesign plans that are being shared publicly. We also urge the City to truly expedite the capital process – three years is an incredibly long time for a community to go without its most significant open space, and we believe the City has a mandate to ensure meaningful alternatives in the interim during construction, to help offset the community’s temporary loss of parkland. We also believe the City should make a good faith effort to step up maintenance and programming in East River Park starting now. The park is still currently still open to the public, and should be maximized as a resource until construction begins. We also ask that the City reconsider plans that would entail the wholesale loss of all canopy and plant-life currently in the park, as well as the preservation of key landmarks in the park that have been identified by the community as ones they would like to see saved.

In sum, we hope the City views this as a “teachable moment” in community process and resiliency planning. That is, act earlier and be transparent, even when facing unforeseen challenges and recognize that communication is paramount. We hope the City now takes heed and proactively re-engages residents and advocates in how to ensure that whatever happens in East River Park reflects their priorities and vision.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak and 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. www.ny4p.org