Public Testimony
New York City Council, Committee on Recovery and Resiliency
Re: Resiliency Projects in New York City

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Waterfront Alliance

The Waterfront Alliance is a non-profit civic organization and coalition of more than 1,000 community and recreational groups, educational institutions, businesses, and other stakeholders committed to restoring and revitalizing New York Harbor and the surrounding waterways. Our waterways have been revitalized with active recreation, education, and transportation, and the harbor has for centuries been a vital conduit for commerce. Yet the waterways that surround us are also a powerful reminder that we live among nature; we and share the benefits the waters provide and the risks they pose. Nearly five years ago to the day, Hurricane Sandy ravaged the East Coast, causing 44 deaths and $19 billion of damages to New York City alone.

Today, many challenges remain: our region is extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The threat of sea level rise and more frequent and more powerful coastal storms require us to act to protect our city for future generations. Sandy was an historic event, but it was not a worst-case scenario, and it will not be the last storm to strike this region. Rebuilding has been a slow, painful, and costly task that is still ongoing, and future storms may cause even greater damage. These consequences pose risks to our entire city, not just coastal residents: from threats to our energy and food supplies and other commercial activity, to mass transit outages in the short term as well as disruptions to repair damaged tunnels.

We face a major collective challenge to protect against more intense storms and sea level rise, exacerbated by the current political environment. The Trump administration has demonstrated that it will not be a reliable ally in the fight to slow climate change and its impact on our coastlines. In addition to sabotaging climate science within the Environmental Protection Agency, it has also proposed $6 billion in cuts to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, including funding for the Community Development Block Grant program, a significant resource for resilience projects. The withdrawal of the United States from the Paris climate agreement worsens the risks our region faces in the years to come, making local action even more crucial. We take great pride that New York City has stepped up to lead efforts to implement the Paris climate accords in the absence of federal leadership, as an executive order this summer reaffirmed the City’s commitment to its “80x50” policy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions at least 80 percent by 2050.

This work remains imperative, because sea level rise and climate projections continue to worsen, with each new study pushing us in the wrong direction. Across the northeast, sea levels have risen by approximately one foot in the last 100 years, a rate that exceeds the global average, and is projected to accelerate. The accelerating pace of sea level rise ensure that the “100-year floodplain” is not a fixed boundary, with land within that risk zone nearly certain to grow over time. That was evident in a new study published just days ago by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, which reported that by 2045, a storm with the force of Sandy would be a one-in-five-years event, up from a one-in-25-years event today. The collapse of the Antarctic ice sheet would mean serious consequences for New York, making hurricanes more frequent and with higher flood levels due to rising seas.
This year the Waterfront Alliance launched the Harbor Scorecard, which provides accessible, community-level data for New Yorkers to assess the risks and challenges we face. It is an online dashboard for coastal flood risk, water quality, and public access to inspire advocacy to decision-makers to invest in cleaner water, better coastal defenses, and more recreational access to the waterways. Using data from Climate Central, a research institution, and taking into account moderate to high sea level rise projections, we found a 1-in-2 chance of a major flood for more than 400,000 New Yorkers by 2060. That is roughly the population of Miami or New Orleans, cities also facing significant climate risks. The City’s response to these unprecedented challenges has been tremendous, but the cost estimates presented in the 10-year plan to address rebuilding (A Stronger, More Resilient New York) do not attempt to give a comprehensive picture of the cost of long-term resiliency. Although we have done an excellent job with available resources, we are making only a down payment.

The waterways do not adhere to political boundaries; we urge a regional, multi-city approach to plan and finance resiliency. New York City cannot address its coastal flood risks alone, nor is it alone in the region in facing such risks. This challenge requires cooperation with State and federal partners, and not just on a project-by-project basis, but on setting long-term priorities and cost-sharing plans. With inaction in Washington, the burdens of leadership fall to states and municipal governments in coastal cities. New York should spearhead a multi-level coalition to plan for combating climate change and sea level rise. Such a commission should set measurable goals, and guidelines for action, aligning coastal states and cities toward ensuring that New York and other regions at risk receive a fair share of available resources. The planned re-launch of the City’s Waterfront Management Advisory Board will be an important forum to convene the necessary partners to explore such an idea.

There is no silver bullet to prepare for the impact of climate change on New York’s waterfront. But with decisions about our shorelines being made in real-time by both public and private stakeholders, we need a variety of adaptation and mitigation strategies, from hard infrastructure such as flood barriers, to natural features such as living shorelines and wetlands restoration. Our Waterfront Edge Design Guidelines rating system, or WEDG, provides guidance and certification for excellent waterfront projects that improve resilience, ecological outcomes, and public access. It is currently being revised with a team of scientists and design experts toward applicability beyond New York. The program aims to shift not only the community of practice, through professional development for waterfront planners and engineers, but empower community leaders to call for safer, healthier, more accessible waterfronts.

We must commit to social equity when planning for resilience. The effects of climate change in New York will be unjust; our research shows more than 40 percent of those at risk of major flooding face substantial social or economic barriers to recovery. Low-income communities and communities of color face more immediate, and more severe, threats from climate change. Low-lying neighborhoods with historically disenfranchised populations face higher risks of exposure to hazardous materials during and following storms. The RAND Corporation identified solutions for improving affordability of insurance and risk reduction measures for low-income homeowners, including income-based insurance vouchers, low-cost loans for risk mitigation, and expanding the Home Resilient Audit program.

New York City can continue be a world leader with strong and stable coastlines for generations to come. We look forward to working with the Council and other stakeholders to ensure that New Yorkers are adequately and expeditiously protected from the increasing threats posed by climate change, with We thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony, and welcome any questions you may have.