Public Testimony  
October 22, 2018  
New York City Council, Committee on Environmental Protection  
Re: Oversight - Resiliency in the Face of Sea Level Rise  

Submitted by Roland Lewis, CEO and President  
Waterfront Alliance  

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. Our mission is to inspire and enable resilient, revitalized and accessible coastlines for all communities.  

The Challenge  

Over the next century, rising sea levels and more intense storm activity associated with climate change will affect our coastal city and the region. Many neighborhoods bordering the waterfront already experience flooding and storm surges, and these events are expected to increase. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report released by the UN earlier this month has only reinforced the need to prepare our region for increased flood hazards.  

The accelerating pace of sea level rise increases certainty that the 100-year floodplain is not a fixed boundary. 100,000 buildings are expected to be within the 100-year floodplain in NYC by 2050 (the length of a mortgage), and over 7,500 acres (or 13,400 residential units) are projected to be under water daily due to tidal flooding, according to DCP. Low-lying neighborhoods with historically disenfranchised populations face higher risks of hazards during and following storms.  

The current political environment in Washington, DC only exacerbates the major collective challenge to invest in resilience against more intense storms and sea level rise.  

US Army Corps Report and Waterfront Alliance’s Position  

With respect to the US Army Corps of Engineers Coastal Storm Risk Management Feasibility Study, we support the resolution introduced here today. A large scale study is needed to assess the potential solutions to adapt the New York-New Jersey harbor and waterfront to sea level rise and an increased frequency of coastal storms. It is important that this study is consistent with that need and the New York City context.  

We want to underscore that there is no silver bullet to prepare for the impact of climate change on New York’s waterfront. Decisions are being made every day by both public and private stakeholders about how our shorelines are developed. From policy to program to built project, there are multiple solutions, the diversity of which should match the diversity of contexts, uses, and needs exhibited by New York City’s waterfront.  

Future sea level rise is unequivocal. And, the degree of certainty for the range we will see in the next 50 years is high. It is recommended that the Army Corps of Engineers use moderate and high scenarios in keeping with those developed by the New York Panel on Climate Change to determine the approach taken and
target design level for each strategy. We face serious impacts from regular future tidal flooding as well as storms, and this consideration, and the fact that strategies may be different for each, must be thoroughly considered.

**What is possible in terms of mitigations and adaptations today?**

A number of the projects being considered in the study are long term and costly. Near term strategies and tools are needed. The full range of strategies includes investments prioritizing green infrastructure when feasible, financing strategies, just transition/managed retreat, education, incentives, and improved design standards for best practices, such as the Waterfront Edge Design Guidelines developed at Waterfront Alliance.

It is a complicated multi jurisdictional landscape. That is why the Waterfront Alliance is convening a high level task force over the next several months comprised of experts from various sector to recommend climate change adaptations for our region, as well as undertake a public advocacy and education campaign.

From encouraging collaboration among adjacent landowners to develop integrated flood protection strategies to restoring wetlands and public access in the industrial south Bronx, WEDG is a powerful grassroots and professional tool for shaping a resilient coast above and beyond our existing regulatory policy.

**Waterfront Governance is Complex**

In our view, there is a significant need for a single manager that oversees the City’s varied waterfronts. The waterfront is dynamic, requiring constant maintenance, repair, and oversight, especially in this age of climate change. What passes for harbor governance is a complex web of city, state, and federal jurisdictions with often confusing and sometimes contradictory regulations, creating obstacles to efficient management, public use, and project planning.

There is a bill introduced in the Council, Intro 982, which would establish an Office of the Waterfront that would be responsible for coordinating among the various city agencies that handle matters related to waterfront use and would harmonize the many pieces that make up its whole. The responsibility of the Office of the Waterfront would be to simplify and raise the platform of waterfront issues, working with the City’s Waterfront Management Advisory Board, a forum of expert waterfront stakeholders to advise city agencies on harbor-related policies.

**Conclusion**

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