Public Testimony
January 23, 2019
New York City Council, Committee on Parks and Recreation and Committee on Environmental Protection
Re: Oversight–The Status of the East Side Coastal Resiliency Project

Submitted by Roland Lewis, President and CEO
Waterfront Alliance

Six years after the devastation of Super Storm Sandy, our region is still vulnerable to the increasing risks brought by climate change. How we ensure the safety of millions of lives and billions of dollars of property and infrastructure, how we finance and administrate that protection and how we communicate the urgency of the need are questions that beg better answers.

While we are here today to specifically address the East Side Coastal Resiliency (ESCR) project, it is important to acknowledge that while this is one of a number of important funded measures to address resiliency in New York, the sum total of city, state, federal, and regional projects address but a small portion of our communities. Progress has been made, and while we recognize that building resilience is a generational federal, regional, state, local, and lot-scale public and private challenge, we emphasize that our current investments are grossly insufficient compared to the problem’s magnitude. What we can do now is develop a proactive approach, clarity and connectivity in our decision-making, better financing solutions, and policies that ensure the equitable resilience, accessibility, and ecological integrity of our region. The application of smart, proactive solutions (or, conversely, lack thereof) will affect our communities for generations to come. We look forward to working with the City and our partners to identify a path forward in that direction.

The recent changes to the East Side Coastal Resiliency project raise three great concerns: 1) Lack of transparency about cost and cost-benefit, 2) What happened to the community led design, and 3) Fear of losing federal dollars due to delay:

- **Lack of transparency:** there has been a lack of clear and thorough explanation as to the justification and cost-benefit analysis for the change in design, other than reducing FDR closures and reducing park maintenance. We realize there are certain opportunities with this new design such as barge access, which is important and removes trucks from the road during construction, but an overall calculus of further costs and benefits are unclear. We question how benefits outweigh the costs to the community and the actual increased cost in budget from $760 million to $1.45 billion without clearer justification.

- **What happened to the community led design?** The ESCR project went through multiple iterations of design with high degrees of community engagement. It may be that, upon deep review, the design
and cost are the most realistic and feasible for the City to implement. But for the community members and those involved in the design process for the East River State Park area, a last-minute scrapping of their careful work, rather than identifying these challenges earlier in the process, the decision risks insult and injury to the public trust in the design process, setting a poor precedent for the future.

- **Use it or lose it** – The federal funding provided through the Sandy Supplemental must be spent by 2022. The substantial changes makes for a very tight timeline to expend these funds before they revert back to the federal government. This risk must be addressed by the City.

ESCR is a big project, but it won’t be the last as we work to protect our city as the waters rise. Setting a solid precedent for transparency and community involvement are key to all successful large-scale resiliency projects that the city will undertake in the years to come.

As you may know, the Waterfront Alliance is a civic organization that brings together a diverse coalition of more than 1,000 stakeholders with ties to our regional waterways to inspire and enable resilient, revitalized and accessible coastlines for all communities. Waterfront Alliance has been a strong advocate for smart coastal policy since its inception, and is the developer of WEDG, or the Waterfront Edge Design Guidelines, a rating system and set of guidelines for catalyzing resilient, accessible, and ecologically-sound urban waterfront decision-making that is now required for consideration for waterfront projects in the Borough of Brooklyn and growing in other Community Districts.

Through WEDG, and through the convening of our partners, we continue to work to increase resiliency literacy at the grassroots and professional levels, and to advocate for a higher standard. We look forward to both working with and encouraging the City (as well as our state, federal, and landowner partners) to take part in a more proactive and regional plan and program to build our resilience to climate change and sea level rise.