Public Testimony
October 3, 2019
New York City Council Subcommittee on Landmarks, Public Sittings and Dispositions
Re: ULURP East Side Coastal Resiliency
Submitted by Roland Lewis, President and CEO, Waterfront Alliance

The Waterfront Alliance is a civic organization based in the New York-New Jersey harbor region that works to inspire and effect resilient, revitalized, and accessible coastlines for all communities. We are an alliance of more than 1100 organizations working together to bring about real change to our region’s waterways and 520 miles of shoreline.

I am here to offer comments on the Land Use application for East Side Coastal Resiliency.

This hearing takes place days before the seventh anniversary of Hurricane Sandy. Whether you endured destructive flooding, were stuck in gas lines for hours, or lived without power for weeks, we all learned that our waterfront is a utility on which we depend.

Harsher waterfront conditions due to climate change are inevitable—and we have to be ready. The New York City Panel on Climate Change’s (NPCC) 2019 report offers a sobering new lens known as the Rapid Ice Melt scenario: the metropolitan region could experience 9.5 feet of sea level rise by the end of the century. That’s six inches short of the height of a regulation basketball hoop.

As a City, we need to embrace major resiliency efforts. While we work to reduce greenhouse gases and mitigate climate change, we must ensure that our coastal communities are wisely and resolutely prepared for the reality of sea level rise and the next big storm.

There is no silver bullet to building that resiliency. ESCR is a project that integrates multiple layers of coastal defense like raised or sloped buffers, floodwalls, levees, subsurface drainage and water management infrastructure. We believe this project will significantly reduce potential for flooding, wave damage, and erosion.

According to a 2018 report by the National Institute of Building Sciences, for every dollar spent on hazard mitigation for flooding, the nation reaps a return of between $6-7.

First and foremost, we need a clear path toward flood resiliency here and throughout our city. As ESCR is reviewed by the community and leadership, we encourage DDC to consider three additional recommendations.
One is to move most of the construction materials and equipment by barge. This can significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. According to the American Waterways Operators (AWO), a mid-size coastal tank barge has the capacity to take 523 loaded trucks off the road or replace 167 loaded railcars. Moving the same amount of cargo by tug and barge produces 90 percent reduction in CO₂ emissions compared to moving it via trucks.

Second, we strongly encourage phased construction so that residents have access to green space and play areas while construction occurs. We are pleased to hear that the City, as of yesterday, has promised a phased timetable of construction so that residents can continue to have access to green and recreational spaces during the next several years. Phased construction also allows for the community to provide iterative input on the project, which enhances community ownership and can maximize project outcomes. And lastly, we are making changes now that will commit us for decades to come. We encourage DDC to build in flexibility that allows for direct access for New Yorkers to and from the water and is designed for adaptation over time.

Fully realizing the potential of this stretch of waterfront and access to the East River, while adapting for a future of sea level rise and extreme storms, is a tremendous challenge but also provides an opportunity to create balanced waterfront spaces that advance social, recreational and economic opportunities. I want to bring attention to Waterfront Alliance’s award-winning Waterfront Edge Design Guidelines - WEDG® - which offer a set of guidelines for striking this balance and catalyzing resilient, accessible, and ecologically-sound urban waterfront transformation. Think LEED® for the waterfront.

Twenty-eight Community Boards have adopted resolutions to take the WEDG Pledge encouraging waterfront projects to be verified through these guidelines. We encourage ESCR to pursue WEDG-verification, as other projects have done around the City.


WEDG guides designs to not only consider current flood risk, but also incorporate future sea level rise into that equation. WEDG standards recommend setting
structures outside of the sea level rise-adjusted 100-year and/or 500-year floodplains, with the latter offering a significantly higher level of risk reduction.

WEDG also encourages greener, more ecologically-sound edge design and stabilization, using more permeable and habitat-friendly materials including plants, stone, and oysters where feasible.

And WEDG prioritizes public access and reimagined connections to our waterfroncts including beaches, get-downs, piers and boat launches that promote stewardship opportunities and bring people and their vessels to and into the water. Additionally, WEDG promotes incorporating pathways, footbridges and greenway continuity.

Importantly, WEDG scores projects on comprehensively engaging the diverse community stakeholders in early planning through the project’s design and management. It is critically important to effectively engage the community in waterfront decision-making. WEDG creates a framework for balancing different priorities for how the waterfront gets developed and has a strong focus on accessibility, accountability, and equity.

Thank you.