Dear Governor Cuomo:

The Waterfront Alliance is a coalition of more than 1,000 organizations working together to inspire and effect resilient, revitalized, and accessible coastlines for all communities.

We are writing to express our support for state investment in a comprehensive climate resilience planning process and state-level resilient infrastructure fund, as has been proposed by the organization Rebuild by Design, to support local governments and communities in their development of comprehensive strategies to reduce their vulnerability to climate change and improve infrastructure – from built projects (wetland restoration, stormwater infrastructure) to buyouts and floodplain restoration.  

Every county in New York has had a flooding disaster at least twice in the past decade and 60% have declared flooding disasters at least five times. Hurricane Sandy alone ravaged the east coast, causing over $70 billion of damages. By the end of this century, climate change is projected to cost New York billions in flood damage in addition to the approximately $100 billion loss in property values, not to mention threatening the economic solvency of entire towns and families. And further, through blackouts, train and road closures and delays, repairs, rising insurance premiums, and disruptions to ways of life. These costs reflect the realized direct costs accrued through centuries of building in vulnerable areas and patchwork maintenance and infrastructure investments, exacerbated by climate change and sea level rise. A state-level fund that will save taxpayer dollars on a return of 6:1 over time and avoid critical risks to individuals and communities alike is not just needed, it is fiscally responsible.

Support for such a resilient infrastructure and planning fund has been demonstrated during a yearlong process convened by the Waterfront Alliance in 2019, to build consensus on adaptation needs among more than 400 stakeholders from the public and private sectors, ranging from grassroots community groups to engineers and finance sector to government agencies. A resilient infrastructure fund will be among a forthcoming package of policy proposals that we will advocate for in 2020, as part of a broad public campaign for action on sea level rise and climate change to be launched in June. In addition to the resilient infrastructure fund, this policy package will include proposals for clear state leadership and

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1 Amy Chester. 2019. Resilient Infrastructure for New York State. Rebuild by Design
2 Rosenzweig, Cynthia et al., Eds. 2011. Responding to Climate Change in New York State. Technical Report, New York State Energy Research and Development Authority
3 Union of Concerned Scientists. 2018. 2.5 Million Homes, Businesses Totaling $1 Trillion Threatened by High Tide Flooding. Study Finds Coastal Municipalities May Lose Huge Sums in Property Tax Revenue.
process to establish special climate hazard areas to be used as a basis for developing minimum standards for planning, regulation, practice, and incentives, among other priorities.

Action is needed at local and federal levels, but it has become clear through our convening process that a strong state role is needed to ensure an equitable and comprehensive approach and avoid the perpetuation of a cycle in which 1) low-income communities have fewer resources to adapt and 2) municipal reliance on property taxes in the floodplain limits the potential political will to restrict development in the floodplain.

As the state budget is reviewed this year, we strongly encourage you to support the development of a state-level resilient infrastructure fund and an ongoing funding source, such as a surcharge on insurance as has been described by researcher Jesse Keenan and the Regional Plan Association, or through other means, such as a more comprehensive statewide greenhouse gas pricing mechanism that supports investments in both greenhouse gas reduction and adaptation. Broader sources of funding are opportunities to support needed investment in both greenhouse gas reduction (as has been committed to through the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act) and adaptation.

We sincerely believe that New York State’s strong leadership on greenhouse gas reduction must be matched with equivalent strength and leadership in the adaptation and resilience sector and look forward to working with the state toward that end.

Sincerely,

Roland Lewis
CEO and President

Cc: Dale Bryk, Deputy Secretary for Energy and Environment
Robert Mujica, Director of the Budget

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