Earlier this summer, the Waterfront Alliance published a report on making access to waterfront open space more equitable throughout our region. The school year had just ended, it was getting hotter, and people had been cooped up at home for three months straight. Demand for the City’s public beaches and waterfront parks was at an all-time high. They are necessary outlets for physical--and emotional--health. This need was especially acute for lower-income residents across the City, many of whom do not have air conditioning or cannot afford increased energy bills.

The core concept of our report, “Breaking Down Social and Physical Barriers to Waterfront Access” was that waterfront access has improved over the last decade, but not for every New Yorker\(^1\). While 37 percent of our region’s waterfronts are publicly accessible, only nine percent of the waterfront in the 12 neighborhoods with the highest need can be accessed\(^2\). These underserved communities, like Far Rockaway, East Harlem, East New York, and Mott Haven, are disproportionately lower- and moderate-income communities of color\(^3\). They are also communities that have been hit hardest by the pandemic\(^4\).

In these places, barriers to quality and equitable access means that there are both physical and social conditions keeping people from being able to experience their waterfront and actually touch the water. Examples of physical barriers include dilapidated infrastructure; roads, highways or industrial uses that cut off communities from their waterfronts; and shorelines which are designed to keep people away from the water, like esplanades, rip rap or bulkheads. Social barriers result from processes and macroeconomic conditions that exclude people from living in or feeling welcomed in high quality waterfront open spaces. Things like ineffective community engagement and lacking diversity in some environmental and waterfront advocacy groups who are key decision-makers in waterfront policies.

The discrepancy between neighborhoods who have quality waterfront access and who don’t is just one of the many ways in which the pandemic has highlighted the staggering economic and social inequities of our region and beyond. Public health and access to waterfront open space are closely linked. Researchers have found that the presence of clean water on site reduces stress, increases feelings of tranquility, improves

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\(^2\) Ibid

\(^3\) Ibid

\(^4\) https://www1.nyc.gov/site/neon/programs/covid-neighborhoods.page
concentration and memory, and lowers heart rate and blood pressure. These health benefits should not be limited to whiter, wealthier neighborhoods.

**Additionally, New Yorkers have legal rights to quality waterfronts.** Through the Waterfront Alliance’s WEDG® (Waterfront Edge Design Guidelines) Pledge Campaign with community boards across the City, we raised awareness about the Public Trust Doctrine, which dates back to Roman law and enshrines the responsibility of government to protect the public’s rights to natural resources including land, air and water, and its codification through City and State coastal zone management policies. With the Department of City Planning’s Zoning for Coastal Flood Resiliency entering public review this week, it is especially critical that the public understand how these policies will affect development in the floodplain, as well as the ways in which provisions like natural shorelines can be leveraged to promote more resilient, accessible waterfront design.

As the City braces itself for the next iteration of the pandemic, we encourage the City Council Parks Committee to heed the following recommendations from our report.

First, following New Yorkers for Parks’ Play Fair Campaign, the City Council should implement a permanent (baselined) budget for parks staff, prioritizing subsidies for high need areas. City parks has already suffered a 14 percent ($84 million) FY21 budget cut, but operations and maintenance funding are critical for maintaining health and safety protocols during heavy use of waterfront parks, playgrounds and recreational facilities during the pandemic. Waterfront parks from Rockaway Beach to Starlight Park in the Bronx have seen record attendance causing strain on trail maintenance, trash pickups, and other basic services.

Second, we recommend City Council codify the Mayor’s Community Parks Initiative to better serve capital investments in areas where quality waterfront access is lacking. It is paramount that quality waterfronts are not solely paid for through private development, which could hasten gentrification, but through public investment.

Finally, public engagement for waterfront development and land use decision-making will be very different in the coming months due to social distancing requirements. Immigrant and working-class communities already face significant barriers to participation in City-led and privately led community engagement activities. Among the many barriers these communities face are language access for non-native English speakers, meeting locations and times being held during the day or at inconvenient locations, and limited options for childcare. Lacking transparency about how public input is used to inform project outcomes also diminishes public trust in public approvals processes.

**We recommend the City Council propose metrics for City-led community engagement to ensure diverse participation, particularly among working-class and immigrant communities.** These metrics should qualify 1) who is engaged, 2) how stakeholders are engaged, particularly given the impacts of the pandemic, and 3) what is the outcome of the public’s valuable time and input? As Uniform Land Use Procedure (ULURP) and other public approvals processes get underway with significant implications for waterfront open space the City Council should urge creative solutions to address participation barriers where they are needed most, as well as more transparency and

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standardization of community engagement practices across the City. We also recommend that City Council Members call for strong Community Benefit Agreements holding developers accountable. While public investment is critical, we realize there will be privately owned publicly accessible open spaces developed as well, and they can play a significant role in equitable open space access if done right.

Read the full report here: Waterfront Access for All: Breaking Down Social and Physical Barriers to the Waterfront