PUBLIC TESTIMONY OF WATERFRONT ALLIANCE

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New York City Council Committee on Environmental Protection, Resiliency, and Waterfronts Preliminary Budgetary Hearing
RE: Long-term Comprehensive Planning and Funding for Climate Resilience

Submitted by Maité Duquela, Climate Policy Fellow, Waterfront Alliance

My name is Maité Duquela, climate policy fellow at the Waterfront Alliance. Waterfront Alliance is the leader in waterfront revitalization, climate resilience, and advocacy for the New York-New Jersey Harbor region.

The Waterfront Alliance is committed to sustainability and to mitigating the effects of climate change across the region’s hundreds of miles of waterfront. We spearhead the Rise to Resilience Coalition of 100+ groups advocating for policy related to climate resilience, we bring education focused on climate resilience to students in NYC DOE schools through our Estuary Explorers program, and we run the Waterfront Edge Design Guidelines (WEDG®) program for promoting innovation in climate design. We thank the City Council Committee on Environmental Protection, Resilience, and Waterfronts Chair Gennaro for holding this hearing.

I’m grateful to be able to testify in front of you today in favor of sustained, dedicated funding and long-term planning for climate resilience efforts. Over the last few years, New York City has witnessed, firsthand, the risks and impacts that climate change poses to our residents, infrastructure, and natural resources. We can see the dire forecasts that experts at the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and even our own New York Panel on Climate Change (NPCC), have laid out for us.

The reality is that many of the projections are slowly becoming realized. Flooding events are the most common climate-related hazard across the city, such as Hurricanes Irene, Sandy, and Ida.\(^1\) The city has also experienced other types of extreme weather occurrences, including over

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40 extreme heat events and over 20 winter storm events and extreme winter weather emergencies in the last 10 years.²

**Climate risks and impacts are no longer abstract or projections of the future. They are the reality of today.** They are tangible, measurable, and – while not avoidable anymore –, they are still abatable. In order to reduce the city's vulnerability to climate change, direct and bold action must be taken immediately.

That action starts by proactively allocating funds and investments towards advancing climate resilience in its most holistic form. Climate resilience involves repairing, maintaining, and innovating physical infrastructure – such as roads, bridges, transportation, and buildings. It also involves expanding technical capacity within the local agencies with regards to risk mitigation, emergency management, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities in the face of observed and projected climate change impacts. Climate resilience efforts also include raising awareness through educational programs and campaigns. **This cannot be tackled without explicit line items in the City’s budget dedicated towards climate resilience programs.**

Even in the understanding of the current context of constraints, fiscal restrictions, and uncertainties, **spending on climate infrastructure and programs cannot be lost or minimized.** The time to prepare for climate change has been ongoing and the City has yet to take the critical steps necessary to reflect this priority across all agencies and through its budgeting processes.

Moreover, the financial costs of climate impacts will be a burden to the City and to all New Yorkers. Scientists estimate that the costs of climate change in the New York State will rise to $10 billion annually by 2050.³ **And yet, the costs of inaction are far greater. Studies estimate that the cost of inaction in the state will be $55 billion in the next decade for coastal storm and flood-event-related damages.**⁴ The millions we invest today is still billions short of the level of investments needed to protect our neighbors, infrastructure, and ecosystems from the climate crisis. **Even without taking into consideration the more than 8 million lives at stake; our homes; our jobs; our communities; and our livelihoods, bold investment in climate resilience and adaptation is proven to be the fiscally responsible**

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option. Nearly 7.2 million New Yorkers (about 78 percent of the population) have an urban heat index (UHI) of 8°F or higher, meaning that people in those census tracts feel at least 8°F more heat because of the local built environment. Additionally, 14 percent of New Yorkers (about 1.3 million people) live within or adjacent to the 100-year floodplain. Waterfront Alliance strongly urges the City’s budget to reflect this reality.

The budget must lay the foundation for long-term investments in robust community engagement, green and grey-infrastructure upgrades, and the full spectrum of climate adaptation solutions throughout the City. One example of an innovative way to support the budget for advancing resilience is by restructuring water utility bills to reflect properties’ contribution to stormwater runoff entering the sewer and local waterways. This contribution is due to impervious surfaces, which don’t allow rain to infiltrate directly into the ground. This results in combined sewer overflows, polluted rivers with fertilizers, oil, and sediment, destroyed valuable aquatic and riparian habitat, and flooded homes and businesses - especially in the context of more frequent and heavy rain events and flooding episodes due to climate change.

By separately and fairly categorizing stormwater runoff contribution, the City will benefit from designated revenues for stormwater management and from incentives for more green infrastructure that reduces flooding events. In fact, the New York City Independent Budget Office released a research report on November 2023, which estimated that the City could perceive revenue ranging from $266 million to $892 million per year from a stormwater fee structure, similar to other cities like Seattle, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. Waterfront Alliance calls on the City Council to pass a resolution of support for the Assembly Bill A9435, which includes stormwater in the definition of sewage for purposes of certain water, sewer, and water and sewer authorities.

Furthermore, we would like to see long-term, dedicated, and increased funding for the City’s current portfolio of climate resilience. For instance, we applaud the City for investing $390 million to the Cloudburst Management Program, which constructs clustered stormwater

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management projects to better manage intense rainfall events in flood-prone neighborhoods. **We encourage the City to include new sites, especially in communities with intersected vulnerabilities, such as the socioeconomic component, poor drainage infrastructure, and high flood risks. We hope to see the invested capital being promptly implemented and for the City to continue leveraging federal funding toward projects like this.**

We would also like to acknowledge the Bluebelt Program, which preserves natural drainage corridors including streams, ponds, and wetlands, and enhances them to perform their functions of conveying, storing, and filtering runoff precipitation or stormwater. Since it has only been implemented in Staten Island, **we encourage the City to expand out into other boroughs where nature can be a solution to reduce flood risk.**

Waterfront Alliance also supports programs like HomeFix, which provides access to affordable low- or no-interest (and potentially forgivable) loans to eligible homeowners for repairs that address building system(s) or housing deficiencies or conditions which may be hazardous to occupants/residents. This program has potential to serve as a tool for resiliency retrofits and upgrades for homeowners, like elevating critical systems; sealing basements; and adding green infrastructure to properties exposed to flood risk. **This and other climate resilience retrofit options ensure access and establishes incentives for New Yorkers to prepare and reduce their levels of vulnerability to climate-related impacts.**

Additionally, the City committed to launching a Housing Mobility and Land Adaptation Program in the latest PlaNYC. As one of the many solutions we need in the face of the climate crisis, Waterfront Alliance strongly supports voluntary buyouts. However, these types of programs can only be successful with large, committed, and dedicated long-term funding. **We strongly urge the City to leverage the initial $250 million investment from the NYS Environmental Bond Act and to identify other funding sources to support the implementation of this program and all its components, such as education, mental health and counseling services, and financial assistance.**

However, dedicated, long-term funding is only half of the equation. There is an urgent need for comprehensive, long-term planning for climate resilience in the City, which will dictate how funding can and should be spent. Waterfront Alliance and our Coalition partners led the advocacy around Local Law 122, which established a Five Borough Climate Adaptation Plan led by the Mayor’s Office of Climate and Environmental Justice (MOCEJ). This plan would include recommendations for resiliency and adaptation measures to protect residents, property, and infrastructure in the City. It would identify areas that are highly vulnerable to climate hazards to help determine where resiliency and adaptation measures
should first be implemented. It would also consider the potential impact on environmental justice areas. **Local Law 122 has the potential to be the backbone for climate resilience in New York City but only if adequately funded, sustained, and prioritized.**

While the City made the initial step of creating the educational website, known as AdaptNYC, we are still looking for the City to begin to develop and implement a comprehensive climate adaptation plan. One of the citywide climate strategies related to Local Law 122 is the Climate Strong Communities program, however, a long-term vision and plan for climate resilience in the City has yet to be seen. **We strongly urge the City to allocate resources towards the creation of a thorough, detailed plan with specific measures to be taken, timelines, goals, and indicators to track progress over time.**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your work to ensure New Yorkers are protected from the impacts of the climate crisis. Waterfront Alliance is willing and looking forward to partnering with the City Council to advance any and all of these recommendations and initiatives. I am happy to discuss these items in more detail with you at any point.