



The City of New York

Manhattan Community Board 1

Catherine McVay Hughes CHAIRPERSON | Noah Pfefferblit DISTRICT MANAGER

New York City Council Committee on Public Safety Jointly with the Committee on Fire and Criminal Justice Services, the Committee on Mental Health, Developmental Disability, Alcoholism, Drug Abuse and Disability Services, the Committee on Aging, the Committee on Health and the Committee on General Welfare

Oversight Hearing on Emergency Planning and Management During and After the Storm: Disaster Management

**Testimony by Catherine McVay Hughes
Chairperson, Manhattan Community Board 1**

**Wednesday, January 16, 2013, 10:00 a.m.
City Hall, Council Chambers**

Good morning, Chairpersons Vallone Jr., Crowley, Koppell, Lappin, Arroyo and Palma. I am Catherine McVay Hughes, Chairperson of Manhattan Community Board One (CB1). Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Emergency Planning and Management During and After the Storm: Disaster Management.

Like other districts in the City, residents and workers of CB1 experienced hardship during and in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy. I applaud the responsiveness of the City and am happy to see Lower Manhattan recovered and thriving again. However, despite the tremendous progress, we must not overlook the closed small businesses, the displaced residents, the closed South Ferry subway station and the ongoing phone and data outage that continue to impose hardships on the community. Equally important, we must learn from our missteps in this past disaster to properly plan for the future so that we can maintain the revitalization of Lower Manhattan.

CB1 is working on an Emergency Preparedness Lessons Learned report that provides a synopsis of the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy and recommendations for improved planning for the future. I would like to share with you today a few points from this document.

Vulnerability of Lower Manhattan to Storm Surges:

As depicted in the attached map, Lower Manhattan is extremely vulnerable to storm surges; all of CB1 is classified within an evacuation zone with nearly 58% of the district in Zone A. The Storm surge, furthermore, extended beyond the boundaries of Zone A into Zone B, as depicted in Figure 2. This discrepancy between the storm surge and the zone boundaries warrants a study and redrawing of the evacuation zones. However, regardless of future improvements in flood protection, understanding the vulnerability of Lower Manhattan is of the utmost importance in proper emergency management especially for our utility and transportation systems.

Public Information and Emergency Communication:

The World Trade Center Redevelopment Committee of CBI was a leading supporter of the implementation of a public emergency communication system, now referred to as Notify NYC. Notify NYC was instrumental in the announcement of the evacuation of Zone A and in providing relevant updates before, during, and after the storm, especially in text format.

The City should explore further campaigns to encourage more residents to sign up for this program. Additionally, commonly used social media platforms proved valuable for the quick dissemination of important information and the New York Public Library system and other key organizations should make efforts to encourage residents to use them in emergency situations.

The blackout resulting from Sandy lasted five days, teaching us not to rely solely on technology to disseminate emergency information. Prior to Superstorm Sandy, NYPD personnel drove around Zone A using megaphones to announce the evacuation. Such non-technology communication tactics are crucial in the aftermath of a disaster, when residents do not have access to technology or phones due to loss of electricity and other utilities.

Lastly, the City wavered in making the evacuation announcement and thereby created confusion as evidenced by these notifications.

- Notification issued (Saturday) 10/27/2012 at 9:15 PM. There is no evacuation order for New York City at this time.
- Notification issued (Sunday) 10/28/12 at 10:40 AM. Due to expected severe weather conditions, all MTA subway and commuter rails suspended citywide as of Sunday, 10/28/12 at 7:00 PM. MTA bus service will be suspended as of Sunday, 10/28/12 at 9PM. Currently, there is no estimated time for service restoration.
- Alert issued (Sunday) 10/28/12 at 11:45 AM. New York City has ordered a MANDATORY EVACUATION of Zone A.

Residents were given less than 24-hour notice. These mixed messages and the late notice, combined with the minimal impacts caused by Hurricane Irene, discouraged residents from following evacuation orders.

Therefore, we strongly urge adequate funding of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) which includes the National Weather Service that provides forecasting and warnings on the potential hazards of storms. Proper funding for storm forecasting will help the City provide additional time for evacuation and encourage a higher usage of emergency shelters.

Emergency Shelters:

Seward Park High School served as the primary emergency shelter for CBI residents and unfortunately proved inadequate for the emergency needs of the community. With buses and

subways shut down and limited taxis available, transportation to the emergency center was difficult for some residents and may have encouraged some individuals to remain in Zone A. Furthermore, Seward Park High School lost power and evacuees were forced to move to other shelters. It is evident that emergency preparedness should include an increased number of emergency shelters with back-up power capabilities. In addition, some residents sheltered in place and then wanted to leave due to the extended utility and public transportation outages but found it difficult.

We suggest that the City conduct an annual dialogue and update on emergency shelter locations for CBI residents.

Housing Safety Precautions:

Superstorm Sandy revealed that residents may be voluntarily or involuntarily confined to buildings without power or functioning infrastructure, including basic necessities such as elevators, water, heat and phone and internet services. In such circumstances where residents encountered darkened hallways, it is essential that buildings remain as safe as possible. A few suggestions include:

- The establishment within buildings of a designated meeting area on a lower, above-ground-level location.
- Adequate emergency lighting equipment for residential buildings including emergency-adhesive, reflective strips for stairwells, portable glow sticks, and flashlights.
- An annual report, by building managers and/or city officials, of vulnerable individuals and their location, especially those on upper floors who are at greatest risk during power outages.

Quality of Life:

The aftermath of Sandy posed numerous quality of life issues as residents coped with the effects of the Superstorm. Some residents went days and others weeks without utilities and information on available resources was limited and inadequate. A few recommendations regarding quality of life include:

- Pre-designated areas for distribution of food, water, baby formula, blankets, diapers, and other essential items.
- Pre-designated areas for phone, Internet and charging stations.
- Back-up power for street and intersection lights.
- Contingency plans to distribute medicine to those unable to access pharmacies and/or subscription mail services.
- Readily available instructions and tools for residents to protect themselves against poor air quality caused by temporary generators.

First Responders

We greatly appreciated the performance by the NYPD, FDNY and other agencies prior to and during the storm and subsequent blackout and we especially noted the effective patrols by the NYPD.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I hope that CB1 will continue to be part of a dialogue leading to improved emergency preparedness for the future of this community and the city.

Figure 1: Community Board 1 and Evacuation Zones

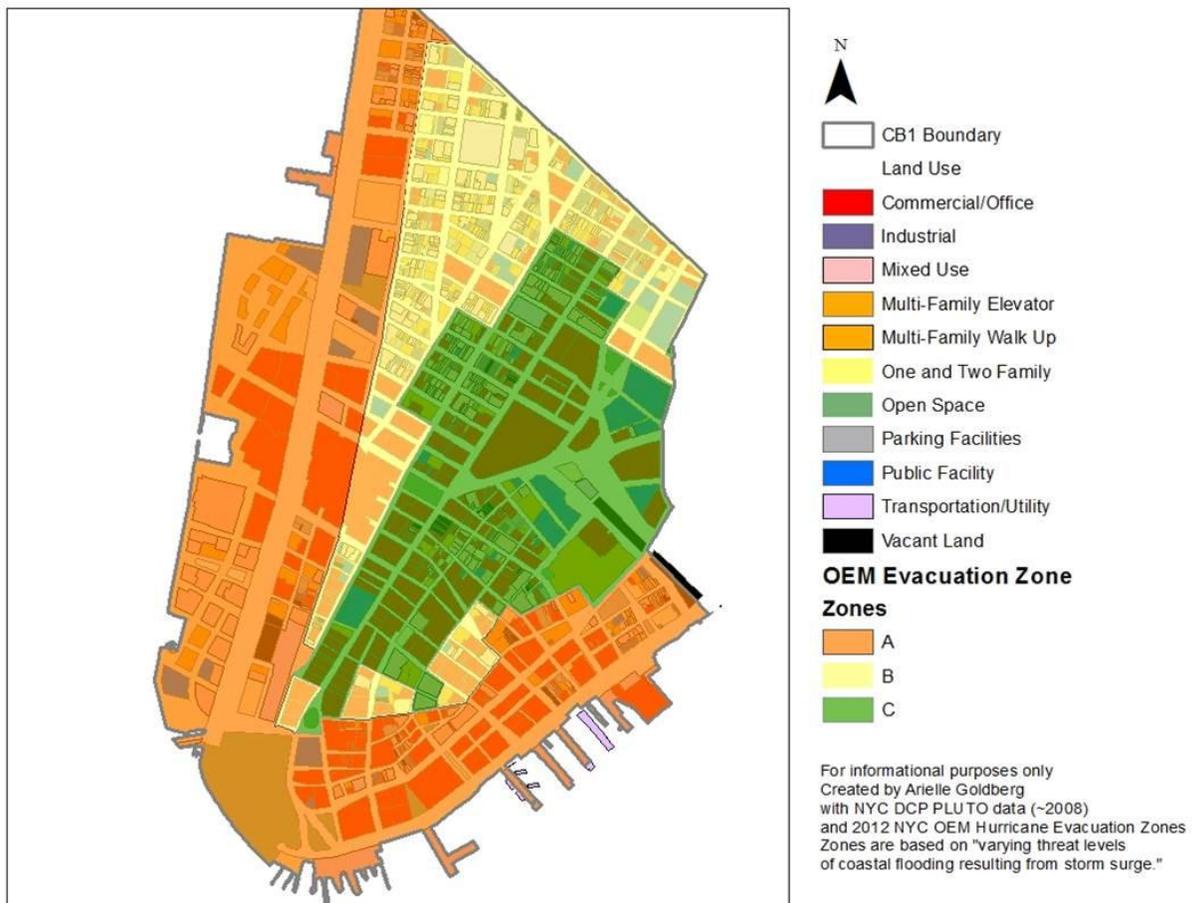


Figure 2: CB1 Land Use Patterns and Evacuation Zones

