



**Hearing before the New York City Council
Committee on Environmental Protection jointly with the Committee on Parks & Recreation
Oversight: East Side Coastal Resiliency Project
January 23, 2019**

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Good afternoon, Chair Grodenchik and Chair Constantinides, members of the Council Environmental Protection and Parks Committees, and other Councilmembers. I am Mitchell Silver, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Thank you for inviting us here today to provide an update on the East Side Coastal Resiliency project. Before I begin, I would also like to thank Commissioner Lorraine Grillo of the DDC for providing such helpful information and context for this massively important project. While many of you are aware that this large-scale resiliency investment is focused on protecting the lives and property of the people of the East Side of Manhattan, today I would also like to provide our agency's perspective on how this project will vastly improve East River Park and other nearby parks, for the betterment of both the local community and the city at large.

The East Side Coastal Resiliency project completely changes the future of East River Park by transforming it into a climate-resilient park that can withstand the risks and demands of the coming century. In its present state, the park is highly susceptible to climate risk - predominantly due to sea level rise, storm surge, and heavy rainfall. Storm surge from sporadic, severe events like hurricanes can overwhelm the park and the surrounding neighborhood, as happened in Sandy. Perhaps even more challenging is the threat from gradually accelerating sea level rise, which increases the risk of frequent flooding from everyday storms or high tides. If we don't take action, this will threaten the recreational capacity of our parks, as fields will be left vulnerable to storm surge, and plant life to salt water inundation in ways that are detrimental to the existing ecology.

When completed, the ESCR project will transform East River Park into the 21st century resilient park that New York City deserves. We have successfully identified a path forward that not only provides the same level of protection as the initial design approach, but does so faster, smarter, and with more benefit to the community.

This plan reflects years of community input; through the comprehensive community engagement that preceded the design process, we heard loud and clear that the users of East River Park loved the existing program and amenities that were in place, and this design reflects that consensus. The core recreational program and design elements for the park will remain in place and be enhanced. All that has changed is the engineering approach for how to incorporate flood protection functionality into the park, and the technical manner through which the project will be delivered. This revised plan will elevate the park by several feet, ensuring that all of the park investments will be out of the flood zone and able to sustain future climate challenges.

The new design strengthens the waterfront bulkhead, which supports the esplanade and is currently in poor condition. The state of the existing bulkhead had previously been a design constraint, limiting plantings and other features that could be sited near the water. By reconstructing the bulkhead now, we can avoid near-term closures of the Park to do this repair work separately. We will also be able to support a more dynamic waterfront esplanade, including redesigned and relocated embayments and



step-downs which will allow more New Yorkers to get closer to the water and really be able to engage with this incredible natural resource.

By elevating the property, we open up opportunities to improve access and incorporate more graceful and natural entryways into East River Park. We will now be able to initiate necessary repairs to Corlears Hook Bridge, a key entry point into the park that is in poor condition. This also allows us to integrate the foundations for the future flyover pedestrian bridge to address the “pinch point” near the Con Edison facility, strengthening neighborhood connections to the park and waterfront. Instead of delaying necessary repair work on the existing waterfront bulkhead and Corlears Hook Bridge, which would mean park impacts and closures at a later time, we are incorporating this work into the ESCR project to maximize efficiency and community benefit. Lastly, as we believe that many local residents will appreciate greatly, altering our approach to the design of the project allowed us to ensure that more New Yorkers living near East River Park will enjoy views of the park, instead of a floodwall.

Though much of the public dialogue has focused on East River Park, we are also pleased that the ESCR project will provide important storm protection for vital Parks assets such as the Asser Levy Recreation Center, and allow for the reconstruction of other nearby properties within the project limits, including Murphy Brothers Playground, Asser Levy Playground and Stuyvesant Cove, which, while not under the jurisdiction of the Parks Department, serves as an important amenity for the community. Similar to the improvements that will be made at East River Park, we look forward to seeing these properties updated and revived for our 21st Century open space needs.

As with any major capital project of this scale and complexity, there will be significant impacts and inconveniences for the public. Regardless of the design approach being considered, the City would have to rebuild the majority of East River Park, a massive undertaking. We have begun working with existing sports league permittees that use the ballfields, and will seek to redistribute their access to existing Parks facilities. We are coordinating with our sister City agencies to identify opportunities to make additional use of recreational space operated by other entities, and we are exploring all feasible improvements to nearby Parks property that will increase interim access to recreational space for the duration of the closure, either through short-term enhancements or capital work that is already underway. We welcome community suggestions on identifying interim recreation measures; we have already received a great list from Councilwoman Rivera and are open to other suggestions.

Through our public engagement, the enthusiasm for our urban forest and the trees within East River Park has become abundantly clear. The earlier design approach would have required removal or replacement of nearly all of the trees within East River Park, and that will continue to be necessary, given the need to elevate the park by several feet. We will attempt to transplant as many existing trees as possible and explore planting larger-caliper trees that will provide more significant benefits sooner, and we will endeavor to accelerate street tree planting in nearby neighborhoods to help with greening efforts. In any case, it is important to recognize that the current trees in East River Park are already at significant risk of flooding, and the updated design will ensure that those trees can survive the next century in an increasingly volatile climate. Subsequent to Sandy, we’ve seen a decline in health for many of the trees in the park; approximately 260 trees were removed in 2014 after die-off from salt inundation and we have continued to remove additional trees that have been unable to recover. I am pleased to note that when this project is complete, there will be approximately 1200 trees within the park, a net increase of several hundred trees, in a diverse palette of species that are resistant to salt spray exposure and more suitable to the park’s location. Realigning our planting strategy in accordance



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with current best practices for resiliency, in combination with the elevation of the new park, means that these trees and plantings will have the best chance of surviving future extreme weather, be it drastic storms or rising temperatures.

Though a project of this size will always present challenges and costs, we are pleased that the ESCR project will help deliver an improved park experience for visitors to East River Park and other nearby open spaces. As I hope we've demonstrated today, improving and protecting our park system for the 21st Century is a guiding principle for this administration and this agency, and this spirit has infused and informed this effort. We look forward to achieving the shared community vision of bringing comprehensive flood protection, along with enhanced open space and waterfront access, to this densely populated area of New York City. Thank you for allowing us to testify before you today and for all your great advocacy for our city parks. I will now like to welcome Jamie Torres Springer, First Deputy Commissioner at DDC, who will give a short presentation. Thank you.