

East Side
Coast
Resiliency
Hearing

January 23,
2019

Department of Design and Construction
Lorraine Grillo, Commissioner

New York City
Council
Committee on
Parks and
Recreation

New York City
Council
Committee on
Environmental
Protection

Good afternoon Chairman Grodenchik, Chairman Constantinides, and members of the Committees. I also want to acknowledge Council Members Rivera and Powers, who have been tireless advocates for their constituents on this project.

I am Lorraine Grillo, and I am happy to appear today for the first time in my new role as Commissioner of the New York City Department of Design and Construction. I am joined today by Commissioner Mitchell Silver, DDC First Deputy Commissioner Jamie Torres Springer, as well as members of my senior staff and key members of our East Side Coastal Resiliency team.

EAST SIDE COASTAL RESILIENCY OVERVIEW

We are building for a new world. When Superstorm Sandy struck in October 2012, the storm surge battered the City's coastline, leading to dozens of deaths, destruction of thousands of homes and other buildings. On the Lower East Side, water depths of up to four feet were recorded along Avenue C. Sandy battered the City's water and sewer facilities, transportation systems, and shut down electrical service to much of Manhattan below 34th Street for nearly four days after the storm.

Add to this image the inevitable pace of climate change, where more frequent and severe storms and sea level rise are expected to bring water even closer to our homes and neighborhoods.

This is the context we are building in. This is the storm we have to design and build for. And the sense of urgency to provide flood protection as quickly as possible is great.

This project comes after years of intensive community dialogue with thousands of community stakeholders and continues almost weekly with meetings with community boards, elected officials, and others to discuss this project and adapt it. This includes the Rebuild By Design process, a community-based effort, sponsored by HUD, that inspired much of the park design we see today.

Project Description

The top priority for ESCR is to provide comprehensive flood protection that addresses the worst-case projections of storm flooding and tidal inundation in the 2050s. The protected area addresses the safety of over one hundred thousand New Yorkers residing in portions of the Lower East Side and East Village, the

extensive New York City Housing Authority developments that line East River Park, Stuyvesant Town, and Peter Cooper Village.

The City is proposing a flood protection system using a variety of approaches including floodwalls, floodgates, and raised landscapes, each tailored to the specific site in which they will be constructed. Drainage and other infrastructure within the protected areas will be significantly enhanced, and we will have an opportunity to rebuild and greatly improve access to park and waterfront areas.

Instead of a floodwall separating the community and the park, this approach raises all of East River Park to the 100-year flood level as projected in the 2050s.

The flood barrier is moved all the way from the highway to the water's edge, where it will sit underneath a rebuilt park and will not separate the community from its waterfront.

Design Change

As you are aware, last year a City team carefully reviewed the design program for ESCR, and came to the conclusion that there were significant challenges in the previous design that would have had major impacts on our ability to deliver this project. The decision was announced quickly after intensive internal deliberation

over the summer. The decision struck many stakeholders as sudden and unexpected. I regret that we did not share more information sooner, because the positive outcome is so significant.

My mandate when I joined the Department of Design and Construction last year was to scrutinize our project planning BEFORE we embark on a project of this size and scope, and that's EXACTLY what we did with ESCR. We must get this project right.

It became immediately clear to me and my team that there was incredible risk to building an extended flood wall along FDR Drive. The plan called for piles to be driven – AT NIGHT – immediately next to Manhattan's primary eastern roadway, and directly in front of several NYCHA developments, home to 15,000 New Yorkers. Each evening at the beginning of the workers' shift the outermost lane of the FDR Drive would need to be closed and construction equipment moved into place, a process that would take well over an hour to complete in a safe manner. And, each early morning before the end of the workers' shift, equipment would need to be removed and the orderly process of re-opening the full highway would have to take place. Access to the site would have been limited to one entrance at Montgomery Street.

Let me be clear: the change had nothing to do with protecting traffic, or keeping the FDR open. The change was about making sure we could build this project.

Quite simply, we were not convinced it could have been done.

As if that were not enough, the design called for full excavation of a major ConEd transmission line delivering power to much of lower Manhattan, and then construction of a massive protective tunnel around the transmission line, all while the line was still active. This effort may have presented the greatest risk to the project – the exact condition of the transmission line is unknown, and the exact cost of excavation, remediation, and the means to protect it were amazingly complicated. Our review this past summer helped us fully understand and steer clear of the unknowns of protecting the ConEdison transmission line.

We recognize that there is concern that parts or all of East River Park will be closed. We did not take this decision lightly but concluded that we could not keep the open and complete the project while keeping residents safe. It also became clear during our constructability review last year that even if we had retained the original wall-along-the-FDR design, we would have had to close the whole park, and potentially for a longer period. I am sorry this information was not made

completely clear before, but as our exact engineering became more refined, we learned more about the challenges of staging this project.

At the same time, the current design allows us to shorten the schedule by about a year and allows us to provide flood protection to the community by spring 2023, one full hurricane season sooner than under the previous design.

The new approach also allows the construction site to be accessed from the water by barge, significantly reducing truck traffic through the community.

Finally, the new design also allows us to build an access improvement long requested by the community along the river path, near 13th Street, known as the “pinch point.” Because of the raised park design the City will be able to construct a flyover bridge to accommodate the thousands of pedestrians and cyclists who now have to navigate a narrow lane between FDR Drive and a Con Edison facility.

East River Park

As Commissioner Silver will describe in more detail, the actual layout for East River Park is exactly the same in this design, only better because the park will be fully rebuilt with all new facilities.

What's more, the park itself will now be raised and will not flood. In fact, moving the flood protection to the water's edge will allow us to rebuild the waterfront esplanade, which was not part of the original plan, in a way that will give users unprecedented access to the river.

Removing the wall from East River Park also addresses a concern voiced repeatedly by community leaders prior to this change, removing a barrier and reconnecting this open space to the community.

Finally, we have to remember that the project has to be visionary: raising the park will ensure this park remains a community resource for the next 50 years or more, even as climate change's impacts become more severe.

BUDGET

The City is proposing a \$1.45 billion construction program. This estimate reflects an all-in cost to install flood protection, reconstruct several access points into the park, and construction of East River Park and the other parks in the project area up to 25th Street. This estimate includes \$338 million in HUD funding, which we will spend by 2022.

There has been discussion that the cost estimate for the preliminary design was approximately \$800 million. But let me be clear: by the time we moved to a different approach, our estimates for the earlier design were approaching \$1.2 billion, nearly the same as the existing design.

Schedule

We are working hard to bring this project into construction by spring of next year. To do this we hope to certify the project into ULURP early this spring. We are planning robust, continual community engagement both before and after that milestone. Construction must start early next year in order to have the key flood protections in place by 2023.

I want to assure you that we are looking very intensely at the construction schedule and whether sections of the park can be reopened in phases, before the overall East Side Coastal Resiliency program is completed.

Thank you. Let me turn the presentation over to Parks Commissioner Mitchell Silver.