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Anatole Ashraf
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June 26, 2025

Environment, Parks, and Recreation Committee Meeting Minutes

This meeting was teleconferenced using Zoom

Committee Member Attendees:
Carlos Castell Croke, Chair
Jolly Patel
Lauren Springer

Committee Member Absentees:
Nellie Afshar
Alexandra Gonzalez
Benjamin Lucas
Andie Olivares
Alaina Van Slooten

Environment, Parks, and Recreation Committee Public Member Attendees:
Kevin Davis

Guest:
Alfonso Lopez, Borough Commissioner for Queens at NYC DEP
Natalia Gulick de Torres, Rebuild by Design
Christine Coulombe, President of the Friends of Noonan Park Dog Run

Community Board 2 Staff:
Debra Markell Kleinert

Carlos Castell Croke, Chair of the Environment, Parks, and Recreation Committee, welcomed everyone to the committee meeting.

The Committee Chair introduced Alfonso Lopez, the Queens Borough Commissioner for New York City's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). Mr. Lopez shared the following about intense weather events, types of flooding and the tools the city uses to address flooding. He shared the following:

- Storm season in New York City runs from June through November, with the most notable effects typically occurring in August.
- DEP incorporates climate change into its strategies and operations, as storms are becoming more powerful and rainfall has intensified.
- There are several types of flooding, including groundwater flooding and tidal coastal flooding.
- DEP's sewer systems are designed to handle 98% of rain events and absorb 1.5 to 1.75 inches of rainfall per hour.
- Some intense weather events have released more rainfall than DEP's systems are designed to manage per hour; for instance, Hurricane Henri released 1.94 inches of rain, and Hurricane Ida released 3.15 inches.
- During heavy storms, DEP's systems can become overwhelmed, leading to backups in manholes, catch basins, basements, and sewer connections.
- Areas with naturally high groundwater are vulnerable to groundwater flooding. After heavy or back-to-back rainstorms, the ground becomes saturated, and water can seep into basements through cracks, floor drains, and household utilities such as toilets or sinks.
- Tidal coastal flooding occurs when tidal water pushes back into the sewer system, leading to overflows from catch basins and basement connections. Devices such as tide gates, including those installed in CB2's district waterways, help prevent this type of flooding by blocking ocean water during high tides or storm surges.
- DEP's capital plan includes $8.2 billion in upgrades. More than 100 projects are scheduled over the next five years, totaling $3.6 billion.
- Green infrastructure, such as rain gardens and green medians, helps absorb water into healthy soil. The soil acts like a sponge, holding water temporarily and giving the sewer system time to manage flow.
- Blue Belts divert rainfall away from sewers, providing retention and creating rich ecological areas. These systems preserve natural drainage corridors such as streams, ponds, and wetlands to store and filter stormwater. DEP manages

approximately 545 acres of Blue Belt Areas across the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island.
- In 2022, through the Stormwater Rule, DEP increased the required amount of stormwater that new and redeveloped properties must manage on-site. The rule also prioritizes green infrastructure to reduce the urban heat island effect and support local wildlife.

Mr. Lopez shared preventive flooding measures to protect against house flooding, and ways homeowners can be proactive to prevent flooding and mitigate its potential impact. He shared the following:

- Homeowners with converted basements should be aware that sewer backups can occur through bathroom fixtures.
- Basements located below the sewage connection line are susceptible to raw sewage backing up into the system.
- Water will find the path of least resistance, so basements located beneath pitched driveways are more prone to stormwater flooding.
- Points of entry and safety exit routes should be kept clear. Bars on basement windows can prevent people from escaping during emergencies.
- Rerouting downspouts helps keep water out of the system and reduces the likelihood of backups.
- Rain barrels can prevent water from entering the sewer system. The collected water can be used for gardening, cleaning, and other purposes.
- Inflatable barriers that fill with water can be placed in front of doorways and entryways to prevent water from coming into the home.
- Flood sensors are effective early warning systems. Placing them near drains, windows, and other points of entry can provide early flooding warnings.
- Water pumps can remove floodwater from inside a building. Pumps detect rising water and push it out. DEP recommends placing the pump hose 10 to 20 feet away from the building to prevent water from returning.
- People can cumulatively take steps to reduce the effects of rainstorms by postponing the use of appliances that release water into the sewer system such as dishwashers.
- Residents should avoid discarding fatbergs such as grease into drains. Fatbergs can worsen sewer backups and contribute to flooding or ponding. DEP spends about $18 million each year to degrease sewers and repair damage from sewer backups.
- Most homeowner insurance policies don’t include coverage for sewer backups. However, riders can be added to home insurance policies to cover any damage.

Through the American Water Resources (AWR) program, participants can be protected from sewer backup damage.

- DEP is responsible for the water main and "back". The homeowner is responsible for the service line into the home.
- Apps such as Notify NYC provide emergency alerts, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration app offers information on high tides.
- FEMA flood insurance through the National Flood Insurance Program (NFOP), is available to homeowners, renters, and businesses.
- Residents should know their evacuation zones, travel routes, and destinations before an emergency.

Mr. Lopez encouraged the committee to reach out to DEP of any topics they would like the agency to present.

Carlos Castell Croke introduced Natalia Gulick de Torres, Rebuild by Design's Park Infrastructure Coordinator. She presented a Google Slides presentation outlining the organization's priorities and findings from a report released earlier this year. She shared the following:

- Rebuild by Design convenes community members and government leaders to develop and implement policies that prepare regions for pressing challenges such as hurricanes, rainfall, and other climate concerns.
- Hurricane Sandy served as the genesis for the idea that physical resilience is tied to social resilience. One cannot exist without the other.
- Rebuild by Design has been working in New York State for some time and, in recent years, has focused more specifically on New York City due to an increase in flooding and growing public concern about climate vulnerability.
- For the past two years, the organization has been exploring what a "rainproof" NYC might look like. This work led to a shift in focus toward viewing parks as critical climate infrastructure.
- Through this work, Rebuild by Design brought together community organizations, individuals, academic researchers, city agencies, and design and planning professionals to explore collaborative and independent solutions for creating a "rainproof" NYC in both public and private realms.
- As the organization advocates for a "rainproof" NYC, it aims to identify ways to protect the most vulnerable communities while demonstrating that investing in climate resilience provides financial benefits.

- Rebuild by Design found that parks have areas where additional rainfall can be absorbed without requiring extensive infrastructure or pump systems. She noted that parks can hold 22.5 – 34% of additional rainfall without pumps.
- A study from Ramboll, referencing Copenhagen's water strategies, stated that every dollar invested in NYC park infrastructure could yield a two-dollar return in recuperation and restoration efforts.
- Water and soil face pollution risks from nearby industrial zones and sewer overflows. She added that vacant lots have the potential to be developed into pocket parks. These small green spaces can enhance cooling, air quality, and stormwater management. Tree plantings, rain gardens, bioswales, and micro-gardens enhance air filtration, reduce stormwater runoff, and provide community benefits in densely developed areas.
- In Hoboken, New Jersey, there are Resiliency Parks that can serve as a model for NYC to follow. Hoboken has about 57,000 residents, with 80% of its land area located in a flood zone. The city experienced severe impacts during Hurricane Sandy—private and public property was destroyed, Hoboken's terminal and NJ Transit system were damaged, leading to a lasting impact on the city's economy. Hoboken implemented a four-pronged approach through Resist, Delay, Store, and Discharge water, using tools such as grey infrastructure, including holding tanks, pumps, and stations. Green infrastructure and site interventions were implemented to prevent flooding in the city and enhance resiliency. Northwest Resiliency Park spans approximately two city-sized blocks and protects 20 surrounding blocks by storing 2 million gallons of water above and underground.

Natalia Gulick de Torres also presented data from the April 2025 report, highlighting current and projected flood risks, heat exposure, and social vulnerability in parks across New York City and Queens Community Board 2:

- Rebuild by Design's analysis of 2020 flood risk data found that 906 parks in NYC (38%) are currently in or adjacent to stormwater or storm surge flood zones. By 2100, that number is expected to rise to 1,653 parks (70%). These figures do not include future parks that may be built.
- In Queens, 49 out of 556 parks (33%) currently face flood risks. By 2100, 431 parks in Queens are projected to be at risk.
- Using the CDC's Heat Vulnerability Index, which ranges from 1 the lowest to 5 the highest; Rebuild by Design identified 307 flood-affected parks that are also in high-heat zones. That number is expected to increase to 606 parks by 2100.

- Using the NYC Social Vulnerability Index (2022), which ranges from the lowest 0.00 to 1.00 the highest, there are 365 parks located in flood-affected areas with high social vulnerability (SVI higher than 0.75). By 2100, that figure is projected to rise to 708 parks.
- 15 parks in Queens Community Board 2 (CB2) are currently in flood zones. By 2100, 26 parks in the district are projected to face flood risk.
- The park with the highest heat vulnerability in CB2 is Sergeant Collins Triangle, which has a Heat Vulnerability Index (HVI) score of 4 and a Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) score of 0.75.
- Eight parks in CB2 have an SVI score above 0.70, indicating high social vulnerability and greater risk during climate events. Ms. Gulick de Torres added that committee members interested in knowing which parks meet these criteria should let her know.

Additional Committee updates:

- Carlos Castell Croke spoke about the budget and shared what he plans to advocate for. He encouraged committee and public members to share their ideas and priorities.
- Kevin Davis emphasized the need for more public space. He said there is a growing need for it as ongoing construction projects, such as ONELIC will increase the area's population. He added that parks would improve resiliency as public spaces and trees help manage stormwater.
- Carlos Castell Croke shared that he is working to schedule a tour with NYC Parks staff throughout CB2 to visit potential sites that could be developed into parks. He encouraged the meeting attendees to suggest vacant spaces that could be converted into green spaces.
- In a previous committee meeting, there were complaints from residents about low-flying helicopters that caused frequent noise disturbances. Residents were expected to follow up with updates but have not done so.
- Kevin Davis shared that a parcel within Hunters Point South Park, which includes housing, is currently being developed. He noted that the Parks Conservancy is advocating for more public green space on the parcel than the current plan allows. Given the limited field space in the community and the construction of 3 new schools in the area, he emphasized the need for recreational space. Mr. Davis asked what the Environment, Parks, and Recreation Committee can do to support efforts to increase public green space in the Hunters Point South Park parcel.

- Christine Coulombe, a resident, shared that since the city owns sidewalks and has limited parcels, the city should expand rain gardens throughout the community. Carlos Castell Croke replied that it's a great idea, and it can be suggested throughout the budget process.

Carlos Castell Croke made a motion to adjourn, and it was seconded by Kevin Davis.

The meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted by,

Rafael Nava