



166A 22nd Street
Brooklyn, NY 11232 NYC-EJA.org

On the ground – and at the table.

New York City Environmental Justice Alliance testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Environmental Protection in relation to the current conditions and future plans of the City's Wastewater Infrastructure.

December 13, 2017

Good morning Chairperson Costa and Members of the City Council. My name is Annel Hernandez and I am here to testify in support of expanding green infrastructure on behalf of the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (NYC-EJA). Founded in 1991, NYC-EJA is a non-profit citywide membership network linking grassroots organizations from low-income neighborhoods and communities of color in their struggle for environmental justice. NYC-EJA empowers its member organizations to advocate for improved environmental conditions and against inequitable environmental burdens. Through our efforts, member organizations coalesce around specific common issues that threaten the ability of low-income and communities of color to thrive, and coordinate campaigns designed to affect City and State policies – including green infrastructure and climate resiliency.

Because a number of the NYC-EJA member organizations come from communities overburdened by lack of green spaces, proximity to potential waterfront toxic exposures, and air pollution dirty industries clustered in their neighborhoods, our organization is a key advocate of Green Infrastructure (GI). Our NYC Climate Justice Agenda is a multi-year research and advocacy campaign to address the need for a comprehensive community-based approach to community resiliency. In 2017, we released a report, which analyzed Mayor de Blasio's OneNYC plan and made several recommendations to strengthen the City's policies in environmental justice communities. We highlighted that GI is an essential piece of integrated climate adaptation and mitigation planning. With rising flood risks, increasing temperatures, and air pollution, the City must continue to prioritize an aggressive expansion of GI – and other complementary urban forestry and ecologically-grounded coastal protection investments – in environmental justice communities facing disproportionate environmental burdens and climate vulnerabilities. In pursuit of a Just Transition, New York City should be leading the nation in the innovative GI strategies that meet our ambitious environmental and resiliency targets.

We commend the NYC Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) for successfully constructing over 4,000 green infrastructure assets across five boroughs in the past few years. We recognize the efforts made by DEP to work across agencies to facilitate the construction of GI on our streets, public land, and private properties. In particular, the dramatic expansion of GI in neighborhoods that are disproportionately vulnerable to extreme heat – including Bedford Stuyvesant and Bushwick in Brooklyn, and Soundview in the Bronx – is an important climate resiliency strategy. Going forward,

DEP should work to increase GI maintenance in these neighborhoods that to date have seen new Bioswales and Rain Gardens collect debris and trash. Additionally, we ask that DEP work to expand their current targeted neighborhoods to include other environmental justice communities in need of GI including the South Bronx and Sunset Park. Finally, we urge the DEP to increase citywide engagement with community-based organizations as they plan for future investments, and neighborhood level engagement in finalizing design of new and much needed GI assets, as well as public information on the modernization and coastal protections of the wastewater treatment plants.

In addition to improving the water quality of waterways, GI provides multiple co-benefits including mitigating urban heat island effect, improving air quality, enhancing coastal resiliency projects, reducing energy demand, and creating local workforce development opportunities. The creation of new job opportunities for maintenance is promising, and we are eager to see additional job growth as the GI program continues to grow.

Furthermore, we commend DEP for expanding the GI grant program to include the City's Significant and Maritime and Industrial Areas (SMIA). As part of our Waterfront Justice Project, we have advocated for increasing coastal resiliency and other best management strategies to prevent toxic exposure during extreme weather events and storm surges. By expanding targeted areas to Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) areas in addition to the Combined Sewer Overflows (CSO) areas, DEP will help increase the climate resiliency of the City's industrial businesses and working waterfronts.

NYC-EJA commends the New York City Council for holding a hearing on the current conditions and future of our wastewater infrastructure, and creating an opportunity for public comment on this important strategy to improve environmental conditions and increase climate resiliency. A climate justice framework is central to NYC-EJA 's work, and we look forward to a continued collaboration with the City and DEP to mitigate the threats of climate change and improve environmental conditions in the communities that need it most.