

# UNNATURAL DISASTERS AND POLICIES FOR PREVENTION



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Worsened by climate change, stormwater has challenged New York City for decades, regularly combining with sewage, overflowing into streams and streets and snarling transit.<sup>1</sup> While standing on a subway platform-turned-waterfall, in one of the most wealthy and innovative cities in the nation, I often wonder - can't we do better? Yes, we can.

We must start with funding the repairs, programs, and monitoring we need to update our infrastructure. Improving stormwater infrastructure is expensive, but Ida made it plain - the costs of inaction are comparatively steep. At the state level, a mixture of funds, such as the three billion proposed by the 2022 environmental Bond Act ballot measure, millions authorized by the federal STORM Act, and an ongoing revenue generator could be paired in a single statewide climate resilience fund. At the City level, a long overdue overhaul of our water rate structure could increase equity, green infrastructure, and expand the resources needed to tackle the problem. Ratepayers are currently charged for water use, with lower income families paying more than their fair share. This could be made into a much more equitable policy that generates greater revenues in which larger contributors pay more and basic needs are met for low income families

at little or no cost. Current financial barriers to installing green infrastructure on private lands could also be reduced through incentives such as rate discounts or up-front funds paid back later through rate fees.

Besides increased investment, the City should also reduce climate risks through every land use, building, and infrastructure decision. Two recent policy opportunities could facilitate this. First, in the spring of 2021, a bill was passed (Intro 2092) that requires all City-funded capital infrastructure to be built to withstand climate threats and meet a resiliency score. If executed successfully by the next administration, this requirement could be expanded to the private sector. Combined with recent mitigation legislation, this could establish a future in which all New York City buildings and infrastructure are rated both for their impact on and resilience to climate change. Second, a bill introduced by Council Speaker Johnson (Intro 2186) proposes a mission-driven comprehensive planning and infrastructure framework through which all land use decisions would meet citywide targets for equity, housing, and resiliency. Through such a policy, all City agencies would have to work together and consider these targets and community priorities for how they are met

<sup>1</sup>According to the Fourth National Climate Assessment, the heaviest rains in the Northeast now produce 55% more rain compared to the 1950s and could increase another 40% by 2100.

in the capital budgeting process. Regardless of the vehicle, the Council and Mayor must work together to address climate change comprehensively, informed by science and in partnership with communities.

## **“WE NEED TO COLLECTIVELY DARE TO DREAM AND DEMAND THE FUTURE WE WANT”**

Finally, we need to collectively dare to dream and demand the future that we want. In 2015, as I read about the mayor of Paris opening up the City’s canals to swimming, I felt envious. I feel the same when I see case studies of Portland’s beautiful public spaces and greener, cooler streets that are actually part of a multifunctional stormwater system. For New York City and all of its residents to thrive, we need to roll up our sleeves and align our policies and investments in a way that demonstrates that we value public wellbeing and the infrastructure required to support it. After the devastation of Ida, it is easy to feel anger and despair. But for the next Mayor and Council, it is important to also hold on to envy, to dream of the kind of future New York we’d like to live in, and work toward that.