CLIMATE RESILIENT INVESTMENTS WILL IMPROVE OUR QUALITY OF LIFE

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Climate resilient infrastructure can make our city safer while improving quality of life. Let me explain.

Hurricane Ida's record rainfall on New York City was immediately concentrated by streets, rooftops, and other impervious surfaces into deadly flash floods, overwhelming our storm sewers. But our wetlands, parks, and other natural lands absorbed the rainfall, and even when saturated, shed the excess water more slowly, giving our sewers time to work. The day after the deluge, while many cars were still stranded on highways, kids were able to play on our community playgrounds like the ones The Trust for Public Land built at PS 140 in Jamaica, Queens or at MS 354 in Crown Heights, Brooklyn – both of which are in the extreme flood zones mapped by the city. That is because those parks are built with green infrastructure elements like turf fields, rows of shade trees and rain gardens over layers of gravel; all basketball courts, play areas, and recreational features are tilted into those natural infiltration basins.

How can the city encourage more of these natural climate solutions?

First, we need to protect the open spaces we have. That includes safeguarding all wetlands in the city from development. For instance, develop of a big-box retail store and parking lot on Graniteville Swamp in Staten Island will only worsen flooding for the surrounding residences and businesses in the next big storm. New York City has to grow vertically from existing built areas, not sprawl outward into our natural buffers.

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Second, in addition to generating more sewer capacity, our strategies must include effectively "de-building" through retrofits. In just the first ten years of the NYC Green Infrastructure Plan, New York City has created 11,000 green infrastructure basins. But more needs to be done to balance four centuries of road construction and real estate

The Trust for Public Land has proposed the ambitious Park Equity Plan to add more parks to accommodate our growing city; currently, the areas most lacking in park infrastructure are too often the areas that suffer the worst flooding. A program to build new parks can increase social and climate resilience, without the opposition that can stall other projects. Parks are "Yes In My Backyard" projects.

Third, funding needs to be focused on the critical issue of climate resilience. Our new State leadership could immediately redirect hundreds of millions of dollars in existing water-quality funding to low-tech flood protection, land conservation, and green infrastructure measures rather than expensive, high-tech "end-of-pipe" treatments. Up until now, flood mitigation has not been prioritized for funding because it is considered a discretionary action not important to meet regulatory standards. But we cannot afford to ignore that floods pose an immediate threat to life and that muddy water from intense cloudbursts does affect drinking and swimming water quality. Better yet, our State could get funding out faster by streamlining the cumbersome grant programs and valuing small projects (like green infrastructure playgrounds) that can be built quickly. For example, we have completed two green infrastructure playgrounds funded by Housing and Urban Development disaster recovery grants, while similarly-funded large floodwall projects are still in the project initiation or design phase, ten years after Hurricane Sandy.

We can, and have to, build back better.