

Justice

New York Embarks on a Massive Climate Resiliency Project to Protect Manhattan's Lower East Side From Sea Level Rise

Some residents are wary of the \$1.45 billion system of seawalls and floodgates that will elevate the East River Park and protect 110,000 New Yorkers from coastal storms and flooding.



By Brahmjot Kaur

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A detour sign is seen at East 20th Street and Avenue C in Lower Manhattan as the first phase of major construction is underway. Credit: Brahmjot Kaur/Inside Climate News

Carlos Jusino has lived in the Lower East Side of Manhattan for over 35 years and remembers Hurricane Sandy as the longest two weeks of his life. As the neighborhood flooded, his family was left boiling water on a gas stovetop. Without heat, every blanket in their apartment was in use.

The City and FEMA provided military MREs to residents in the neighborhood, and Jusino was forced to send his asthmatic son, who was 7, to stay with his grandmother and uncle in Brooklyn so that he could use his nebulizer if he needed it.

“Through the grace of God, we made it through, and we grew stronger as family,” said Jusino, 38, a building maintenance man, explaining how he now keeps a survival kit in his home—“batteries, satellite radio, flashlights, you know.”

“Hurricane Sandy should have put people into perspective where they should be prepared for the unexpected,” he said.

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For him and his family, the unexpected now includes the \$1.45 billion East

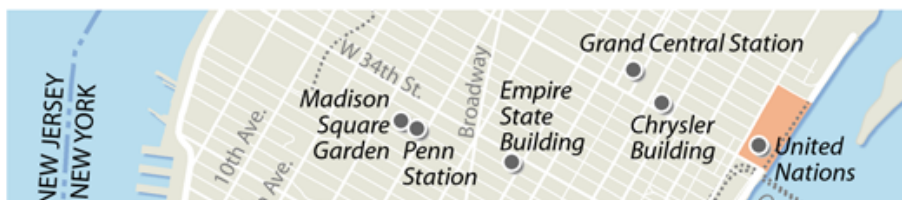
Side Coastal Resiliency Project, a massively ambitious network of berms, seawalls and floodgates designed to protect 2.4 miles of lower Manhattan and 110,000 New Yorkers, including 28,000 public housing residents, from sea level rise, flooding and extreme weather linked to climate change.

With construction now underway, the project, the first piece of \$20 billion plan to protect all of lower Manhattan from sea level rise, has become a case study in the intricacies of building climate resilience at a time when both the city and the Biden administration are focused on environmental justice to ensure that people of color are included in the planning process and actually benefit from new infrastructure.

Jusino is skeptical, seeing the centerpiece of the project—raising East River Park by eight to 10 feet and adding various recreational amenities—as something that will further gentrify the area and make it unaffordable for residents who currently live there. Meanwhile, 60 percent of the park will be closed during construction over the next five years.

NYC's \$1.45 Billion East Side Coastal Resiliency Project

New York is taking costly measures to combat the even-costlier effects of climate change. The proposed East Side Coastal Resiliency Project will span 2.4 miles along the East River and will include a combination of 18





This is just city officials “doing what they’re doing to Long Island City, to Williamsburg—that’s what they’re going to do here,” Jusino said. “We’re not blessed to have homes where we have a backyard to play in.”

Carlina Rivera, a city council member representing parts of the Lower East Side, opposed the project at first because it would have closed too much of the park. She’s become an enthusiastic supporter after working with the mayor and city officials to ensure that existing utilities and infrastructure beneath the park would be protected along with ball fields, playgrounds, tennis courts, barbecue areas, lawns and the compost yard. The project covers an area from East 25th Street to Montgomery Street, between the Williamsburg and Manhattan Bridges.

Jainey Bavishi, the director of the Mayor’s Office of Resilience, said the project protects an entire section of the city in an area where the 100-year flood plain “extends quite far inland.”

“So, we know that this community is vulnerable to future coastal storms,

which we expect will become more intense with climate change,” she said. “This project will provide this community critical flood protection.”

A Redesign Emerged From Community Opposition

Hurricane Sandy slammed the East Coast of the United States in October 2012. New York City suffered \$19 billion in damage. The areas most affected in New York City were Staten Island and the waterfronts of Brooklyn, Queens and Lower Manhattan, which were inundated by as much as five feet of water. According to a New York City government [report](#), 43 people died, approximately 2 million people were without power and nearly 800 buildings were “structurally damaged or destroyed across the five boroughs,” leaving tens of thousands of people displaced.

The development for the East Side Coastal Resiliency Project began in 2013 with a competition, called Rebuild By Design, which was sponsored by the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development to foster innovative solutions to increase the resiliency of neighborhoods devastated by Sandy, providing an initial \$338 million grant. The city will pay for the rest of the \$1.45 billion project.

Initially, a far less costly and ambitious blueprint called for flood protection along the FDR Drive, but left East River Park susceptible to future flooding. In addition, the seawall in the original design would have interfered with Con-Edison high voltage electrostatic transmission lines, which were already underground.

Under the new plan, devised in part to deal with structural concerns related to the power lines, the seawall was moved close to the waterfront. It will provide better flood protection to East River Park, with the massive quantities of dirt needed to elevate the park arriving via river barge. It will also avoid the closure of one lane of the FDR Drive.



Perfetto Contracting Company, the construction company awarded the project the waterfront area from 14th St. to 25th St., installs a flood-wall at East 20th Street and Avenue C in Lower Manhattan. Credit: Brahmjot Kaur/Inside Climate News

“Instead of building very high flood walls adjacent to the FDR Expressway,” said Jamie Torres-Springer, the commissioner for the NYC Department of Design and Construction, “we were able to identify a way that we could build the flood wall in the middle of the future East River Park.”

Torres-Springer said the current phase of construction, beginning at the Asser Levy Playground, involves utility relocations and sinking so-called Z-sheeting, which creates an underground seepage barrier against water inundation during storms. Workers are also installing floodwalls and gates.

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The project, based on a study by the New York City Panel on Climate Change, is designed to protect the Lower East Side from “extreme, low probability” projections for sea level rise by 2050, which the panel doesn't consider likely to occur until 2100. The study, published in the Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, says that the highest estimate of sea level rising in 2050 is 2.5 feet. The mid-range estimates for 2050 are 11-21 inches.

A system equipped with floodwalls and a total of 18 floodgates, which will close during coastal storms, will be erected along the waterfront and is expected to be completed by 2023. A series of smaller recreation areas, including Corlears Hook Park, Murphy Brothers Playground, Stuyvesant Cove Park and Asser Levy Playground, will be protected and receive new landscaping and amenities.

The sewer system in the area is expected to be completed by early 2024. New lines will reduce flooding that now occurs during heavy rainfall and convey water to the Manhattan Pumping Station during storms for processing.

The elevation and remodeling of East River Park will include upgrades to an existing amphitheater as well as picnic areas, basketball and soccer fields, and multi-sport turf fields. The new park won't be completed until 2025.

The Parks Department will plant 1,800 new trees in the new East River Park and an additional 1,000 new trees in adjacent neighborhoods. About a thousand trees currently in the park are London Plane trees and will be

felled. Robert Moses, the man most responsible for building modern New York, chose these trees in the 1940s because he liked them, not because this was the best environment for them, said Mitchell J. Silver, commissioner of the Parks Department. They were damaged significantly by Hurricane Sandy and were already coming to the end of their life cycle.

The Parks Department chose 50 different species of trees to plant around East River Park and the neighboring communities. The trees selected for East River Park, including red maple, heritage river birch and swamp white oak, can thrive even with the constant salt spray of the East River, Commissioner Silver said.

'This Is My Backyard'

For Jusino, the state of East River Park directly affects his quality of life. "This is my backyard," he said.

He remembers trying to entertain his three children during Hurricane Sandy, shut inside a cold apartment without school, television, video games or Wi-Fi, in a flooded neighborhood. "Try telling a 4-year-old or a 7-year-old, he said, that coloring books and board games "are all I have to offer you for two weeks."

Rivera, the local City Council member, was a community organizer at a local nonprofit and a housing counselor for tenant's rights at the time. She understands how important East River Park is to her constituents. In addition to negotiating to keep at least 40 percent of the park open during construction, she said she has worked to get neighborhood sports teams "prioritized permits" to play their upcoming seasons at nearby parks.

"We've installed additional turf fields and improvements at a few of the nearby parks," she said, "and we've installed additional barbecue pits at two of the parks because that's one thing a lot of our families will go there [to do], barbecue, and have local celebrations."





Graffiti and opposition signs for the construction of the new East River Park hang on East 6th Street along FDR Drive in Lower Manhattan. Credit: Brahmjot Kaur/Inside Climate News

But Jusino's biggest challenge during Sandy came, not from losing access to the park, but deciding to send his 7-year-old to Brooklyn to stay with his grandmother and uncle, concerned about the child's asthma. "It was probably the hardest thing to do because, at the time, I wanted to be a father and have my son close, but I had to be a person of reason and put myself aside and put my son in the best situation," he said.

For now, he remains part of the local opposition to the city's big resiliency effort. Jusino is a member of a group called East River Park Action, organized around a slogan—don't kill a great park for a bad flood control plan. The group is arguing that the project disproportionately harms low-income residents.

"This project is an environmental injustice against our crowded low-and-middle income Lower East Side and East Village neighborhood that will suffer the effects of losing our only large green space and the effects of

summarize the effects of losing out on my large green space and the effects of oversized construction on our health," the group says on its website

A lawsuit was filed against the city by East River Park Action in February 2020 to halt construction of the project. The group's attorney, Arthur Schwartz, said that "closing the East River Park, whether completely or in phases, will disproportionately affect the health and well-being and recreational opportunities of low-income New Yorkers who live in the neighborhood around the Park." But, in August 2020, State Supreme Court Justice Melissa Crane denied the request, finding that while she understood that losing portions of the park would be difficult for the community, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, the park would not exist at all if the surrounding area was not protected. The group said it plans to appeal Crane's ruling.

Jusino said he will continue speaking out about the project's long-term effects. "The writing's on the wall," Jusino said, "you have to pay attention to what's going on in your neighborhood."



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Brahmjot Kaur is an environmental justice fellow for Inside Climate News. She recently graduated from The City College of New York with a BA in political science and journalism. During her final semester, Brahmjot participated in the Semester in DC program at City College and was a public policy intern for the National Disability Rights Network. Brahmjot also worked at City College's student-run publication, The Campus, for three years and previously interned for Gothamist as an editorial intern. She covered the mayor of NYC announcing a ban on plastic foodware and a climate protest where over 60 people were arrested. She further learned about environmental justice while volunteering with the New York Public Interest Research Group. Brahmjot currently resides on Long Island, New York.

