

**COMMUNITY  
INTERVIEW  
REPORT  
2022**

**THE  
RESILIENT  
COASTAL COMMUNITIES  
PROJECT**

# **Designing Community-led Plans to Strengthen Social Cohesion: What Neighborhoods Facing Climate-driven Flood Risks Want From Resilience Planning**

Paul Gallay, Victoria Sanders,  
Annel Hernandez, Jacqueline Klopp,  
Bernadette Baird-Zars, and  
Lexi Scanlon

# I. Summary of Interview Findings

In November 2021, the Columbia Climate School, in partnership with the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance, created the Resilient Coastal Communities Project (RCCP) to help foster actionable, equitable solutions to flood risks along with complementary benefits like habitat restoration, job creation and more empowered communities.

RCCP's first initiative was to invite representatives of **ten local environmental and climate justice organizations<sup>1</sup> to share their past experiences in resilience planning**, provide their perspectives on what a truly just and equitable planning process would look like, and explain what resources they'd need in order to participate fully and effectively in future planning processes.

Across all the interviews, **leaders of these local organizations expressed frustration, demonstrated immense expertise and exuded energy, good will and willingness to engage in improved resiliency planning processes.**

They are frustrated at a status quo that still doesn't meaningfully include them in decision-making, including around investment and development projects that shape their communities and the risks they face.

They reported that, even when communities are invited to offer input into resilience planning, arrangements are almost never made for equitable compensation, making such input practically infeasible for groups and individuals already spread thin with their time and funding.

They are frustrated also at realities of climate threats such as flooding that shape their daily lives and futures — and that of their constituents and neighbors, threats that compound and intersect with problems of poor and inadequate housing, contamination, racism, and existing environmental injustice.

It's clear that flooding and the interconnected components of climate change are not abstractions: **their impacts shape daily life in neighborhoods across New York City and New Jersey.**

Respondents spoke of communities acting from experience, knowledge, and fear: cars flooding, "a superfund that is now your basement", and contamination-driven health impacts.

Drawing on their deep experience and embedded, long time work across sectors and neighborhoods, **the ten activists interviewed detailed specific, concrete ideas for immediate actions and approaches that can model and bring broader changes and ways of working to address current exclusions and gaps in resiliency planning.**

They — and their members and partners — have immense energy and expertise to bring to bear on work toward a more flood-resilient metropolis.

---

1 El Puente, GOLES, Guardians of Flushing Bay, Ironbound Community Corporation, Newtown Creek Alliance, New Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance, RISE, Staten Island Urban Center, The Point CDC, UPROSE.

All of the leaders have personal experiences of environmental justice disparities and described being 'compelled' to act. All but one have a background or came into their current environmental justice work influenced by work with children or youth.

Nearly all started their stories about why they came into this work with anecdotes about where they had grown up — Williamsburg, Gompers Housing in the LES, Harlem, Bushwick — and connected those issues to where they work now. **They are all deeply connected to place, people, neighborhood, and land and waterscapes.**

Their narratives of specific places are essential to deliver their message about the interconnectedness of EJ initiatives, where flooding impacts layer atop problems of inadequate and poor housing, high asthma rates, insufficient pre-K, closed rec centers, fights for self-determination, rezonings, food justice, youth ministries for peace.

As a result, **they emphasized that flooding cannot be addressed alone**, in the same way that storm-driven power outages will only be avoided if infrastructure is improved, healthy neighborhoods only preserved if trash is better managed, wetlands only protected if building rules are reformed, and housing relief only available if issues associated with racial segregation and undocumented households are dealt with.

Similarly, they articulated deep knowledge of how flooding involves many kinds of water: successful responses and prevention efforts around a single event entail understanding the complex interconnections between rainfall, wastewater system backflow, extreme events, storm surges, flows of creeks and rivers, tides, and gradual sea level rise.

This knowledge must translate into a full and true seat at the table if resiliency planning is to be successful. **The organizations are "looking to be more than advisors and be listened to. They need power beyond advisory, suggesting. They need decision making power when it comes to how money is used."** Transparency on the part of government agencies is a key part of this.

Unfortunately, right now, **these community advocates feel that they are "being brought to the table to eat food that is being force fed to them"** and that "the agenda is already set" by the time they are brought in.

They are "surprised" that deeper outreach doesn't happen sooner and that more work has not been put into designing and fostering genuine community participation and input.

**They have found that the overwhelming majority of processes are flawed**, don't instill trust, lack follow through, and fail to bring communities into the planning process early enough for effective engagement. They also describe a lack of follow-up after consultations end.

## II. Community Action Plans

A critical element of the Resilient Coastal Communities Project is **uplifting environmental justice work that is already being done** — some of that work is focused on developing and implementing community action plans.

We learned that both communities/community organizations and government agencies are taking a wide variety of

steps and actions to address climate issues.

We learned that **the greatest equity has been achieved when communities are heading the processes.** Projects like the Green Resilient Industrial District (The GRID) from UPROSE, ¡Nuestro Aire! from El Puente, and the North Shore Maritime Education and Recreation Corridor project from Staten Island Urban Center each show an array of community-led plans with different needs and goals.

A few engagement processes have been successful in the past. For example, in the Rockaways, the New York City Department of Housing, Preservation and Development reached out to invite participants for an advisory board for Edgemere. Still, most processes are generally frustrating and fall short of what COs feel needs to be done.

**Processes in the past have lost trust, as in the case of the East Side Coastal Resilience Project.** There's a need for change on every level, from zoning and policy to jobs and infrastructure, community/emergency planning.

Turning to specifics: **The GRID focuses on four main goals for Sunset Park:** Preserve, Retain, Support, Promote. It is a "community proposed alternative to Industry City's proposal to rezone 3.3 million square feet of Sunset Park's M-3 zoned industrial waterfront into luxury big box retail."<sup>2</sup> Still, the project needs a great deal of support through partnerships anywhere from tech to an economic analysis.

**¡Nuestro Aire! is a grassroots campaign**

with a "5-Point Action Platform" to address toxic air quality in their community.<sup>3</sup> They are focused on engaging youth members, and an array of other folks, with air quality monitoring — specifically focusing on reducing congestion, thinking creatively about green infrastructure, and building capacity through green jobs.

Finally, the **Staten Island Urban Center is facing a rezoning of their North Shore** with the highest concentration of Black and Brown residents in the area. The community is focused on developing an agenda for the North Shore that will center on SIUC's Maritime Education and Recreation vision, but are in need of support and experts who can listen to community needs and create solutions.<sup>4</sup>

These community-initiated planning efforts are intended to **shape government policy, spending, and shoreline planning in a manner to better reflect community priorities** — they have had varying degrees of success, which bears further study so that future exercises can gain more traction.

Other **planning initiatives** like RISE's [Greater Rockaway Community Shoreline Enhancement Plan](#)/[Greater Rockaway Vision 2020](#), GOLES's [LES Healthy Communities Map](#), El Puente's [Greenlight District](#), TwoBridges, and Waterfront Vision Plan, the Point CDC's [South Bronx Resilience Agenda](#), and the Staten Island Urban Center's [Maritime Education Recreation Corridor](#) are each exemplifying community planning with the ability to shape policy in NYC.

---

2 UPROSE, [The GRID Factsheet](#).

3 El Puente, [Nuestro Aire](#).

4 Staten Island Urban Center, [Community Development](#).

# III. What Can the RCCP Do?

Interviewees consistently sought to know what the RCCP (and Columbia as a whole) could do to support their work. Here are some ideas, based on what we heard during the interviews about community needs and opportunities:

**1. Uplift community knowledge** and support communities seeking to participate as valued and respected partners in climate adaptation planning. Specifically:

- Help communities build networks, share information, drive decisions, access resources, make connections with other organizations, foster restorative justice, build capacity and exchange knowledge.
- Support funding for community involvement and actions, including basic amenities like child care and transit fares to meetings and reliable, sustainable organizational capacity for engagement and outreach.
- Support the development and funding of community-driven projects that achieve climate resilience goals and complementary benefits, like habitat restoration, job creation, and greater community cohesion.
- Help communities achieve a higher level of at-the-ready planning capacity, so that they do not have to start from scratch whenever a new planning process gets underway.

- Be a hub for sharing (and creating) resilience success stories, to help support and inform planning throughout the region.

**2. Support community participation in specific planning processes** such as the Army Corps' NY-NJ Harbor and Tributaries Study, AdaptNYC, the New York City Climate Knowledge Exchange, and the NYC Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act. For example, help communities generate and analyze localized planning information and connect communities with relevant researchers and professionals, such as urban designers, when they need technical assistance.

**3. Share community goals and concerns with planners** and other policy actors and help **advocate for and co-create better models for collaborative decision making**, to drive more successful outcomes in a manner fully consistent with community goals and concerns.

**4. Help the academic community better understand community needs** and environmental/climate justice aspirations, so academics can better **align research project design and directed action initiatives with community goals** and desired planning outcomes. Provide a model for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Anti-Bias work and engaged, community oriented research within the university and beyond.

# IV. Summary and Vision

Time and again, interviewees told us that **they put far more energy into coastal resilience planning processes than**

**they get out of those processes**, due to the organizing agencies' inability or unwillingness to make them true partners in developing effective resilience solutions.

The growing sense of frustration that communities feel in the wake of such unsuccessful planning efforts threatens to undermine the region's ability to plan for the ever-expanding range of climate related risks facing our communities and surrounding ecosystems.

What we have learned through these interviews is that **a phase shift in coastal resilience planning must occur, both in terms of process and support for community participation in that process**. To support the fundamental systemic change that our community partners are rightly demanding, the Resilient Coastal Communities Project will **seek to change the way coastal resilience planning is done, by:**

- Uplifting community knowledge and supporting community efforts to act as valued partners in climate planning;
- centering social cohesion and restorative justice, side by side with coastal protection, in all resilience initiatives;
- sharing community needs and concerns with planners and other policy actors and fostering more collaborative decision making processes; and,
- helping the academic community understand community resilience planning goals and incorporate them more effectively into research project design and implementation.

Only through such a **fundamental systemic change in the processes** by which coastal resilience planning is done, and in the role locally based organizations plan in those processes, can communi-

ties, governments, and academics, working in true partnership, foster just and restorative resilience projects that keep our communities safe and make them more vibrant, while providing, as well, for healthier, more biodiverse ecosystems.

The RCCP is committed to supporting such change and looks forward to working with the organizations that generously gave their time to be interviewed to come up with respectful and effective ways to bring this change about.