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4. Outreach Process

Community and Stakeholder Outreach

Outreach Process

CIVITAS and Mathews Nielsen designed and led an outreach process to engage community members and stakeholders in a dialogue about the future of the East River Esplanade. This process was organized to allow community members and stakeholders to voice their concerns about and aspirations for the Esplanade. It also provided a venue for CIVITAS and MNLA to share information gathered in our research process, as well as gather information from knowledgeable community members and stakeholders. Community meetings were open to all members of the community and were advertised through CIVITAS' outreach process. Stakeholder meetings consisted of invited city, state, and congressional elected leaders, representatives from city agencies, and leadership from active community groups and boards.

A series of four stakeholder meetings and three community education meetings were held between April 23, 2014 and September 22, 2014.

- Stakeholder Meeting 1: Listening Session
April 23, 2014
- Stakeholder Meeting 2: Key Issues and Short-term Opportunities
May 20, 2014
- Stakeholder Meeting 3: Medium and Long-term Opportunities
June 19, 2014
- Stakeholder Meeting 4: Site Specific Short, Medium, and Long-term Opportunities
September 18, 2014
- Community Education meeting 1: Listening Session
May 6, 2014
- Community Education meeting 2: Key Issues and Short, Medium, and Long-term Opportunities
June 24, 2014
- Community Education meeting 3: Site Specific Short, Medium, and Long-term Opportunities
September 22, 2014

The initial meetings shared information on CIVITAS' goals for the Vision Plan, the historical background of the Esplanade, and provided participants with information on current conditions. The primary intent

of the initial meetings was to listen to community members and stakeholders, and allow them to express their desires for the future of the Esplanade. Small group breakout sessions were designed to discuss multiple topics, and gather information and feedback concerning the following:

Experiential and Sensory Environment

- What is the current experience of the Esplanade?
- What is the desired experience and how must the Esplanade change?

Edge Conditions

- How do users interact with the water?
- How do users and the Esplanade interface with the city and FDR Drive?

Upland Connections

- How do users get to the Esplanade and how does this affect their experience and sense of place?
- How and where does this need to change?

Broad Spaces

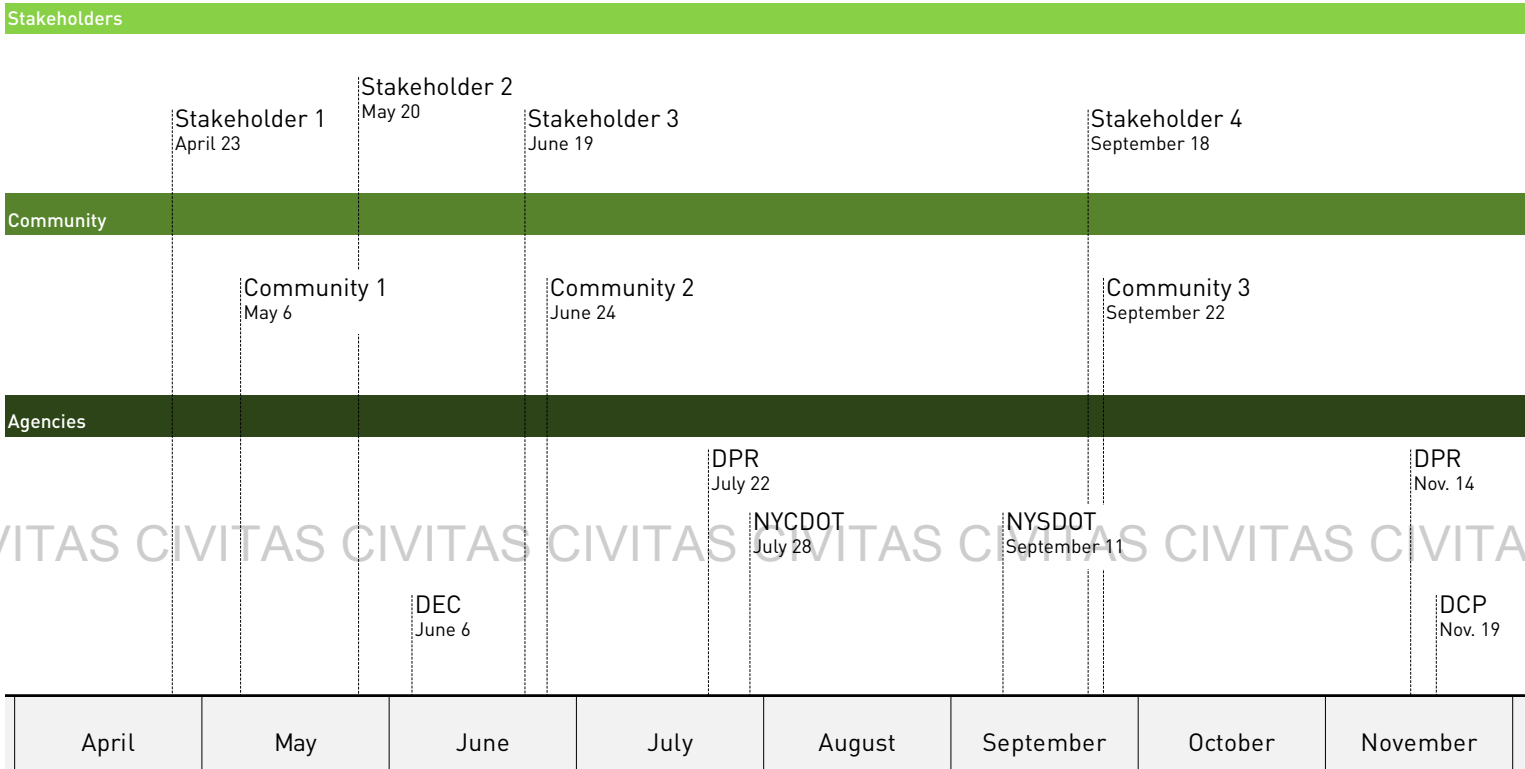
- What uses should be considered for the wider spaces along the Esplanade?
- How should these spaces be programmed?
- Where should larger gathering areas be located?
- What are the critical design criteria?

Narrow Spaces

- What uses should be considered for the narrow spaces along the Esplanade?
- How should these spaces be changed or redesigned?

The second and third Stakeholder and the second Community meeting included an educational component to provide background to participants about the principles affecting noise attenuation, the historic transformation of FDR Drive from a boulevard to the current controlled access roadway, and to discuss opportunities for solving current problems, addressing the need for resiliency, and visioning the transformation of the Esplanade in parts and as a whole.





Agency Outreach

In addition to meeting with stakeholders and the community, CIVITAS and MNLA also met with key agencies having jurisdiction over the Esplanade or the land and waters adjacent to it. The intent of these meetings was to share initial ideas for short, medium, and long-term opportunities for the Esplanade, and to get feedback on the feasibility of the options presented. It was also an opportunity to garner support needed for the Esplanade’s transformation from these governing agencies. CIVITAS and MNLA were able to learn more about agency intentions for maintenance, capital, and resiliency planning efforts being undertaken at this time. These agencies will play a key role in shaping the future of the Esplanade, and it is important that they have the opportunity to both contribute to the process and comment on proposed ideas. Any feasible approach to improving the Esplanade will require close collaboration and cooperation among city, state and federal agencies, as well as community groups. As part of this feasibility study CIVITAS and MNLA met with the following city and state agencies:

- New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC)
- New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (NYCDPR)
- New York City Department of City Planning (NYCDCP)
- New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT)
- New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT)

A recurring challenge expressed by all agencies was the lack of capital funding available through the traditional city and state budgetary processes. Funding for improvements will need to draw from city, state, federal, and even private resources.

**New York State Department of
Environmental Conservation (DEC)
June 6, 2014**

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is responsible for the conservation and protection of New York's waterways, including the East River. For this feasibility study CIVITAS and MNLA met with the DEC and other stakeholders to assess the regulations and process that will govern alterations to the shoreline where the Esplanade meets the East River. Currently, regulations prohibit filling in or constructing structures over the top of waterways. Filling waterways decreases aquatic habitat, and decking over them creates shade that degrades habitat. If a proposed project will alter the shoreline and extend into the water, mitigation measures are required. One approach is to extend out into the water in one area of a project site while pulling the shoreline back elsewhere on site to balance the impact of the encroachment. When this is not feasible, a project may offset the impact by providing mitigation on or off-site. Because of the general lack of upland area suitable for habitat conversion and thus onsite mitigation, offsite options will likely need to be explored. Finding a suitable site to use for mitigation is a challenge in New York City as the number of available sites is low while the regional demand for mitigation credits is high, therefore making offsite mitigation very costly. It has been noted that mitigation costs can triple a project's overall costs.

The discussion of the East River Esplanade focused on the possibility of increasing the Esplanade width by extending out into the river, either with fill or via conventional structure. A riprap edge was suggested as a potential solution north of 96th Street, and that solution would reduce costs associated with the maintenance of a vertical bulkhead. Riprap edges, however, require an angled slope, and the Esplanade's narrow width does not allow for this type of construction without extending out into the river with fill. Due to the narrowness of the Esplanade, it is not possible at this location along the East River to build a riprap edge starting from the current water's edge and working back toward the upland edge. The concept of creating an ecological edge is discussed

in more depth in later sections of this report. It fundamentally introduces the idea that, in the shallow waters north of 96th Street, a formerly rich ecological habitat can be restored, including the re-introduction of salt marsh and shellfish reefs that could support a diversity of a marine life and simultaneously provide aquaculture uplift and water quality improvement.

The DEC has indicated that, at present, this approach would still be subject to the standard regulatory process regardless of whether ecological improvement can be demonstrated. While it is more expensive to construct, build, and maintain a structured edge than a riprap edge, the current regulations would be more likely to allow for a structure that creates shade over the water versus one that fills it in.

The regulations serve the valuable purpose of protecting New York's waterways from being transformed and filled in for both public and private development at the expense of rivers and bays. For the public benefit, however, the process for altering shorelines remains a difficult process with a comprehensive review of the impacts and benefits of any proposed project. Rivers, streams, wetlands, and bays are a valuable resource that must be protected. However, the current status of New York's rivers is a snapshot in time, after hundreds of years of intervention. The present-day regulations leave little opportunity to consider historic river conditions, ecological function, biological diversity, water quality, and their enhancement, as positive contributors toward mitigation. But the regulatory environment does appear to be at a crossroads, and the coming years will reveal whether opportunities to enhance ecological function in lieu of a traditional area ratio mitigation scenario will become possible justification for permitting. The drivers of change in the regulatory environment are likely to come from the need to implement measures to protect the city from future storm surge and flooding as well as sea level rise.

New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR)
July 22, 2014

The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation is responsible for maintenance, upkeep, and reconstruction projects along the East River Esplanade. During the outreach process, DPR representatives attended stakeholder meetings and offered valuable insight and comments on the ideas presented. In addition, CIVITAS and MNLA met with a larger group representing the planning and engineering divisions of the Department of Parks and Recreation.

In this meeting CIVITAS and MNLA shared initial findings from our analysis, and community and stakeholder meetings. Ideas for future opportunities for the Esplanade were also presented. At this point in our process, the initial findings suggested that a much improved Esplanade was desired by the community, and that long-term improvements to the Esplanade needed to accomplish multiple goals to be fiscally responsible. Proposed solutions would be financially prudent and best serve the community by improving the quality of the Esplanade if they incorporated an infrastructure that protected the community from future sea level rise and flooding from storm surge. Given the Esplanade's deteriorated structural condition, DPR indicated that their immediate priority is to secure funds for repairs to maintain and keep the existing Esplanade structurally sound and viable. Other improvement opportunities to address Esplanade width, possible ecological enhancements, and flood control may be considered as future opportunities if more funding arises.

November 14, 2014

In November, CIVITAS and MNLA met again with DPR to review short, medium, and long-term opportunities and to discuss next steps. DPR stressed the importance of this report as a vehicle for the community to communicate the problematic lack of parkland in the neighborhoods along the Esplanade. It was also noted that short-term opportunities, such a beach or other temporary intervention at Andrew Haswell Green Park, might be limited by the

construction timeline for implementation of the impending permanent improvements to the park.

For CIVITAS' next phase of study, DPR indicated that developing cost estimates for opportunities is essential for the purposes of both planning and assessing feasibility. Estimates are also needed to begin discussions with political leadership and other agencies to secure capital funding. Additional study is needed at Thomas Jefferson Park to clearly determine the technical basis for how a decked structure or land bridge over the FDR would work with adjacent grades and vehicular clearances. Next steps should clearly identify types, locations and the cost of pilot projects, as well as a means for assessing which pilot projects have enough merit to be pursued. Finally, DPR indicated that improvement to Pier 107 on a short term and long term basis should be a high priority for CIVITAS to study as part of their next steps.

New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT)
July 28, 2014

CIVITAS and MNLA met with NYCDOT to share information regarding the feasibility study, to learn about any planned improvements to the FDR, and to better understand the jurisdictional division between City and State DOT. Figure 3.9 shows the current division of jurisdictional responsibility between City and State DOT. As a general guide, portions of the FDR that are at grade fall under NYCDOT jurisdiction, while bridged or structured portions are managed and maintained by NYSDOT. This division of authority over the FDR will necessitate close coordination with both NYCDOT and NYSDOT when implementing any improvements to the Esplanade.

In our initial research, we learned that NYCDOT has plans to improve the bikeway connections at the 103rd Street Bridge to the Esplanade and Randall's Island. This connection will allow bicyclists to easily travel down 106th Street between Central Park and the bridge to either the Esplanade or Randall's Island.

NYCDOT indicated that major improvements to the FDR, including those that would be needed to keep the FDR operational in light of future flooding and sea level rise, would likely be handled by NYSDOT. Jurisdictional authority of the FDR may, at some point, pass completely to NYSDOT.

**New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT)
September 11, 2014**

NYSDOT indicated that current planning efforts did not include major improvements to the FDR. Moreover, while in previous years NYSDOT did assume greater responsibility for improvements to and planning for sections of the FDR currently under NYCDOT jurisdiction, the contemporary fiscal funding environment makes it unlikely that it will assume more responsibility for these sections at anytime in the near future. There are also no current NYSDOT planning efforts that would address long-term sea level rise for the FDR.

The possibility of utilizing the area below the 96th Street overpass as a boathouse for East River CREW and other boating entities is of particular interest to the design team and community. NYSDOT was receptive to the possibility of pursuing this initiative, but indicated that the land below the FDR at that location may be owned by NYCDOT with a permanent easement for the structure, even though the overhead roadway is controlled by NYSDOT. In the event that boat

storage is permissible there, the enclosure would need to maintain a mandated distance below the roadway structure above to allow for painting and inspection of the highway's physical supports. The storage of combustible materials or fuels in the enclosure below the structure would not be permissible.

**New York City Department of City Planning (DCP)
November 19, 2014**

CIVITAS and MNLA met with the New York City Department of City Planning's Waterfront and Open Space Division to share this study of the East River Esplanade and to learn about any DCP planning efforts that may impact future planning for the Esplanade. DCP made the point that there is no requirement for private development to make improvements to the Esplanade as part of a private waterfront development project concession because the Esplanade is physically separated from the adjacent zoning lots by the FDR. This would mean that the developers for the planned residential development on top of the East River Plaza are not obligated to address the waterfront. City Planning also indicated that they are aware of the potential for flooding in East Harlem. It was noted that it may be difficult to achieve flood protection from a 100-year storm, but protection from a 10-20 year storm may be a feasible benchmark to pursue.

What we have heard

Community

- Think Big! and Small!
- More space, more boats, more enjoyable
- Improve connections and accessibility
- Enhance quality and basic amenities
- Program, program, program
- Increase access to the water

Stakeholders

- Design to solve multiple issues
- Coordinate across agencies

- Identify feasible and equitable solutions
- Collaborate with community, groups, agencies

Agencies

- Implement critical repairs
- Seek multiple funding sources
- Evolving post-Sandy regulatory environment
- Opportunities to influence resiliency plans