



CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS

CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS

CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS CIVITAS

1. Executive Summary

Executive Summary

Background

Parkland in New York City is a resource treasured by residents and visitors alike. In the communities of the Upper East Side and East Harlem, the East River Esplanade offers a cherished landscape with dramatic views of the East and Harlem Rivers. The Esplanade affords users river breezes, wide open blue skies, access to the water's edge, and a continuous stretch of landscape that is not subject to the stop and go of city traffic. This approximately three-and-a-half mile stretch currently spans sixty-five blocks, but plans are in place to create Greenway connections to both the north and south termini. With the addition of those planned projects, this section of Esplanade will provide pedestrian and bicycle access to residents of Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. The Esplanade is a resource for the adjacent communities and the city as a whole, but it is in need of improvements, repairs, and planning to enhance the quality of the experience and ensure its long-term viability in light of sea level rise and future storms.

In February 2014, CIVITAS, with consultants Mathews Nielsen Landscape Architects (MNL), launched this study of the East River Esplanade. The study area covers the Esplanade between East 60th and 125th Streets and identified the following goals to guide the process:

- Raise awareness of the opportunities embedded in the East River Esplanade
- Study all aspects of feasibility
- Develop recommendations to guide future planning
- Identify opportunities for short and long-term improvements
- Identify funding approaches so that improvements may ultimately be constructed

This study builds upon the ongoing work of CIVITAS and their commitment to improving civic life in East Harlem and on the Upper East Side. In 2011, CIVITAS sponsored an international design-ideas competition to jump-start a process for envisioning the transformation of the East River Esplanade. Over 90 submissions representing 24 countries were received, and the winning entries have been exhibited at several locations throughout the city. Both the CIVITAS focus on the Esplanade

and this study come at a critical time for the Esplanade. In 2013, the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and Office of Management and Budget conducted an underwater investigation of the Esplanade's structural integrity with ARCADIS. This study revealed that the Esplanade is in need of significant repairs within the next ten years. The community's desire to bring about meaningful improvements, combined with the need for substantial repairs, provides a rare opportunity to envision an innovative and comprehensive design and resiliency solution for the East River Esplanade.

Study Approach

The opportunities and recommendations for the future of the East River Esplanade are the products of extensive research and analysis combined with an in-depth community and stakeholder outreach process. The research examined the experiential, physical, ecological, social, economic, geographic, and hydrologic environment of the Esplanade. In addition, the research looked at how this landscape has changed over time as the tributaries and streams that once fed the East and Harlem rivers were slowly filled in and the hardened edge that now defines the edge of the Esplanade evolved. The Esplanade will continue to change in the face of numerous environmental factors. Improvements in water quality have ironically increased the rate of deterioration to its existing structures. Further, it is expected that climate change and sea level rise will impact the long-term relationship between the Esplanade and the river, and now is the opportunity to begin planning for these changes.

CIVITAS, together with Mathews Nielsen, collaborated with stakeholders and community members to gather ideas and information, to identify opportunities, and to garner input and support for future planning efforts. Between April and September 2014, a series of four stakeholder and three community outreach meetings were held. Stakeholder meetings with elected officials, agency representatives, and community groups were a forum to share ideas, build political support, and discern community needs and wishes. Community meetings offered residents and users of the Esplanade the opportunity to express their ideas for



the future, articulate their concerns, and share their knowledge of the Esplanade. In both the stakeholder and community meetings, CIVITAS and MNLA presented portions of research and shared information on opportunities and constraints.

The product of this process is this Vision Plan. The Vision Plan includes specific recommendations to guide future planning efforts as well as a range of opportunities for suggested improvements. Research, community and stakeholder outreach, and discussion with city and state agencies form the basis for the opportunities herein. Additional technical analysis, cost estimating, planning, design, and community input is needed to refine the opportunities and bring actual projects to fruition. Clearly, there are both significant regulatory and financial obstacles that must be overcome, but these challenges must be addressed given the potential impact from sea level rise and future storm events to the Esplanade and East Harlem community.

Key Findings

Stakeholders and community members shared many ideas and aspirations for the future of the Esplanade. The current Esplanade is narrow, congested with

bicycles and pedestrians, noisy, and feels disconnected from the city. More programming is desired, as are improved connections to the water, opportunities for gardening, ecological enhancements, and greater access to recreational boating. These are just some of the things the community would like to see improved upon and integrated into future planning. The common thread linking areas in need of improvement is a lack of physical outdoor space. Space is also the element needed to implement and integrate many of the community's aspirations and visions for the future. Finding additional space for the Esplanade is a technical, regulatory, and financial challenge. Expansion of the Esplanade is limited by the FDR on the upland side, while the river is the limiting factor on the opposite side.

Planning and designing an Esplanade with increased area is a real possibility, and the opportunities presented in this report show how and where interventions can be adapted to make the best use of future funding to accomplish this goal. The options for adding space include building above portions of the FDR or expanding into the river via structure or fill. These are costly options and they are proposed with full knowledge that the current state and federal regulations discourage expansion above or

into waterways and typically require costly mitigation in return. It is also acknowledged that the most transformative and expansive interventions cannot be undertaken purely to improve recreational opportunities. For example, low-lying areas north of 90th Street, including neighborhoods of East Harlem, which are home to many public housing developments and large concentrations of low-income residents, are particularly vulnerable to future flooding events. Rebuilding the Esplanade creates an opportunity to integrate long-term flood protection measures into the future design. Therefore, it is expected that any significant investment in the Esplanade will utilize funds to maximize the value of each dollar spent. Design solutions must be elegant and inviting to Esplanade users, but must also function on multiple levels to solve the challenges of limited space, experiential quality, noise, flooding, and ultimately sea level rise. This multifaceted design approach is key to producing feasible design solutions that can and must be built to restore an important New York City waterfront edge. Furthermore, a viable and long-term comprehensive solution for the Esplanade is dependent upon a collaborative approach to problem solving that integrates the resources and needs of multiple agencies and groups.

Next Steps

This report identifies short, medium, and long-term opportunities for remediation, restoration and rebuilding the Esplanade. Long-term opportunities present the greatest challenges, require longer planning and construction times, and demand significant coordination efforts. However, short-term opportunities can be implemented quickly, energize the community and show commitment toward improving the Esplanade. Acting on these

short-term opportunities will sustain momentum and continue the process of building community and political support. This support is critical to future planning efforts.

Additional planning is needed to develop site-specific designs and establish a comprehensive strategy for the future of the Esplanade. Due to the required level of agency coordination, permitting, and investment needed to formulate a comprehensive plan, this effort must be developed with city and state support and lead to plans that are both definitive and implementable.

In spite of significant challenges, there is a wonderful opportunity to transform the East River Esplanade into a world-class waterfront that is on a par with other waterfront parks in New York City. Furthermore, the prospect of integrating resiliency measures into the plan will ensure the long-term viability of this parkland as well as protect residences and businesses in East Harlem and the Upper East Side from the hazards of climate change. In this situation, needs and opportunities are uniquely aligned so that the right design will solve multiple challenges. With strong political leadership, community support, and financial commitment, these opportunities can be transformed from vision to reality.