



Speech to the Association for a Better New York
City Council Speaker Christine C. Quinn
Tuesday, November 13, 2012

Back in early October, when we scheduled today's breakfast, I wouldn't have guessed I'd be standing here after the largest and most destructive hurricane in our lifetime talking about how to protect New York from rising tides and future storms.

But the world changed two weeks ago, when Hurricane Sandy carved a path of terrible carnage across our city and much of the tri-state area.

It was a storm that hit our most vulnerable residents the hardest – seniors, New Yorkers with disabilities, families in public housing. This devastation was shared by our neighbors in New Jersey, Long Island, and Connecticut.

113 lives have been lost, including 43 right here in the five boroughs. Tens of thousands of New Yorkers find themselves homeless, along with countless more who remain without power and heat, or ready access to food, gasoline and basic supplies.

But as we've seen time and time again, New Yorkers respond to catastrophe with an outpouring of courage and community.

Our first responders - police officers, firefighters, EMTs, and sanitation workers. The men and women who worked to restore power and clear our roads. Those who kept clean water flowing and got our trains and buses up and running.

Teachers, principals and custodians. Doctors, nurses and home care workers. The tens of thousands of volunteers who have spent weeks working to distribute supplies, or helping families begin to rebuild their homes and their lives.

Our city's business leaders have donated generously to the cause – including many folks in this room. The Rudin family and members of ABNY have already given \$1.1 million to the Mayor's fund, and are giving generously to other organizations as well.

And for anyone who still wants to give, there are handouts on each of your tables to tell you how you can donate to the Mayor's Fund.

I'm also grateful to so many of my colleagues in government for their incredible efforts. President Obama, Senators Schumer and Gillibrand, Governor Cuomo, and Governors Christie and Malloy. Mayor Bloomberg, all of our Borough Presidents, our Congressional delegation, and especially all of my Council colleagues.

I've visited with New Yorkers in affected neighborhoods, and I've seen countless examples of their generosity and resolve.

At PS 188 on the Lower East Side, I met the custodial team led by Gary O'Neil. From Sunday to Wednesday, through the storm and in the days that followed, they slept at that school and spent every waking moment working to keep water from getting in, cleaning up and digging out to get ready for those kids to get back to class.

Then there are the little things that can make a big difference. Like the members of a jazz band in Red Hook – who launched into an impromptu concert outside Visitation Church, to lift the spirits of people waiting in line for supplies.

And in Breezy Point, as I toured storm damage with Senator Schumer, we passed a man standing among the rubble of burned out homes. The minute he saw us he yelled "Hey Quinn! You better get me my building permits quick!"

There was no question in his mind he was going to rebuild, no chance he was leaving. In fact he couldn't get started soon enough.

That's the spirit of New York City. Selfless. Tireless. Relentless. And yes, a little bit pushy.

Today I want to talk about how we harness that spirit to rise from this destruction and take bold action in the days ahead. Because that is what this moment calls for – not words, but action.

Two weeks ago we were reminded that our city is vulnerable to the forces of nature, that the reality of climate change puts our homes and our safety at risk.

What we do in this moment will determine whether we allow that reality to define us, to hold us back – or to inspire us, to push us to do what we know is hard.

Today I want to discuss some of the ways we must use the opportunity of this moment. To invest in the kind of infrastructure that can protect our city from severe storms. And to strengthen our city itself – our buildings, our energy and sewer systems, mass transit and gasoline distribution – to make us less vulnerable to the storms that will inevitably strike in the future.

We must focus on the future even as we continue with the task at hand. Getting displaced families into temporary housing, restoring service to everyone in every neighborhood, helping New Yorkers repair their homes and businesses. And we will learn from Sandy, so that when the next storm hits we'll be better prepared.

In the coming months there will be necessary debate over the City's response. While that isn't the focus of my remarks today, it is a conversation we must have as a city, one that we have already begun to have.

It's why I am announcing here today that the Council will be holding a series of hearings in the weeks and months ahead, on everything from public safety to health care - and yes, on ConEd's handling of the storm.

I've spent the last two weeks working with New Yorkers who were devastated by Sandy. And it's heartbreaking to hear folks say, "I feel like we've been forgotten." "Help came too late."

Well I can promise you this. We are not leaving until everything is fixed. Until every neighborhood is back on its feet.

We've established satellite Speaker's offices in all affected parts of the city. We're working with local Council Members and community leaders to help coordinate relief efforts and respond to problems as they come up.

Because through it all we are one city. When Coney Island is hurting, every New Yorker is hurting. When the South Shore of Staten Island is paralyzed, none of us can truly move on. We rise together or not at all.

And every neighborhood in the five boroughs touches lives beyond its borders, has impacted generations of New Yorkers in thousands of ways.

My grandfather came over on a boat from Ireland with a third grade education and worked his way up through the ranks of the Fire Department. Rockaway Beach offered him a chance to rent a bungalow in the summer, to afford a little place on the ocean just like the rich people he saw in the magazines. It was his own piece of the American Dream.

I can remember walking along the boardwalk as a young girl with my late mother and aunt. It's one of my favorite memories of my mother, of how much that place meant to her and to my whole family. And last week, visiting with families in the Rockaways, I saw that boardwalk lying in pieces, tossed into street corners or crashed into people's homes.

Millions of New Yorkers have stories just like mine. We will make sure our children and our grandchildren have those stories too – not of a Rockaway destroyed, but of a Rockaway reborn.

But recovering from Sandy is just the beginning of the work ahead. This storm was a wakeup call.

Those who still deny the reality of climate change, I challenge you – come to Coney Island. Come to Far Rockaway or the South Shore. Look in the eyes of New Yorkers who lost loved ones, who lost their homes and businesses. Tell them that the science is inconclusive. Tell them that global warming is a myth.

Our nation needs to take on climate change, and New York has been leading the way. The Mayor in particular, through PlaNYC and his C-40 initiative, has set the environmental standard by which all other cities are judged.

The Council has passed landmark legislation to reduce our carbon footprint, including the Climate Protection Act, which requires the city to reduce emissions 30% by 2030. Non-profits and forward-thinking groups like the Rockefeller Foundation have made serious investments in greening our city and preparing for the challenges of global warming.

If we can get more cities to follow our lead it will make a real dent in the problem. But make no mistake – if we're going to get serious about climate change, we need the federal government, and every nation in the world, to wake up and take action.

Yet we also need to face the reality that this trend will not be reversed overnight, or even in a few decades. If we cut the world's carbon emissions in half tomorrow, the tides would continue to rise.

In the last hundred years, New York Harbor has already gone up 12 inches. According to the New York City Panel on Climate Change, sea levels are projected to increase roughly one to two feet by 2050 – and three to four feet by 2080.

So if we don't act now, when our children are raising families of their own, flooding will be even more common in parts of Coney Island and the Rockaways, Red Hook and the South Shore, City Island and Lower Manhattan. And places that never had to worry about serious flooding will suddenly find themselves vulnerable in major storms.

And it's not just the next Sandy we need to worry about. Hurricanes of every size will continue to make their way further north.

New York's geography makes us even more susceptible to flooding than other east coast cities. The right angle formed by our harbor, known as the New York Bight, takes the water kicked up by a storm and funnels it towards our city, then blocks it from going back out to sea.

Now our geography is our geography. There's no way to prevent this – other than maybe moving Long Island – which we are pricing out, but I think it's going to be way too costly.

So clearly we need to strengthen our infrastructure to prepare us for the effects of climate change, particularly as we rebuild in areas devastated by Sandy.

And as we rebuild, we must rebuild smarter. We will need to address all of the many challenges posed by climate change. But today I want to focus on two of the most pressing:

One, how do we prevent or reduce the flooding we will face in the decades ahead? And two, how do we safeguard our critical infrastructure – our energy and fuel, our sewer and transit systems, our homes and businesses and health care facilities – so that when flooding does occur it causes minimal damage?

This is the single most important infrastructure challenge of our time. How do we prevent flooding? And how do we protect against it?

We don't need to look that hard to find ideas.

In the Netherlands, they've spent billions of dollars on miles and miles of connected barricades like dams, dikes, walls, and levees. In more recent decades they added massive storm surge barriers at critical locations. The largest one - which is called something completely unpronounceable in Dutch - stretches five and a half miles from end to end.

In London, a series of ten enormous steel gates protects the city from the powerful tides that sometimes move up the River Thames.

Closer to home, engineers in Stamford, Connecticut, with the click of a mouse, brought a storm surge gate rising up from the water as Sandy approached.

Meanwhile Louisiana is spending \$50 billion over the next 50 years on natural barriers, protecting and refurbishing wetlands and rebuilding small islands in the gulf. Along with reconstructing levies, this is one of the most significant pieces of their post-Katrina response.

For years now, there's been a discussion, largely confined to academic circles, about whether these types of barriers would work for New York City. Would it be worth the potential billions of dollars in investment? Would they be effective in shielding our most vulnerable neighborhoods?

Well the time for casual debate is over. It's now crystal clear that we need to build protective structures.

This will include both hard infrastructure, like sea walls, bulkheads, or flood gates, and more natural defenses, like sand dunes, wetlands and embankments. And there are places where the best solution may be to raise the elevation of land above the flood plain.

Today I am happy to announce that we are taking the first major steps in hardening our defenses against global warming and storm surges.

At the Council's request, the City has agreed to accelerate two studies that will help us determine the specific risks faced by different parts of the city, and the best techniques for protecting each area. And both of these studies will be complete by April of 2013.

At the same time, I've spoken to Senator Schumer and he will be taking the lead in Congress, working with the Obama Administration, to get a study done by the Army Corps of Engineers. This study is an important and necessary step towards strengthening our defenses.

The Army Corps has the expertise to determine exactly what we can and must build, and without their permits we will not be authorized to build a thing.

The study will include a definitive analysis of whether storm surge barriers will be an effective means of protecting New York City and if such barriers are not viable or feasible, it will tell us what other tools are at our disposal to ensure that New York remains secure against rising seas and future storms. – Because something must be done.

Let me be clear - this is not an academic exercise. It will produce a concrete blueprint for action, along with a price tag for any and all projects.

We begin today, but the work of building and strengthening our defenses will go on for years, if not decades. In the meantime, there are more immediate actions we can take so that when we do experience flooding, it doesn't incapacitate so much of our city.

So we must also seize this moment to begin an aggressive, top-to-bottom storm-proofing of our city's infrastructure. This work will be hard, and it will be costly. I won't pretend to have all the solutions today. But we know where we need to begin.

We need to strengthen our energy infrastructure. Major storms will always bring interruptions in service. But Sandy knocked out power to more than 800,000 homes and businesses in New York City for days or weeks – many still don't have power restored.

Today I'm demanding that ConEd and all local utility companies take a series of significant actions to prevent lengthy outages in the future.

First and foremost, we need to improve the protocols for when ConEd cuts power to vulnerable substations. If they had shut off power at the 14th street station sooner, they would have avoided the explosion that caused long-term blackouts for hundreds of thousands of customers in lower Manhattan. That in turn would have freed up staff and resources to focus on the rest of the city.

Second, all utility companies need to erect structures around power plants and substations in at-risk areas to protect from storm surges of at least twenty feet. And they should review their standards regularly based on the most recent climate science.

Third, they need to take immediate steps to flood-proof vulnerable infrastructure, like upgrading transformers and installing flood switches that protect the grid from damage. ConEd actually has a plan to do much of this flood-proofing, but many projects aren't scheduled to be completed until 2017, and we simply can't afford to wait that long.

And now that we know flooding can be much more widespread, companies need to dramatically expand the area in which these upgrades are being made.

Fourth, there are a number of neighborhoods, particularly in Staten Island, Queens, and the Bronx, where overhead power lines seem to come down every time we have heavy winds. I'm proposing that New York City require utility wires in parts of these neighborhoods to be buried underground, where they'll be better protected, just as they are in most parts of the city.

And I want to send a clear message to ConEd today – we will not tolerate you simply passing these costs on to ratepayers. New Yorkers cannot be asked to pay more just to receive consistent and uninterrupted service.

Finally, I am proud to announce a significant action that will reduce the chances of a storm knocking out cell phone coverage across the city. It will help ensure that New Yorkers in distress can get emergency help or reach loved ones.

In the aftermath of Sandy, AT&T and T-Mobile entered into an agreement to provide access on their networks to customers of both companies in impacted areas.

At our request, they have agreed to make these emergency network-sharing agreements permanent, and we urge other wireless providers to follow their example.

This means that even when networks go down, customers can place calls just like they normally would, and their calls will be carried by whichever network is most operational in their area. This will go a long way towards preventing loss of service, and I want to thank AT&T and T-Mobile for their leadership.

Now Sandy didn't just wreak havoc on our electrical system. It also devastated our ability to access gasoline, whether for commuters or emergency vehicles. In the last two weeks we've seen six hour waits at the pumps, and volunteers unable to reach hard hit areas due to a lack of fuel.

This storm caused major systemic breakdowns at almost every phase of the gasoline supply chain. Our regional refineries in central Jersey shut down for days or weeks because of flooding and power outages.

Serious damage to parts of Port Newark and Port Elizabeth prevented shipments of gas coming in from outside the area. Local storage facilities were operating on backup generators, and couldn't push gas out at anywhere near peak capacity. And even if they could it wouldn't have gotten very far, because their pipeline system had lost power too.

What little gas did make its way to the city still couldn't get into your tank, because gas stations didn't have power to operate their pumps.

Today we are sending a letter to the US Department of Energy, formally requesting an investigation of the breakdowns in our gas distribution network. And I am demanding that the oil companies work with federal regulators and local leaders on a major overhaul of the entire system.

We need to storm-proof critical systems at refineries and storage facilities, to protect them from flooding and provide much more back up power when the lights go out. We need to build in redundancy, so if the supply chain is compromised, fuel can still get to where it's needed.

And big oil companies need to do much more to support their local stations. Three days after Sandy hit, less than a quarter of the service stations operating under international companies like Exxon Mobil, BP, and Shell were selling gasoline. Meanwhile, as many as three-quarters of our regional chains like Hess, Wawa, and Sunoco were up and running using back-up generators that the parent companies provided.

Exxon, BP and Shell are multibillion-dollar companies. The least they can do is provide support to the small business owners that sell their products to drivers around the world. I'm calling on every oil company to secure backup generators to keep pumps operating, and to create a system for deploying them to gas stations in an emergency.

As we strengthen our city's infrastructure we must also focus on the city's sewer system – much of which remains woefully outdated. The Department of Environmental Protection has been making major investments – including almost \$3 billion this fiscal year alone. But there are still great challenges in working with an old system.

Our Finance Chair Domenic M. Recchia, Jr., who represents Coney Island, was out helping people in his district during the storm when he got a frantic call from his wife.

The city had been forced to shut down some sewer pipelines because we couldn't process all the floodwaters fast enough. As a result the whole system backed up, and sewage was coming out of drains in his sinks and bathtubs.

This is an extreme example, but sewage overflows that pollute our waterways remain far too common. Residents and business owners who have to deal with sewer backups have had enough.

So our plan today includes accelerating major sewer and wastewater treatment projects, to make sure they can stand up – both to major storms like Sandy and to more common flooding.

Electrical equipment and other critical systems need to be elevated at treatment plants in flood zones. We had pumping stations fail, and they need to be upgraded and protected from storm surges.

We need to speed up our efforts to improve our sewers themselves, and install soft infrastructure that helps absorb water runoff, like green streets, green roofs, and bluebelts.

And we're going to pass legislation requiring the city to use new pavement materials that absorb rainwater and prevent sewer overflows.

Not all of these steps will be able to process the water from a 14 foot surge, but they will all make the system more resistant to the kind of flooding we'll see from continued climate change.

Now even in places where the system worked well, there is still room for investment and improvement.

Joe Lhota and the MTA did a remarkable job maintaining and restoring service. But there are steps we can take to protect our subways from the flooding we face not just during a hurricane, but practically every time it rains.

There are small steps we can take today, like installing raised buffers around subway grates in certain areas to prevent water from seeping in. Or elevating the entrances to our stations a couple of feet above ground. Then there are new technologies to explore, like industrial balloons that can completely seal off subway or vehicular tunnels from flooding.

At the same time, we must continue to invest in more resilient means of transportation. Our buses and ferries were up and running little more than 24 hours after the storm had passed. They're also more flexible – you can reroute a bus a lot easier than a train.

Some of the money we invest in storm-proofing our city needs to go to these and other transit projects. We can't allow severe weather to incapacitate eight million New Yorkers.

Now when we talk about upgrading our infrastructure, we don't just mean power or transit.

We also mean rethinking the way we build in neighborhoods that were destroyed by the storm.

Our building code includes requirements on how to flood-proof critical equipment and avoid major structural damage. But if we learned one thing from Sandy, it's that many of our buildings are still vulnerable to storms.

It's time to consider stricter requirements for flood-proofing boilers, generators, and electrical equipment. Or water systems using sensor based technology that can work even during a power outage.

We may need to raise buildings higher above base flood elevation. And we need to consider expanding these requirements to include new areas that will be more vulnerable to flooding in the years ahead.

So at our request, the city's Building Resiliency Task Force, led by the Urban Green Council, and working with the Real Estate Board of New York, has agreed to hold emergency sessions.

They'll help us determine the best ways to build smart without putting unnecessary burdens on individual property owners.

In every case we'll assess environmental impacts and make sure our efforts don't have unintended consequences.

We'll need to determine which costs are the responsibility of private entities, and what should be paid by the city, state or federal government.

Because many of the things I've proposed today are big-ticket items. If we decide to build a storm surge barrier, it could cost roughly \$16 billion alone. The sum total of everything I described could reach \$20 billion.

But just looking at the response to hurricane Katrina gives some sense of the scope of federal investment that must follow a storm this destructive. Congress authorized more than \$110 billion in spending to the gulf coast, including over \$25 billion to the city of New Orleans.

Now Sandy was a different storm than Katrina, but to people in many of our neighborhoods it was just as devastating. And just to put things in perspective, there are 360,000 people in New Orleans. We have nearly half a million residents in Staten Island alone. We need the federal government to invest in our citizens, to help us rebuild New York safer than before.

And even if we need to take on some costs locally, or turn to the private sector for investment, think about this. New York City suffered an estimated \$26 billion dollars in economic damage and losses. That doesn't even take into account the losses we will suffer if we don't rebuild correctly, if businesses flee our city because they think lower Manhattan is too risky a place to invest.

Even half that money used properly could go miles towards creating protective barriers, strengthening our energy grid, or flood-proofing people's homes.

If all we focus on is the cost of rebuilding, and not preparing for the next storm, the future costs to all of us will be staggering.

Our greatest danger is inaction. We stand in a unique moment that carries with it a unique opportunity. The future of our planet, the world our grandchildren inherit, depends on what we do in the months and years ahead.

At this moment the need for action cannot be ignored – the cost of this enterprise cannot be dismissed as too great.

It won't be easy. And it won't come cheap. But New York's history is a story of progress, of making smart investments when others were afraid to, and continually adapting to changing times.

We're a city that built skyscrapers where swamps once stood, and that spirit still defines us today.

We are right now transforming what was once the world's largest garbage dump into a sprawling park where our children will play.

We grow vegetables on rooftops, turn abandoned rail tracks into open space, forgotten factories into high tech hubs.

And where we once saw a gaping hole that marked our darkest hour, we now see a tower reaching to the heavens that will soon stand as the tallest building in the nation and a symbol of our strength and resolve.

There is no task too great for the people of the City of New York. They are ready to act. We in government must be ready to lead.

We will seize this moment, we will harness the energy and generosity we have seen in the wake of this storm. And working together, as one city, we will rise from this devastation stronger and more united than ever before.