



# The Road to Equitable Adaptation: Highlights of the Community Process

## Introduction

The destructive effects of climate change will reach every person and community on the planet regardless of race and socioeconomic status. Yet the extent and caliber of those effects will disproportionately impact working class, immigrants, non-English-speaking, and communities of color. It is imperative that these communities be empowered with the resources and tools to adapt to climate challenges.

There are countless ideas, strategies, policies, and designs for adapting communities to the new realities brought by climate change, but many are only feasible in certain contexts, or have undesirable side effects. In a community where most households are renters, building renovations or neighborhood improvements can lead to higher rents, causing displacement. In a commu-

nity where a significant portion are non-citizens, eligibility for certain programs may be a hurdle. If community members are undocumented, then access to legal rights and mutual trust between government and community can be a major challenge. If a community has many non-English speakers, then meaningful engagement and education will require extra effort.

Regional Plan Association (RPA) and the Queens office of Make the Road NY (MRNY) partnered to develop a way to overcome these obstacles and build climate change adaptation capacity in the working class Latinx communities. It was important for both groups that the end products be immediately useful, and not just good ideas that there is no capacity to implement.



## Project Proposal

During the development of its Fourth Regional Plan, RPA collaborated with several community-based organizations across the region, including MRNY. This marked a new kind of partnership for RPA, which has traditionally worked more closely with government, civic, and business leaders. With persistent inequality despite overall growing prosperity throughout the region, RPA recognized the need to work more closely with communities dealing with structural inequity. After the completion of the Fourth Regional Plan, RPA and MRNY sought to continue their collaboration, focusing on building climate change adaptation capacity. In Fall 2017, the two organizations received a grant from the New York Community Trust for a joint proposal entitled, “Equitable Adaptation: Building Climate Resilience in Queens’ Latinx and Working Class Communities.” The proposal outlined five objectives:

- ▶ **OBJECTIVE 1:** To research and identify the most pressing climate risks affecting the Borough of Queens.
- ▶ **OBJECTIVE 2:** To understand how the effects of climate change are impacting the lives of Latinx and working class residents in Queens.
- ▶ **OBJECTIVE 3:** To determine the capacity and awareness of Latinx and working class citizens in Queens to respond to climate risk.

- ▶ **OBJECTIVE 4:** To research and advance tools and best practices for residents to use to adapt to climate change effects.
- ▶ **OBJECTIVE 5:** To develop a grassroots climate agenda for Latinx and working class neighborhoods in to work with policymakers on solutions.

The project consisted of four workshops with MRNY’s core team of community activists, known as BASTA!, and the development and dissemination of a climate resilience survey to nearly 400 community members.

Working together, the two organizations successfully educated and influenced each other, deepening the skill and knowledge of each organization, as they worked closely with community members and BASTA!. Over the course of the four workshops, RPA and BASTA! explored the direct and indirect impacts of climate change on the neighborhoods of Central Queens. Through workshop outcomes, along with the community-wide survey, the project team discovered the intersecting impacts of climate change across environmental, social and health-related issues. Based on this knowledge, the team has developed a set of 13 actionable strategies that can be implemented at the individual, community and policy levels.



# The Framework

The fundamental purpose of this project is to help MRNY's constituent communities in Central Queens adapt to climate change. In addition to the challenges of limited resources, time, and political capital, finding the capacity to tackle climate change is not easy. MRNY is already extremely active in a number of issue areas and their staff and members already devote countless hours to fight challenges to their community. Especially in recent years, with a federal government hostile to MRNY's communities and mission, the organization is working incredibly hard to take on the myriad short-term crises that arise. While RPA has previously developed and researched frameworks for climate change adaptation, this project forced us to consider how to accomplish adaptation through the lens of organizational and community capacity. The end result would not be a roadmap to add a new issue area to MRNY's portfolio, but how to effectively add a resilience or adaptation component to their existing programs and activism.

## Climate Change Adaptation

The most visible symbol of New York City's climate change impacts is the damage wrought by Hurricane Sandy in 2012. The billions of dollars in damage, destroyed homes, and lost lives are a powerful sign of what can happen if communities are not prepared for the effects of climate change. But an increased chance of devastating hurricanes is only one effect, and not even the deadliest. Extreme heat is expected to take the lives of many more people in the coming century than storms and flooding. Sea level rise flooding occurs gradually over decades, but will permanently inundate communities and critical infrastructure.

The effects of climate change will be felt by everyone, but some communities will face greater challenges than others, due to extreme impacts, or a lack of resources to address the challenges, or both. The type and severity of the impacts can depend on a number of factors, including geographic location, income level, race or ethnicity, migration status, disability, and economic activity. The geographic location of the community could mean it lies in a flood zone, or in a particular climatic zone, for example, or in an area dependent on unreliable public transportation. In other cases, a lack of economic, political, or social resources makes dealing with climate change impacts more difficult. Most of the time, it is a combination of the two.

Coping with the impacts of climate change is called "adaptation" and includes reducing the harm caused by heat waves and flooding. Preventing the causes of climate change is called "mitigation" and includes reducing greenhouse gas emissions by transitioning to renewable energy and increasing energy efficiency. The ability for a community to address the impacts of climate change is called "adaptation capacity."



## Community-led Process

Adaptation capacity depends on many factors, from physical infrastructure to social ties to equipping residents with the right knowledge. Understanding the social, economic, and political dimensions of a community, as well as geographic and physical factors, are critical to understanding how to build climate change adaptation capacity. The project team utilized demographic data, existing research, workshops and conversations with MRNY members and staff, and a climate resilience survey with nearly 350 responses.

### Climate Resilience Survey

RPA and MRNY developed a Climate Resilience survey for community members, and nearly 400 responses were collected over the project period. These responses steered the research and recommendations of the project.

### Workshop 1

To gain an understanding of how climate change issues are and will continue to affect the community, facilitators asked how different extreme weather events affect participants' physical health, their homes, and their community. Answers were written on sticky notes and attached to corresponding parts of a poster.

### Workshops 2 and 3

The project team researched a wide variety of strategies to address the issues identified in Workshop 1. These strategies were summarized on cards and facilitators led a discussion on the urgency, feasibility, and applicability of each.

### Workshop 4

The final workshop consisted of presenting the project recommendations and a discussion on which strategies MRNY community organizers would be most interested in implementing first.



# Understanding Climate Change in Central Queens

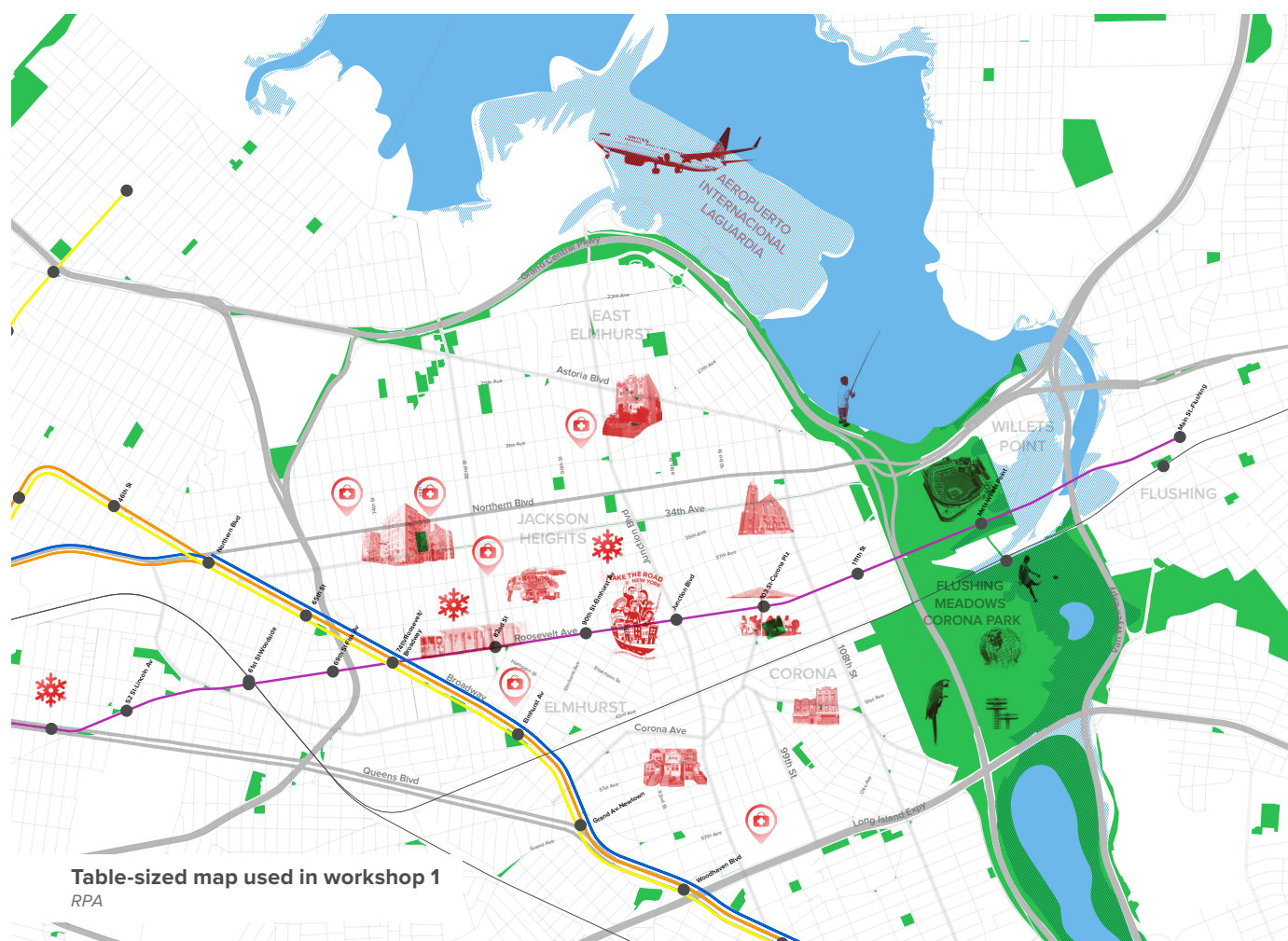
To better understand how climate change issues are affecting Central Queens communities, the project team conducted a demographic analysis and assessment of the area, developed a climate resilience survey in consultation with MRNY (See Report, Appendix A), and designed the first of four workshops to solicit the concerns of BASTA! Members.

The neighborhoods of Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, and Corona in Queens are some of the most ethnically diverse communities in the United States, but many of the factors that contribute to the area's vibrant cultural life also present challenges when it comes to adapting to climate change. Social, political, and economic structural barriers around linguistic isolation (non-fluency in the dominant language), immigration status, race, and income mean that there is both a greater need and greater challenge to build adaptation capacity.

Of the 400 responses received, 70 percent of respondents said they were very concerned about how climate change will affect their lives, while 23 percent were somewhat concerned. Nearly 20 percent do not have air conditioning in their homes, and the vast

majority expressed concerns about extreme heat, especially staying healthy and safe during heat waves. Most respondents also expressed concerns about heavy rain, storms, and blizzards, with around half citing personal safety and worsened pollution, and nearly three quarters concerned about disruption to roads and transportation.

For the first workshop, the project team prepared colorful schematic diagrams of bodies, apartments, and the neighborhood, and facilitators asked participants to share the kinds of problems they face during different types of extreme weather events. For example, when prompted about heavy rains, participants discussed flooded basement apartments, leaks and molding, and foul smells in parts of the neighborhood. Participants wrote their answers on post-it notes, and placed them in the appropriate place on the diagrams. Through this exercise and discussion, it became clear that climate change issues are not just future risks—they are the same issues that the community is already dealing with, made worse.



# Building capacity at different levels

The wealth of information collected from the first workshop directed project team to research viable strategies to address the problems highlighted. The team drew from previous RPA research, plans produced by New York City, as well as reports and research by peer organizations around the country and internationally.

Placing these strategies in the context of MRNY's capacity to implement them presented an interesting complication. Through the discussions with staff, the climate resilience survey, and the workshops with BASTA! Organizers, we developed a framework for how MRNY can approach climate change adaptation. For each strategy discussed, we categorized it into one or more of the following three levels:

- ▶ **Individual and families:** Small actions that can be taken individually to help prepare oneself or family for the effects of climate change. MRNY could have a role in disseminating this information
- ▶ **Community:** Direct actions that MRNY can take through its programs and community activities.
- ▶ **Government:** Actions that require government intervention, whether city, state or federal, which MRNY could fold into their advocacy and legislative agenda.

These strategies were presented at the second and third workshops, where participants prioritized the strategies and discussed MRNY's capacity and potential role in implementing them. To cover so much material, the strategies were split between two workshops—one focused on physical health and healthy homes, and the second focused on community and infrastructure. In both, facilitators walked through the various strategies and led small groups in a discussion on their urgency, efficacy, and feasibility. This allowed the project team to focus on the most promising strategies and tailor recommendations that work for MRNY and its community.

This information presented a picture of which strategies were most feasible, urgent, and addressed community concerns. The workshops have also had an enthusiastic reception, with BASTA! participants expressing their excitement to learn about climate change adaptation, and facilitators learning new ways to think about familiar adaptation strategies.





# Recommendations and Next Steps

To the extent possible, the project team tried to frame the recommendations in a manner that could be acted on by MRNY, with its surplus of passion but lack of time and capacity. This entailed identifying the actions, time and resources, and potential partnerships where applicable. The final report contains 13 recommendations, organized by the framework described above. Many of the recommendations are contingent on the incredible organization and active community that MRNY has built, and speaks to the critical role of community-based organizations in adapting cities to the effects of climate change.

## Recommendations

### Personal Adaptation

#### ► Healthy Homes Action Guide

MRNY can, on its own or in partnership with another organization, produce a short booklet of no- and low-cost ways families can make their homes healthier in the face of extreme weather and environmental hazards. Similar products exist, but a well-produced document tailored to the needs of the MRNY community would make it much more accessible. This booklet could then be distributed to MRNY members and throughout the community.

#### ► Family Emergency Planning

Creating a family emergency plan is one of the simplest and most effective ways to prepare for unpredictable and chaotic events. MRNY can provide information on how its members can create a family emergency plan that includes items like meeting points, essential supplies, and copies of important documents.

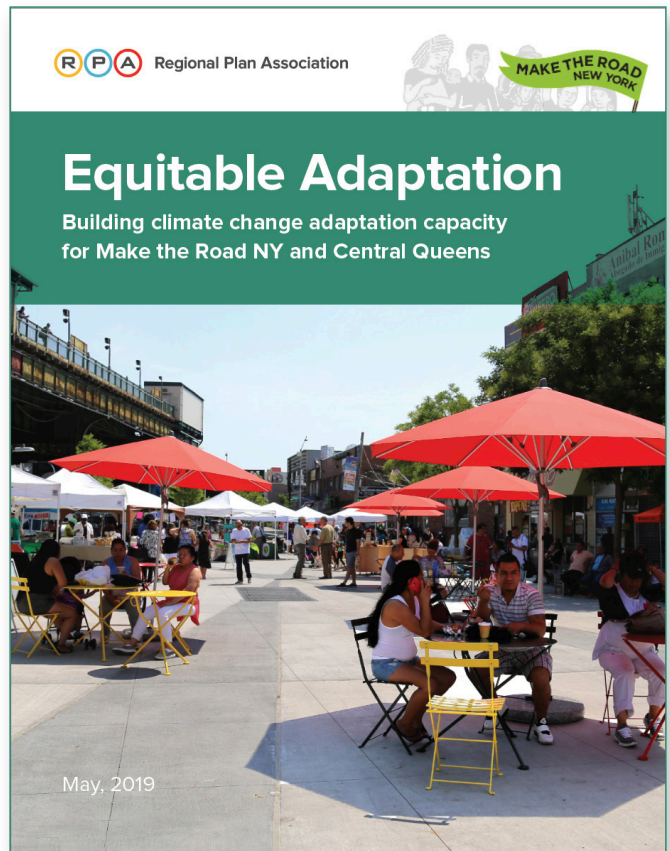
#### ► Workshops for Managing Stress

For the MRNY community that already faces major stressors from structural and political conditions, adding on the impacts of environmental hazards may be that much more challenging to cope with. Stress management workshops could be offered by MRNY to help its members cope with all of these issues.

### Collective Resiliency

#### ► Education and Training for Green Jobs

While the economic changes brought about by climate change pose a big challenge for the working-class, they may also provide new opportunities for communities who are prepared. MRNY could expand its existing OSHA training to include certain green jobs training.



#### ► Green Streets and Resilient Materials

Lack of green space and trees in Central Queens creates two major environmental issues exacerbated by climate change. Unmitigated urban heat island effect makes extreme heat even more extreme, while impermeable pavement diverts stormwater into overwhelmed and aging sewers, which then washes raw sewage into local waterways. MRNY can explore working with the city to advocate both for green infrastructure and for the job training necessary to maintain it.

#### ► Climate Risk Training for Community Health Workers

Community health workers (CHWs) are trusted community members who work directly with members of the community most vulnerable to climate risks. MRNY can work with the city to incorporate climate risk training into their existing community health worker training program to allow CHWs to identify climate risks facing their clients, such as dangerously overheated homes.

#### ► Expand the Cool Roofs Program

New York City's CoolRoofs program trains workers and provides materials for to provide eligible buildings with a white reflective roof coating that helps keep buildings (and the surrounding community) cooler. MRNY could work with the city to provide the necessary green jobs training for its members and community.

► **ABCs of Environmental Home Health**

MRNY could partner organizations and the city to expand the city's environmental home health training to its community members, while also including the effects of climate change in its curriculum.

**Community Advocacy**

► **NY Renews Coalition**

MRNY has already been an active member of the the NY Renews coalition, which consists of hundreds of organizations and community groups around the state advocating for progressive climate change legislation. MRNY can continue to advocate for NY Renews-proposed legislation like the Climate and Community Protection Act and Polluters Fee, policies that would have a comprehensive impact on both climate change mitigation and adaptation.

► **Ban Diesel Buses**

MRNY could create a campaign to pressure MTA into eliminating diesel buses from its vehicle stock, as the emissions from diesel buses not only contribute to climate change but create public health issues in communities like Central Queens.

► **Make Cooling Centers Visible**

Although the city has many public cooling centers throughout the city, where residents can seek relief from the heat, residents are largely unaware of where they are and many centers close in the early evening, when temperatures are still at their peak. MRNY can advocate for not only more accessibility, but could explore community-led partnerships with neighborhood establishments of all kinds to provide free relief from extreme heat.

► **Expand Energy Assistance Programs**

While local utilities have financial assistance programs, these often only reach families at the very lowest end of the income spectrum. Families making more than the current threshold can still struggle to pay for necessary heating and cooling. MRNY can advocate for expanding these programs or for energy rebates for working-class families.

► **Improve Housing Quality Enforcement**

While the city has several housing quality enforcement programs, many tenants still face unsafe and unsanitary conditions, especially those in unregistered units. MRNY has previously evaluated these efforts and encouraged the city to make changes to better ensure the programs do not unintentionally cause the displacement of the tenants they serve. MRNY can continue to evaluate and advocate for better housing quality enforcement that explicitly includes issues related to climate change.

## Next Steps

RPA and MRNY will continue to collaborate, working at the individual, community and government levels to advance these recommendations. RPA and MRNY have received a second grant from New York Community Trust to continue the partnership. The next phase will focus on implementing several of the recommendations from the report, such as developing a pamphlet on Climate Adaptive Practices for the Home for MRNY members, implementing stress management workshops, working with MRNY vendors who provide community health worker and OSHA training to incorporate climate change into their curriculums, and developing a Climate Action Catalog, a hyperlocal policy guide for Queens elected officials.

Many of the final recommendations depend on the extraordinary institutional infrastructure that MRNY has built. While some recommendations are specific to Queens and to the MRNY community, we believe the process is largely replicable. RPA hopes to collaborate with community-based organizations throughout the region to build local adaptation capacity.

## About Regional Plan Association



RPA is an independent, non-profit regional planning organization that works to improve the equity, prosperity, sustainability, and quality of life of the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut metropolitan region. We pursue these goals by conducting independent research, planning, advocacy and vigorous public-engagement efforts. A cornerstone of our work is the development of long-range plans and policies to guide the region's growth. Since the 1920s, RPA has produced three landmark plans for the region and recently completed a fourth plan, tackling the urgent challenges facing our region, including climate change, fiscal uncertainty and obstacles to opportunity.

## About Make the Road NY



Make the Road New York (MRNY) builds the power of Latino and working class communities to achieve dignity and justice through organizing, policy innovation, transformative education, and survival services. Their model integrates multi-issue, multi-generational organizing – on workers' rights, tenant rights, LGBTQ justice, youth power and policing, public schools and education justice, immigration justice, and climate – with an array of wraparound services that create a space of safety and support for entire families. They reach the hardest-to-reach New Yorkers, particularly new immigrant families with limited English proficiency who are fearful of government and mainstream providers. MRNY has centers in Bushwick, Brooklyn; Jackson Heights, Queens; Port Richmond, Staten Island; and Brentwood, Long Island. Their Queens office is located in Central Queens, and they are home to over 10,000 of MRNY's 21,000 members statewide. Their roots in Queens extend over 25 years.

## Project Team

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