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March 21, 2023  
Honorable Kathy Hochul  
Governor of New York State

Dear Governor Hochul:

The Sierra Club New York City Group is calling on you as Governor to intervene to stop the unnecessary demolition by the Battery Park City Authority of Wagner Park in lower Manhattan. The destruction, even pending replacement, of a well-functioning green park and the destruction of trees should always be a last resort. We agree with the Authority on the necessity of protecting NYC from rising sea levels and more frequent and powerful storms; we accept the climate change-related predictions of NOAA and other respected scientific authorities. However, the community and the park's original designers have jointly proposed an alternative plan that accomplishes the Authority's stated goal of protecting inland areas from future flooding.

The Sierra Club calls upon you to intervene at this critical time to support and implement the better, community-backed, more environmentally responsible option available. The Battery Park City Neighborhood Association and lower Manhattan community worked diligently with Olin and Machado Silvetti, the world-renowned architects and landscape designers that originally designed this award-winning and innovative park in 1996. Olin/Silvetti created an alternative design that protects the inland residential/commercial area from sea level rise, storm surge, and other climate change threats and does not disturb Wagner Park — preserving the beauty and usability of the original design. By adopting this alternative plan, the park could remain continuously available to the neighborhood without the community enduring a protracted loss of a very needed park space during construction. Importantly, the community plan incorporates an inland green or floral barrier, which provides the same height protection as the Authority's proposed elevation while leaving intact the water absorption elements of Wagner Park.

The current plan will destroy 114 healthy and mature trees, which could endure for decades more of sea level rise. The Authority says it will plant a greater number of new trees at higher elevations, but these new plantings will take years to develop the same root systems that the current trees have established, which remain valuable to storm surge abatement and flood water attenuation. It is important to note that the NYC Parks Department states on its website that "A large, healthy tree removes almost 70 times more

air pollution each year than a small, newly planted tree.”<sup>1</sup> Granted, we do not know the details of the Authority’s plans regarding trees: the age or species of the proposed new trees. Yet, the preservation of the existing trees and the expansion of new tree plantings within and adjacent to the envelope of the park will continue to provide these benefits, uninterrupted.

The Sierra Club NYC Group supports climate solutions that preserve existing parks and trees where possible, especially when working with existing natural infrastructure produces a cost savings that can redirect funds for other environmental or social needs. Eliminating a well-functioning green park, even temporarily, and destroying healthy, mature trees should always be a last resort. We emphatically support the alternative, community supported design provided by Olin/Silvetti over the Authority’s proposed design that demolishes the park before a complete rebuild. Both designs will protect the human built environment, but the preferred alternative envisions keeping the current natural infrastructure of Wagner Park intact as a natural buffer for storm surge for decades to come.

The cost of the Authority’s plan significantly exceeds that of the community’s alternative solution. The State or Authority could certainly use the cost savings for other critical environmental or social needs. The Authority’s plan also reduces the amount of usable lawn space, which remains a critical resource to the densely populated, high-rise area. The additional flora, which the Authority proposes, could be planted in the immediate surrounding area. The elevation of the Authority’s plan allows the park’s lone concrete commercial restaurant building to expand by adding an additional subterranean floor. But such private sector commercial expansion should never justify destroying a public park and its trees at needless taxpayer expense.

Green infrastructure preservation should be the priority of New York State. You have established yourself and our state as leaders to combat climate change and protect our city and state from harm due to sea level rise or superstorms. The Sierra Club NYC Group strongly urges you to apply your leadership to implement the better, more sustainable, and less costly plan.

Governor, we recognize, appreciate, and support your environmental commitment and leadership. The Sierra Club calls on you to remain true to your environmental record in this situation by intervening to stop the destruction of a critical green park space in favor of a plan that satisfies all the climate objectives and leverages the latest thinking on climate resilience, also supported by the community. We would be happy to meet with you or members of your team to discuss this further.

Sincerely,

Karl Palmquist, Chair, Executive Committee NYC Group  
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Irene Van Slyke, Chair, Political Committee  
Lucy Koteen Urban Sustainability Committee Community Liaison

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<sup>1</sup> Please see City of New York Parks and Recreation, “Calculating Tree Benefits For New York City,” [https://www.nycgovparks.org/sub\\_your\\_park/trees\\_greenstreets/images/BENEFITS2.pdf](https://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_your_park/trees_greenstreets/images/BENEFITS2.pdf)