nhpr
NEW HAMPSHIRE PUBLIC RADIO

**June 20, 2016**

http://nhpr.org/post/why-new-york-better-prepared-flooding-boston

# Why New York Is Better Prepared For Flooding Than Boston

*The South Street Seaport area, on Manhattan's Lower East Side, saw some of the worst flooding during Superstorm Sandy.*

RUPA SHENOY / WGBH NEWS

When Hurricane Sandy washed over Manhattan four years ago, the city's oldest seaport, on the lower east side, bore the brunt.

"You can go to the coffee shops in the seaport and you can see the line—the Sandy line—over my head, more than six feet high," said Michael Porto, director of outreach and planning for the nonprofit Waterfront Alliance, walking past construction crews rebuilding tourist shops.

If this were Europe, these buildings might not have been rebuilt. That's because European cities vulnerable to flooding have learned to live with it, putting parks next to coastlines that sometimes overflow. But it's tough for

American cities to take the same steps, in part because money for improvements only flows into a community after a disaster. In these cities where a catastrophe is still only a threat, people build next to shorelines without paying for the increased risk of flooding due to climate change.

“You have these countries like Netherlands that have the ability to do whatever they want at the waterfront,” Porto said. “There’s not a significant amount of democratic NIMBY-ism and sort of different voices that you would have here in NYC. And we look at that enviously sometimes.”

Because deciding the future of New York’s waterfront has been complicated.

“It’s kind of the American spirit,” Porto said. “Build back better and stronger. I don’t think anyone is retreating.”

New York did make sure everything that got built after Sandy was better prepared for a flood. The city passed 16 new building codes. And Porto’s group of more than 900 waterfront stakeholders created a list of voluntary additional steps developers could take to flood proof.

“What we do at the waterfront matters for everyone behind you as well,” Porto said. “If my building is flooded and doesn’t protect at the leading edge of a storm, everything behind it gets flooded too.”

Buy-in to this flood-forward thinking has been widespread. Several blocks west, Richard Anderson, president of the New York Building Congress, a group made up of developers and construction companies, stands between the twin World Trade Center memorial pools, where it also flooded.

“Everything in New York has changed as a result of Hurricane Sandy,” Anderson said. “Every public agency, every private development organization, every real estate organization has changed the way they manage buildings, design buildings, build buildings, to take into account the effects of the storm and the fact that it could happen again.”

That’s been challenging and painstaking, Anderson says, but that’s OK.

“Don’t forget we got a lot of work," he said. "Huge amount of work. Billions of dollars were being spent. So we’re not complaining. Too much development in the past has been irresponsible. And we in the building business should be the first ones to say where not to build.”

Other American cities that haven’t experienced a disaster have been slower to come to a consensus on building in flood zones. Many are experiencing building booms along coastlines, without the same stringent flood-proofing regulations in place as New York. Boston—a city regarded as a resiliency leader—is still crafting new rules for consideration.

Boston doesn’t have the same storm-surge flood risk as New York, in part because it’s protected by islands. But its risk will increase as sea levels rise. That’s what Senior Climate Advisor Bud Ris of the Barr Foundation told an audience at the New England Aquarium last month.

“With all of that development taking place, it’s pretty hard for me to see really any solution for this area, other than some kind of structure or barrier around at least some parts of it, to try to keep the water out many decades from now,” he said. “Does anybody know where GE is going to locate on this map?”

Squarely inside a flood zone. Three months ago, General Electrical announced that would be the location of its new international headquarters.

“GE being the green company it is, I think there’s an opportunity to do something real creative and visionary here,” Ris said. “Presumably their lawyers have checked the maps and know where they’re going to locate.”

GE says it’s still working on its plans—but they do want to collect rainwater on the site, have resilient infrastructure, and use solar power. Beyond the cost of those measures, building in a flood zone shouldn’t be more expensive for GE.

Take insurance, for example. GE won’t pay more because of the increasing risk of flooding due to sea level rise. That’s because rates are based on what’s happened in the past, says Jay Guin a vice president at risk analytics company AIR Worldwide.

“Doesn't mean that senior executives at insurance companies are not concerned about climate change," he said. "They certainly are. But in terms of actual pricing, in the best of our knowledge it's not done actively.”

Insurance rates would skyrocket, though, if a storm like Sandy ever hit Boston—to reflect the cost of rebuilding. Jamie Torres Springer says that’s what happened in New York. He’s a consultant who worked on that city’s recovery and is now helping with Boston’s resiliency plan.

“Sandy happened, there was $20 billion of damage and disruption. And Congress appropriated $50 billion,” Torres Springer said, adding that amount of money is enough to recover—and become resilient. “And Boston, having not had a tragedy like this, doesn’t have that funding.”

So Torres Springer says Boston can only plan instead for long-term incremental progress. The city should target resources to vulnerable areas, he says, and try to protect them multiple ways.

“I think because there’s so much risk in cities, and it’s so hard to adapt, the idea is you gotta work in layers,” he said.

That’s why New York is also investing in a large scale project, proposed by a Dutch firm, called the Big U—it calls for a system of hills along the coastline, forming a U around Manhattan. The hills would keep water out and double as public spaces. City spokeswoman Amy Spitalnick says New York has $335 million in federal funding and is set to break ground on the project by next year.

“That’s a pretty quick turnaround for an infrastructure project of that scale,” she said. “Some might call that the silver lining to a very devastating event.”