Chapter 19: Neighborhood Character

19.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers the effects of the Proposed Actions on neighborhood character. As defined in the 2014 *City Environmental Quality Review (CEQR) Technical Manual*, neighborhood character is an amalgam of various elements that give neighborhoods their distinct "personality." These elements may include a neighborhood's land use, urban design, visual resources, historic and cultural resources, open space, socioeconomic conditions, traffic, and/or noise. However, not all of these elements affect neighborhood character in all cases; a neighborhood usually draws its character from a few determining elements.

19.1 PRINCIPAL CONCLUSIONS

The study area has diverse characteristics owing to the varied land uses in the vicinity of the project site. No one defining feature would be considered critical to the character of the neighborhood; rather all the various localized features contribute to it. The Proposed Actions would result in the development of new resiliency, educational, and recreational infrastructure in Tottenville, and would complement and build on the existing character of the Tottenville neighborhood in numerous ways:

- The linear components of the Shoreline Project system (earthen berm, hybrid dune, eco-revetment, raised edge, and overlooks at the transition nodes) would be consistent with the uses already present in Conference House Park. Plantings of native vegetation would complement existing natural features, and access and views to the water would be preserved. A comprehensive trail system for the park would be provided, linking its key elements.
- The proposed Water Hub would be located at one of two potential locations within Conference House Park and would reinforce the community's already strong relationship with the natural environment and with Raritan Bay in particular. Programming would complement the existing activities and events in Conference House Park and would benefit local residents.
- The Water Hub, Shoreline Project, and new programming would generate minimal incremental traffic, transit, or pedestrian trips and would not lead to a significant change in the noise levels in the neighborhood.
- Through the proposed resiliency improvements, the Proposed Actions would reduce risk to Conference House Park and the neighborhood as a whole. Beaches in the neighborhood would stabilize and, in some areas, grow as a result of these interventions.

Taking into consideration the effects of these Proposed Actions on the contributing features of neighborhood character in Tottenville, Alternative 2 would not have a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character. Rather, it would have a positive impact, reinforcing and protecting the character-defining features of the neighborhood.

The elements of Alternative 3 would affect neighborhood character in much the same way as they would under Alternative 2, although the positive interplay between these elements and the shoreline protection system would be lacking. Like Alternative 2, Alternative 3 would have a positive impact on neighborhood character.

The elements of Alternative 4 would affect neighborhood character in much the same way as they would under Alternative 2, although the positive interplay with the proposed breakwaters, Water Hub and associated landscape enhancements would be lacking. Like Alternative 2, Alternative 4 would have a positive impact on neighborhood character.

19.2 METHODOLOGY

The *CEQR Technical Manual* states that an assessment of neighborhood character is generally needed when a proposed project has the potential to result in significant adverse impacts in any of the following technical areas: land use, zoning, and public policy; socioeconomic conditions; open space; historic and cultural resources; urban design and visual resources; shadows; transportation; or noise. Even if a project does not have the potential to result in a significant adverse impact in any of the technical areas listed above, an assessment may be required if the project would result in a combination of moderate effects to several elements that cumulatively may affect neighborhood character. According to the *CEQR Technical Manual*, a "moderate" effect is generally defined as an effect considered reasonably close to the significant adverse impact threshold for a particular technical analysis area.

As described in the relevant chapters of this environmental impact statement (EIS), the Proposed Actions would not result in significant adverse impacts in any of the areas listed above. However, the nature of the project makes it prudent to conduct a preliminary assessment of neighborhood character impacts, which is provided below.

The study area for the preliminary analysis encompasses the area of direct effect from the Proposed Actions as well as the larger area that would experience storm damage risk reduction with the implementation of the Proposed Actions. The neighborhood character study area is located along approximately two miles of Staten Island's South Shore waterfront from the Arthur Kill shoreline in the west to Richard Avenue in the east, and extending inland to Hylan Boulevard.

19.3 PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

19.3.1 DEFINING FEATURES OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The Proposed Actions would be undertaken in the Tottenville section of Staten Island, along the neighborhood's southern shoreline and offshore within the waters of Raritan Bay. Tottenville is located at the southwestern tip of Staten Island, and is the southernmost neighborhood in New York City and State. It is bounded by water on three sides, with the Arthur Kill to the west and north and Raritan Bay to the south. The study area is located in the southwestern corner of Tottenville where these waterways meet. Land uses in the study area are characterized by a mix of parkland and residential uses, with some privately-owned vacant parcels.

The largest single land use in the study area is Conference House Park, a 265-acre park under the jurisdiction of the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation (NYC Parks). The western portion of the park contains numerous amenities and attractions, including grassy and densely wooded areas, historic architectural resources, a playground, visitors center, walking and biking

paths, hiking trails, and the "South Pole" marking the southernmost point of New York State. Extensive natural areas make up the rest of the park, including large tracts of maritime forest, creeks and ponds, bluffs, coastal wetlands, and beaches lining the shore. Events and organized activities offered at Conference House Park include tours, exhibitions, community events, volunteer programs within the park such as tree plantings and cleanups as well as at the historic houses, beach walks, birding talks and walks, kayaking, outdoor drawing workshops, fishing, family activities, outdoor movies, and citizen science programs. Due to the diverse programming offered at Conference House Park and varied selection of amenities such as historic houses, the park is an asset to the Tottenville community and Staten Island as a whole.

Inland from Conference House Park, the study area is residential in nature, characterized by single-family detached and attached houses. West of Brighton Street, these residential areas are adjacent to a wooded section of Conference House Park primarily along Billop Avenue and Swinnerton Street; east of Brighton Street, residential areas are developed in closer proximity to the shoreline with beach and vegetated upland separating the neighborhood from the waters of Raritan Bay. Since Superstorm Sandy, some homes in this coastal area have been elevated. The blocks between Loretto Street and Sprague Avenue contain several developments consisting of two-family houses and attached single-family houses on small private streets. East of Sprague Avenue to Page Avenue, large vacant or wooded areas are interspersed with tracts of single-family houses including some houses on larger lots.

In addition to Conference House Park, several park uses are present in the eastern portion of the study area. Hybrid Oak Woods Park is located along both sides of Joline Avenue north of Bruno Lane and Tricia Way. This smaller passive park, roughly 10 acres in size, consists of woodlands in their natural state and does not have any developed park facilities. The Tottenville Pool, another NYC Parks facility, is located north of Hybrid Oak Woods Park along Hylan Boulevard at Joline Avenue. East of Page Avenue, the study area contains extensive wooded lands. Immediately adjacent to Page Avenue, these lands are in the ownership of NYC Parks. Further east, the area includes wooded areas owned by the State of New York, including the Butler Manor Woods—a component of the Mount Loretto Unique Area—under the jurisdiction of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC). Butler Manor Woods contains hiking trails. The South Shore Swimming Club, a membership-based pool club, and the South Shore Babe Ruth League, which runs two baseball fields located predominantly on City property, both operate along Hylan Boulevard east of Page Avenue. An early learning center, a dentist office, and a gas station round out the land uses in the study area.

Urban design in the study area largely follows the land use patterns described above. West of Loretto Street, the study area streets are laid out in a grid of rectangular blocks; east of Sprague Avenue, the aforementioned private streets and large wooded tracts break up the street grid. Hylan Boulevard is a major thoroughfare connecting the study area to neighborhoods northeast along Staten Island's South Shore, while Page Avenue provides access northwest to areas along the West Shore and to New Jersey. Aside from these two major arterial roads, most study area streets provide two-way local access, are equipped with sidewalks and on-street parking, and are lined with closely spaced houses, leading to a classic suburban feel. Certain streets in the area east of Sprague Avenue, such as Joline, Bedell, and Page Avenues, traverse wooded areas and therefore have a more rural feel and lack sidewalks. Expansive views out across New York Harbor toward New Jersey, Brooklyn, the Rockaways, and the open waters of the Atlantic Ocean lend a waterfront character to areas along the shoreline. Noise levels in the study area are relatively low and reflect the low level of vehicular activity on study area roadways. Along the

waterfront, wave action is an additional source of noise and reinforces the waterfront feel described above. Noise levels remain acceptable where wave action is audible.

Several bus routes serve the study area, providing service along Hylan Boulevard; these include the S59 and S78 local bus routes, and the X17, X22, and X22A express bus routes serving Manhattan. Buses do not traverse local streets within the study area.

Historic architectural resources in the study area include the three known and one potential historic architectural resource in Conference House Park: Conference House/Christopher Billopp House, Henry Hogg Biddle House, Sam and Hannah Wood House, and the Rutan-Beckett House (see Chapter 5, "Historic and Cultural Resources.")

Overall, the study area has diverse characteristics and is not defined by one element. Defining characteristics and uses in the surrounding area are Conference House Park in the southern and western portions of the study area; the low- to medium-density classic suburban residential streetscapes at the center of the study area; the large open tracts east of Sprague Avenue with homes on larger lots; and the waterfront, with its coastal character. The relationship between the residential areas of the neighborhood, the park and the waterfront can also be considered a defining characteristic. The study area is lightly trafficked with noise levels that are relatively low, reflecting the low level of vehicular activity on the adjacent streets. No one defining feature would be considered critical to the character of the neighborhood. Rather, all the various localized features contribute to it.

19.3.2 POTENTIAL TO AFFECT DEFINING FEATURES OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

ALTERNATIVE 1—NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE

The No Action alternative assumes that no new structural risk reduction projects or marine habitat restoration projects will be implemented in the project area. This alternative also assumes that current trends with respect to coastal conditions at Tottenville—i.e., relating to erosion, wave action, ecosystems, and water quality—will continue. The No Action alternative also presumes that existing strategies to educate New Yorkers and the general public on the risks posed by climate change will remain the same in the study area.

While the No Action alternative would not result in adverse effects to neighborhood character, it would also do nothing to prevent further damage from wave action and erosion, nor would it provide any social resiliency improvements to the neighborhood.

ALTERNATIVE 2 (PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE)—THE LAYERED TOTTENVILLE SHORELINE RESILIENCY STRATEGY: LIVING BREAKWATERS AND TOTTENVILLE SHORELINE PROTECTION PROJECT (LAYERED STRATEGY)

As described in Chapter 1, "Purpose and Need and Alternatives," the Layered Strategy consists of the implementation of two individual projects: the Living Breakwaters Project and the Tottenville Shoreline Protection Project.

The primary component of the Breakwaters Project would be an ecologically enhanced breakwater system that would provide coastal risk reduction by reducing wave energy at the shoreline, and reducing or reversing shoreline erosion. The breakwater system would increase habitat diversity by providing a combination of exposed, intertidal and subtidal reef habitat, including "reef streets" (pockets of habitat complexity within the structure). Another key project element is a proposed community Water Hub that would provide a physical space for access to

the waterfront, orientation, education, information on shoreline resiliency, and community gathering space. The Water Hub would provide space to engage students in waterfront education, citizen's science, oyster restoration and reef building, and cultivating long-term estuary stewardship. Programming would educate residents about the coastal environment, with its risks and benefits, and build awareness, preparedness and stewardship within the community. As described in Chapter 1, "Purpose and Need and Alternatives," there are two potential locations for the proposed Water Hub. Potential Location 1 would be in the vicinity of the southern terminus of Page Avenue (involving the construction of a new structure). Potential Location 2 would be in the north-western portion of Conference House Park (involving the rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of an existing NYC Parks building). Direct water access from shore would be provided near the Water Hub site, including an accessory boat launch. Lastly, the project would include a one-time addition of new sand for shoreline restoration along approximately 806 feet of shoreline between Manhattan Street and Loretto Street to build up a particularly narrow, eroded section of the beach.

The Shoreline Project would consist of a series of shoreline risk reduction measures, including an earthen berm, a hybrid dune system, an eco-revetment, and a raised edge (revetment with trail), along with wetland enhancement, and native coastal plant species, from approximately Carteret Street to Page Avenue. From Carteret Street to Brighton Street, within a wooded area of Conference House Park, the system would include a raised earthen berm that would be set back in the forest, leaving an expansive area of woodland in front of it with expansive waterfront views. The berm would be planted with native vegetation. At Brighton Street, the berm would tie into an armor core hybrid dune system; this transition node would be designed as a public, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessible gathering place with an outlook. At approximately Loretto Street the beach narrows, leaving no space for a hybrid dune, and thus the proposed dune system would transition to a stone eco-revetment along Surf Avenue. The eco-revetment would be constructed with stepped planters, and potentially stepped seating and ADA accessible overlooks. At approximately Sprague Avenue, the proposed eco-revetment would tie into the raised edge—a stretch of revetment and trail—which would continue to the project's terminus, near Page Avenue. Running along and adjacent to these elements, the project would provide an interconnected, seamless, and ADA accessible waterfront trail along the shoreline, connecting the Shoreline Project elements to the existing Conference House Park trail system. Finally, habitat enhancements would be included with the project, including wetland improvements (both functional and aesthetic); shoreline plantings; and green infrastructure.

Alternative 2 would directly affect the wooded and shoreline areas of Conference House Park. The linear components of the Shoreline Project system (earthen berm, hybrid dune, eco-revetment, raised edge, and gathering spaces at the transition nodes) would be consistent with the uses already present in the park. The earthen berm, planted with native vegetation, would complement the surrounding maritime forest and has been sited to retain existing views of the harbor from within the woodland area and to preserve as many existing trees as possible. The hybrid dune would replace an existing, temporary dune constructed in the wake of Superstorm Sandy; it would complement the public beach along which it runs and be planted with native shoreline vegetation. The eco-revetment and raised edge are similarly compatible with the public beaches of Conference House Park and would preserve beach access and views to the water from adjacent shoreline areas. The proposed trail would tie together the wooded western sections of the park to the beaches in the project area, providing a comprehensive trail system for the park that would link all its key elements and uses while also providing maintenance access for the park in areas previously difficult to reach. New plantings and habitat enhancements proposed

along the length of the Shoreline Project would improve the ecological function and aesthetics of the park and are intended to lead to a more enjoyable natural environment.

The proposed Water Hub would be located in one of two potential locations within Conference House Park and would link the community to the new breakwaters and, more generally, to Raritan Bay. At either location, new recreational, educational, and social resiliency programming would complement the existing activities and events in Conference House Park and would benefit local residents, especially students. The new outlooks and physical access to the water provided by the proposed accessory boat launch and seasonal floating dock would build on the connection to the natural environment, which is an important component of the neighborhood's existing character.

Although many different types of activities could take place at the proposed Water Hub, these activities are expected to be sporadic and spread out among different days of the week and times of day, and most events would not draw many patrons. Additionally, it is expected that patrons of these activities would arrive by either private automobiles or school buses, and patrons would park at the Water Hub site without needing to walk along nearby City streets and sidewalks. The Water Hub, Shoreline Project and new programming included in the Alternative 2 are not expected to generate incremental traffic, transit, or pedestrian trips that would exceed *CEQR Technical Manual* thresholds. Likewise, noise from sporadic programming events and the limited additional traffic generated by Alternative 2 would not lead to a significant change in the noise levels in the project area. Alternative 2 could result in the rehabilitation and adaptive use of either the historic Henry Hogg Biddle House or the historic Rutan-Beckett House for the proposed Water Hub programming; if either of these options is chosen, the selected historic building would be rehabilitated and adaptively reused, and no adverse effects are anticipated. None of the other historic resources in the project area would be affected.

All on-shore project elements would be constructed on City parkland and street rights-of-way which are already publicly accessible. The improvements to waterfront access provided as part of Alternative 2 would reinforce the existing waterfront character of the neighborhood, and would respond to the post-Superstorm Sandy desire in the community (expressed in public outreach conducted as part of the planning process for the Proposed Actions) to protect, maintain, and increase access to Tottenville's public waterfront.

Alternative 2 would result in changes to the shoreline landscape, and certain views from nearby study area streets would be changed with the addition of the proposed Shoreline Project components. The earthen berm would modestly change the viewshed from Billop Avenue toward Raritan Bay. The proposed hybrid dunes would be slightly higher in elevation than the existing dunes, which already slightly obscure certain pedestrian views from upland streets. Therefore, the new hybrid dunes would result in modest changes to these views. Views near the proposed Water Hub locations would change for viewers closest to the Water Hub. However, the Water Hub is being designed to be contextual to the surrounding area in terms of scale, siting, and material. Views toward the waterfront from nearby vantage points near Page Avenue would include the Water Hub if sited at Potential Location 1, or a smaller kayak storage facility in this same location if Water Hub activities are located at Potential Location 2. However, the building in either case would be consistent with other nearby buildings in terms of scale and siting. Therefore, the Water Hub (or smaller kayak facility) would not adversely affect views toward the waterfront. Residents closest to the proposed Water Hub at Potential Location 1, including residents on Ottavio Promenade, would continue to have stationary views of the Raritan Bay and certain nearby waterfront elements. With Alternative 2, however, views would also include the

Water Hub. Views near Potential Location 2 in Conference House Park would not change as the programming for the Water Hub would be located within an existing building. None of these view changes would result in significant adverse impacts to visual resources in the project area.

Overall, Alterative 2 would reduce shoreline erosion and wave action, with the goal of reducing risk to Conference House Park and the neighborhood as a whole. Beaches in the neighborhood would stabilize and, in some areas, grow as a result of these interventions. Improvements to upland and in-water habitat and water quality would enhance the natural environment and recreational opportunities along the waterfront.

Alternative 2 would not result in adverse impacts in the areas of land use, zoning, and public policy, socioeconomic conditions, urban design and visual resources, open space, historic and cultural resources, shadows, transportation or noise, nor would they result in moderate effects in these areas as defined by *CEQR Technical Manual* guidelines. Therefore, Alternative 2 would not have the potential to result in a combination of moderate effects that cumulatively affect neighborhood character. Alternative 2 would preserve, reinforce and strengthen elements of the neighborhood that contribute to its character, leading to a positive impact on neighborhood character.

ALTERNATIVE 3—BREAKWATERS WITHOUT SHORELINE PROTECTION SYSTEM

Alternative 3 considers conditions with the proposed breakwaters in place (including the proposed on-shore community Water Hub, proposed shoreline restoration and associated landscape elements), but without a proposed shoreline protection system between approximately Carteret Street and Page Avenue.

The elements of Alternative 3 would affect neighborhood character in much the same way as they would under Alternative 2, although the positive interplay between these elements and the shoreline protection system would be lacking. Like Alternative 2, Alternative 3 would have a positive impact on neighborhood character.

ALTERNATIVE 4—SHORELINE PROTECTION SYSTEM WITHOUT BREAKWATERS

Alternative 4 considers conditions with the proposed shoreline protection system in place, but without the proposed breakwaters, shoreline restoration, Water Hub and associated landscape elements.

The elements of Alternative 4 would affect neighborhood character in much the same way as they would under Alternative 2, although the positive interplay with the proposed breakwaters, Water Hub, and associated landscape enhancements would be lacking. Like Alternative 2, Alternative 4 would have a positive impact on neighborhood character.

19.4 MINIMIZATION AND MITIGATION OF IMPACTS

The Proposed Actions would not result in significant adverse effects to neighborhood character in the study area. Therefore, no mitigation with respect to neighborhood character is required. ✶