

# The city's odd storm splurge: Mayor de Blasio wants to spend \$700 million more on a resiliency plan. Why?

By Amy Chester and Tom Wright



What happened to the Big U? (The BIG Team/Rebuild by Design via AP)

After Superstorm Sandy civic groups and foundations joined with the federal government to create [Rebuild by Design](#), an international competition to develop creative, resilient new infrastructure to guard New York and New Jersey from climate change.

Seven projects, including one called the Big U, emerged and were awarded nearly a billion dollars from the federal government to start building.

Six years later, the Big U still hasn't broken ground, and the city has just

abruptly announced major changes to the project with an expanded pricetag and unclear additional benefits.

That's left many of the original stakeholders asking: Just how committed is the city to leading the way on resilience?

The Big U, which called for a series of berms and parkland that would act as a sponge during major storms, was designed to protect Lower Manhattan from flooding. This area houses more than 220,000 residents as well as a \$500 billion business sector; if it goes underwater, the whole country is in trouble.

By 2015, the first two sections of the project — from E. 25th St. to the Brooklyn Bridge — received \$511 million in federal funding, later matched by \$542 million from the city, which also led dozens of meetings with residents to craft an intelligent, effective plan.

Then earlier this year, the city went dark.

A few weeks ago, after several months of silence, the mayor's office announced radical changes to the northern portion of this project. Instead of building a berm, or narrow shelf of land, alongside the FDR Drive, and leaving East River Park to act as a sponge during major storms, they now plan to completely raise the entire, [recently renovated](#) park 8 to 10 feet.

It's hard to determine whether the new design will be better or worse since the city hasn't released any details. We do know a few things: The northern portion of the Big U will now cost an additional \$700 million (bringing the price tag for this section to \$1.45 billion); offers no additional flood protection; no additional community amenities, and should have already been well underway.

Spending \$700 million to get a better park or more flood protection might be welcomed, but that's not what the city is offering. Instead, it seems, this

money is buying the city out of having to grapple with two thorny problems.

The first: inconveniencing drivers on the FDR, which would require overnight closures to build the original design.

The second challenge is more complex. The original design called for East River Park to flood in the event of a big storm. Other privately managed parks including Brooklyn Bridge Park and Domino Park are designed to do this, and provide an extra layer of protection to their surrounding communities.

But the Parks Department doesn't have a maintenance budget or process to restore city parks after a major storm event. Instead of fixing that problem, the city proposes to skirt it by lifting the whole park. That seems unwise.

The city has said that this new approach will shorten construction by six months, but for a project that is designed to last for more than a generation, that's already been slow-walked, let's make sure we get it right.

Mayor de Blasio should engage with the public to determine the best use of an additional \$700 million. Perhaps that will mean using the funds to extend the Big U to the Battery, which was underfunded. Perhaps we should use the money to create a maintenance budget for the city to maintain flood infrastructure over time.

If they want to insist their way forward is the best, let's hear them make the case.

*Chester is managing director of Rebuild by Design. Wright is the president of Regional Plan Association, one of the original partners of the Rebuild by Design competition.*

- [Floods and Flooding](#)
- [Hurricane Sandy \(2012\)](#)