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On the ground — and at the table.

New York City Environmental Justice Alliance testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Land Use in support of Int. 1661 in relation to the development of a comprehensive urban agriculture plan.

October 26, 2017

Good morning Chairperson Greenfield, Councilman Espinal, and Members of the City Council. My name is Annel Hernandez and I am here to testify in support of Int. 1661 on behalf of the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (NYC-EJA). Founded in 1991, NYC-EJA is a non-profit citywide membership network linking grassroots organizations from low-income neighborhoods and communities of color in their struggle for environmental justice. NYC-EJA empowers its member organizations to advocate for improved environmental conditions and against inequitable environmental burdens. Through our efforts, member organizations coalesce around specific common issues that threaten the ability of low-income and communities of color to thrive, and coordinate campaigns designed to affect City and State policies – including community gardens, green infrastructure, and urban agriculture directly benefiting these communities.

Our organization has been a longtime advocate of community gardens, and we support this Intro. 1661 that requires the City to develop a comprehensive urban agriculture plan that addresses land use policy and other issues to promote the expansion of urban agriculture. NYC-EJA member organizations come from communities overburdened by polluting infrastructure, lack of green and open space, and lack of access to healthy foods. NYC-EJA recognizes urban agriculture as a key community resiliency strategy.

Our NYC Climate Justice Agenda is a multi-year research and advocacy campaign to address the need for a comprehensive community-based approach to climate adaptation and community resiliency. In 2017, we released a report which analyzed Mayor de Blasio's OneNYC plan and made several concrete recommendations to strengthen the City's policies in environmental justice communities. We highlighted that community gardens are a much needed piece of green infrastructure to mitigate climate change, and a valuable asset for vulnerable communities. For example, a comprehensive approach to the growing threat of extreme heat should also take into consideration the multiple co-benefits associated with green spaces. While the City has provided support for community gardens and urban agriculture, we are troubled by news that several community gardens sites may be offered up for the development of housing.

Urban agriculture is also an important piece of food resiliency. In the City's recently released Five Borough Food Flow report, they flagged that in the event of an emergency low-income, geographically isolated consumers face additional vulnerabilities, particularly if they have limited food choices under normal circumstances. This increases the need for comprehensive food mapping at the community level, so that emergency food supplies are readily accessed by the City's most vulnerable populations during hurricanes, blackouts, and other emergency scenarios.

NYC-EJA commends the New York City Council's Committee on Land Use for holding a hearing on Int. 1661 creating an opportunity for public comment on this important strategy to increase community resiliency. We urge the passage of Int. 1661, and look forward to continued collaboration with the City in this regard.