U.S.

Complaints Pour In Over Updated Storm Protection Plan for Manhattan

Project's price tag increases by $700 million and officials propose shutdown of a large park for more than three years

A 2012 file photo shows flooded streets in Manhattan in the wake of superstorm Sandy. PHOTO: MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Katie Honan

Oct. 15, 2018 11:42 a.m. ET

5 COMMENTS

Residents on Manhattan's East Side say they recently were blindsided when New York City officials drastically changed a plan to protect the island from East River flooding, adding $700 million to the cost of the project and proposing the shutdown of a large park for more than three years.

Community members and designers had worked on a plan for five years to build a wall along a section of the East Side to protect it from storm surges.

Since last spring, residents had been waiting for news on an environmental study before the plan could move forward. But in September, officials from the New York City Department of Design and Construction, the Parks Department and Mayor Bill de Blasio's office announced a major overhaul of the project.

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Trever Holland, chairman of the parks and waterfront committee from Manhattan's Community Board 3, said last week at a meeting for residents to discuss the changes with city officials that the long-term closure of East River Park will be detrimental to surrounding neighborhoods. He also criticized the city for not being transparent about the changes.

"Here we are today with a completely new design," he said. "How did we get to this point after almost five years?"

The new plan will raise East River Park, above, in Manhattan by up to 10 feet and close it for more than three years. PHOTO: CAITLIN OCHS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The original project, known as the East Side Coastal Resiliency Project, outlined flood-protection measures from East 25th Street to Montgomery Street along the East River. It received millions of dollars in funding through a program called Rebuild by Design, a competition from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that started months after superstorm Sandy struck the city in 2012. The program also received private funds for major infrastructure projects.

The East Side project was selected as one of the contest winners in 2014, and HUD has allocated $338 million to the plan. New York City kicked in more than $400 million.

Under the city's changes, the protective wall, initially planned to run next to the FDR Drive, is now slated to be closer to the water. The plan also would raise East River Park by up to 10 feet. The green space, which runs from Montgomery Street to East 12th Street, will close for 3½ years.

Jamie Torres Springer, the first deputy commissioner at DDC, said at last week's meeting that the city realized it needed to make changes while going through a value-engineering study on the project to see where to cut costs. But instead, officials changed the bulk of the project and increased the price tag by $700 million, bringing the total cost to more than $1.4 billion. The city will pay the additional money.

The mayor's office said the city evaluated unexpected construction challenges along the FDR Drive, which forced the changes. New leadership at the DDC, including Mr. Torres Springer and Commissioner Lorraine Grillo, also led officials to re-evaluate the previous plan, according to Seth Stein, a mayoral spokesman.

The original plan required the closure of a lane of traffic on the FDR Drive at night for four years. The new plan cuts the time needed to close a lane to two years, Mr. Torres Springer said.

It also would move potentially disruptive construction noise farther away from homes, while still providing vital protection, he said. "I also hope you respect that we're trying to deliver flood protection for the community," Mr. Torres Springer said during the public meeting.

The city expects to complete the project by 2023, which is earlier than the original plan.

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"The study brought us back to the table and with Commissioner Grillo's guidance, we found ways to alter the design to do it faster and with additional benefits for the community," Mr. Stein said.

Two Manhattan neighborhoods, the Lower East Side and the East Village, were flooded with up to 8 feet of water from the East River during superstorm Sandy. Water rushed into Con Edison's power plant on 14th Street and Avenue D, causing an explosion and knocking out power to much of lower Manhattan.

At the community meeting, residents questioned why their park needed to be raised when it could just be redesigned to absorb flooding.

"If you're building East River Park up, then that water's going to be like a channel coming down," said Billie Cohen, a 40-year Lower East Side resident. "To start this project again after five years, it's not a design problem, it's an engineering problem."

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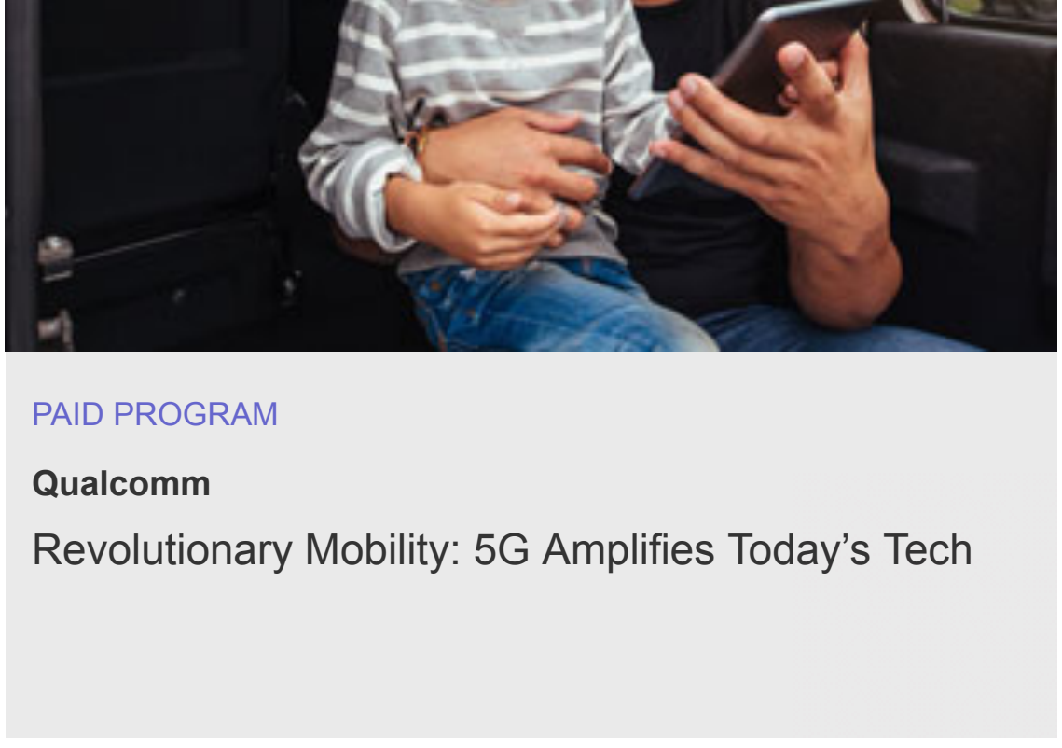

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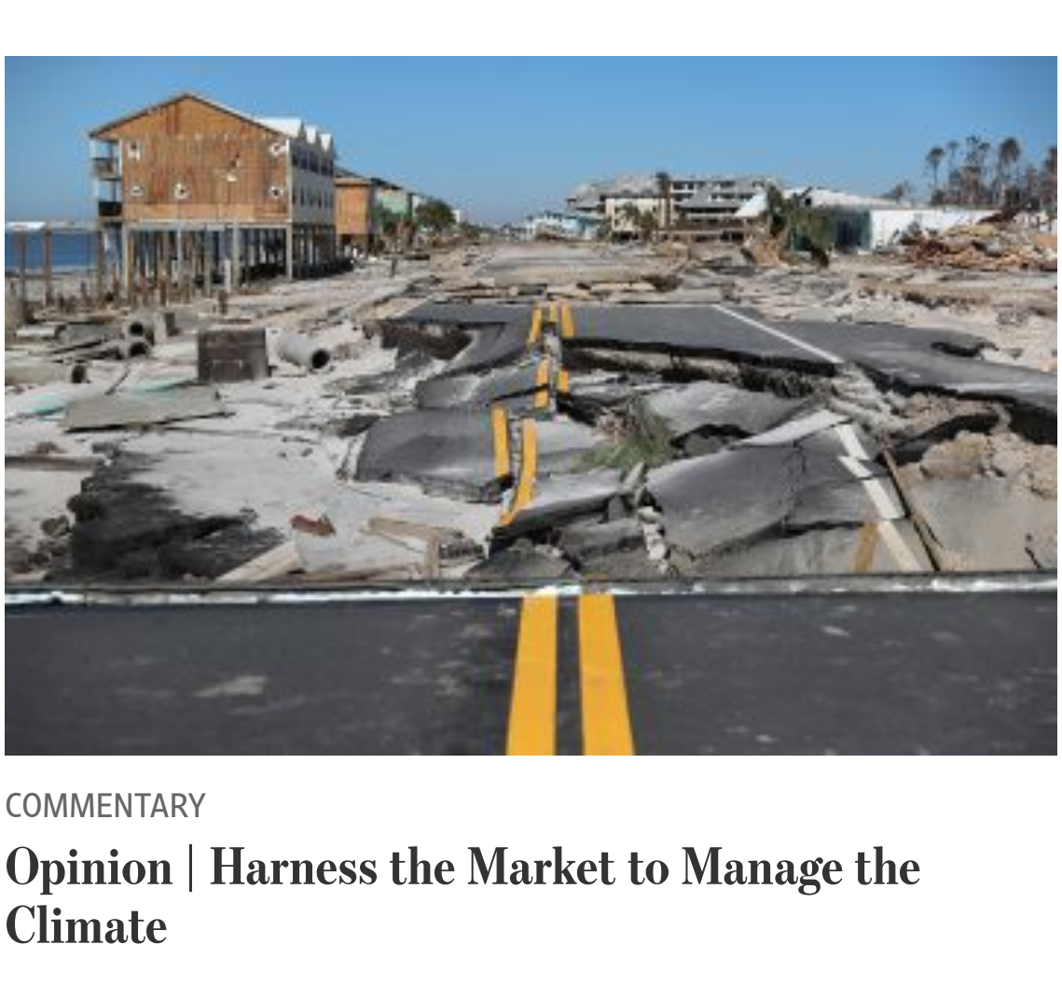

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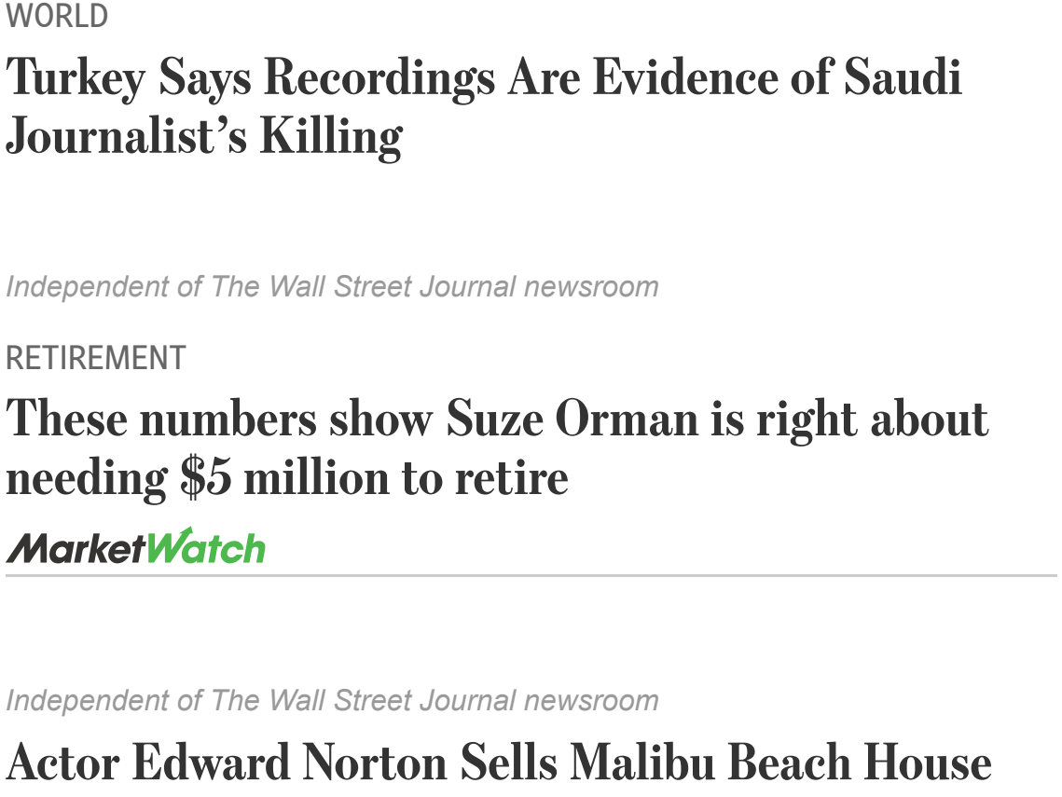

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