

**A New Way, Not the Highway:
An Open Letter from the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway Environmental Justice Coalition**

The Honorable Kathy Hochul
Governor of New York State
NYS State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Hochul,

We are a coalition of residents, environmental justice advocates, organizations, allies, and elected officials committed to achieving a comprehensive transformation of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway (BQE). Our advocacy and organizing are fundamentally rooted in principles about equitable transportation access and healthy environments — key tenants of environmental justice — for all communities impacted by the BQE.

The Brooklyn-Queens Expressway is an environmental injustice that has long harmed our communities. Our people are living on borrowed time, susceptible to the next asthma attack, vehicle crash, or climate change-fueled disaster. The BQE requires a true vision that features expansive, comprehensive planning efforts across the corridor *beyond* current plans and processes. Simply put, there is much more urgent work that must be done to reduce the destructive harms the BQE inflicts daily upon communities along the corridor. A new vision will also help our city and state achieve our climate goals outlined in the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA).

We urge your office and agencies to work together to (1) release any recently submitted grant applications for federal funding, and (2) create a comprehensive community-led plan centered on racial justice and equity that addresses the environmental and health impacts of air pollution, reconnects our communities, and meets our climate targets.

A relic of the destructive urban planner Robert Moses, the BQE now carries nearly 150,000 trucks and cars every day through neighborhoods where more than 280,000 people of color, low-income people, and immigrants live, learn, work, play, and pray. The enormous number of vehicles on and around the highway is responsible for severe respiratory issues and traffic violence, contributing to an ongoing public health emergency in these communities. Two neighborhoods, Sunset Park and Williamsburg, demonstrate how the BQE severely harms public health.

- In Sunset Park, where about 76 percent of the population identifies as Asian, Black, or Latinx,¹ levels of fine particulate matter (PM2.5) — the most harmful air pollutant — are 8.5 micrograms per cubic meter, higher than both the borough and citywide average.²
- In South Williamsburg, asthma rates are twice the citywide average, and the neighborhood ranks third out of 59 districts for the number of asthma cases in NYC.³

Beyond these serious respiratory threats, massive traffic on the BQE is responsible for countless reported and unreported pedestrian and cyclist crashes, resulting in injuries and fatalities. This traffic violence severely impairs the street safety and neighborhood cohesion necessary for residents, workers, students, and others to access equitable transportation and healthy environments.

Fortunately, we are in a moment of tremendous opportunity: Congress and federal agencies are allocating major funding to once-in-a-generation investments in infrastructure, including through the U.S. DOT

¹ Census 2020; Community Profile Table 1.01

² <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/data/2018chp-bk7.pdf>

³ <https://brooklyneagle.com/articles/2017/09/11/in-williamsburg-a-renewed-push-for-a-platform-park-over-the-bqe/>

“Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods” (RCN) program, to specifically address communities disadvantaged by highways.⁴ We cannot squander this moment to equitably invest new resources in our communities and repair the historical and ongoing public health harms caused by the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway.

However, we are deeply concerned that the NYC DOT BQE Vision Process announced by New York City Mayor Eric Adams in late 2022 contains many flaws that will jeopardize this opportunity. This process needs to provide a timeline for thorough community engagement to create an effective plan for the corridor. Residents and organizations involved in the Community Visioning Council and the Community Partner Program have found that proposed plans have been pre-determined and decided upon ahead of community engagement events. Residents and organizations find that the process fails to incorporate community priorities, ideas, and voices genuinely. Our suspicion that the process is designed to tick off a consultation requirement on NYC DOT’s checklist, rather than gather genuine community feedback, was confirmed when NYC DOT asked organizations and elected officials to send letters of support for the agency’s grant applications, which NYC DOT did not share, a week before they applied. While there has been some progress in elevating transformational community-led projects (for instance, considering decking the BQE in North Brooklyn, known as BQGreen), these individual pieces are wholly insufficient to address the systemic problems of the BQE.

Moreover, residents and organizations are concerned that the existing BQE Vision Process will only lead to billions of City and State taxpayer dollars spent to simply preserve the failed and dangerous BQE with a band-aid. We are living in an era of climate crisis and catastrophe, where the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway regularly floods, and the city sees a major loss of invaluable human life and economic activity. Real climate adaptation and resilience means seriously investing in alternative modes of transportation for people and goods that move us away from depending on the highway and greenhouse gas-emitting trucks and cars. Attempting to preserve the BQE, rather than investing in alternative transportation, paves the way for a continued public health emergency in our communities.

The true path toward achieving equitable transportation investments, climate change goals, and environmental justice in communities along the BQE is to wholly transform how people and goods move along the corridor. That’s why the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway Environmental Justice Coalition demands that the New York City and New York State Departments of Transportation:

- 1) Fund the planning and implementation of community-developed, environmental justice-centered projects in the BQE North and South sections of the highway. These include, but are not limited to:
 - a) [BQGreen](#) in BQE North. This plan to create a decked park over the BQE trench in Williamsburg requires funding to update and implement the project. The proposed project would reclaim and establish 3.5 acres of land to be transformed into green, open spaces, as informed by community-led planning processes. Covering the portion of the expressway that runs alongside various parks and playgrounds in the Southside with greenery and community amenities will result in improved health conditions and outcomes for the community in absorbing and mitigating the impacts of noise and air pollution, and urban-heat island effect.
 - b) Sunset Park Greenway-Blueway in BQE South. By connecting to Brooklyn’s existing waterfront greenway and neighborhood transportation facilities like ferries, ports, bike lanes, and distribution centers, this pedestrian and bike path will enable the safe, equitable movement of people and goods to, from, and within Sunset Park. The project requires funding to update and build the greenway according to UPROSE’s Green Resilient Industrial District 2.0 (GRID 2.0) objectives developed by Sunset Park residents.

⁴ “Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods Grant Program.” <https://www.transportation.gov/grants/rcnprogram>

- 2) Center environmental justice needs and communities in need assessment, planning, decision-making, and implementation for any applications to federal infrastructure funding, especially grants from the U.S. Department of Transportation Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods program.
- 3) Create a comprehensive, environmental justice-centered plan for the entire BQE and Gowanus corridors, including in Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island, that
 - a. explores zero-emission modes of freight distribution — including, but not limited to, a capacity study for rail and maritime transportation — to reduce truck usage and vehicle miles traveled,
 - b. invests in public transportation, pedestrian and cyclist safety, and mobility for all,
 - c. meaningfully improves public health outcomes,
 - d. and incorporates community-developed climate adaptation and resilience strategies and designs.

We literally stand at a crossroads of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transform the BQE. As organized people and institutions committed to centering and prioritizing environmental justice across the corridor, we call for a comprehensive planning process that does not silo neighborhoods. These demands are uplifted across the corridor, as well as affirmed by the recommendations made by the BQE Expert Panel convened by the previous administration in 2019.⁵ Our united front calls for an integrated, community-led planning process that fosters collaboration across government agencies, ultimately reducing air pollution, improving health outcomes, and tackling climate change. We are eager to continue this vital conversation and await your response.

Signed,

El Puente
UPROSE
New York City Environmental Justice Alliance

The Brooklyn Heights Association
350 Brooklyn
Riders Alliance
Tri-State Transportation Campaign
St. Nicks Alliance
A Better Way
North Brooklyn Neighbors
360 Furman Street
Red Hook Initiative
DUMBO Neighborhood Alliance
North Heights Neighbors

cc (via email):

Kathryn Garcia, Director of State Operations
Eric Adams, Mayor of the City of New York
Meera Joshi, NYC Deputy Mayor for Operations
Ydanis Rodriguez, NYC Transportation Commissioner

⁵ “Brooklyn-Queens Expressway Expert Panel Report”,
https://www.buildingcongress.com/uploads/BQE_Expert_Panel_Report_v12_digital_distro_reduce.pdf

