

RIO PIEDRAS WATERSHED COMMUNITY COALITION

COMMUNITY RESOLUTION FOR THE INTEGRATED MANAGEMENT OF THE RIO PIEDRAS WATERSHED

Approved on January 24, 2024

In a Community Summit held on November 4, 2023 at the Old Piedras River Aqueduct, members of various community groups, including Friends of Puerto Nuevo for the Watershed, Metropolitan Urbanization Residents, Riverguard, Communities in Defense of the Piedras River and community leaders from Caimito, Las Curiás, Carraízo and Quebrada Arenas Neighborhood, came together as the **Rio Piedras Watershed Community Coalition (Coalition)** to express our rejection of the Puerto Nuevo River (technically the Piedras River) Flood Control Project as proposed by the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

As a Coalition, we agree on the following statements:

WHEREAS: We are alarmed by the dramatic alteration that the canalization project would imply for the only river in the capital city. The implications include the expropriation of families and the destruction of the riparian forest, as well as disturbances to the surrounding social and natural life. A large part of the urban area would be under constant construction for a decade or more, even affecting major transportation routes such as Las Américas Expressway, Roosevelt Avenue, Piñero Avenue and Américo Miranda Avenue, the latter being the main access to the Medical Center.

WHEREAS: In light of the climatic events we have experienced, which will be intensified by climate change, such as hurricanes, storm surges, flooding, sea level rise, droughts, and heat waves, we understand that we need an integrated management approach for the entire river basin, considering the protection of water resources as a long-term adaptation and transformation strategy.

WHEREAS: We recognize that although we have different needs, political ideologies, and beliefs, we share common situations and concerns. Some of us directly experience floods, while others face the surprising threat of being expropriated from our communities or losing green spaces in the city.

RIO PIEDRAS WATERSHED COMMUNITY COALITION

WHEREAS: We have been consistently excluded from the decision-making process. We want and are committed to community participation being more than just an informative act, but rather a meaningful and transparent process that includes the community in decisions about the plan and project design.

WHEREAS: We observe how poorly located constructions without controls throughout the basin put all our neighbors and communities at risk (and contribute to flooding).

WHEREAS: We are concerned that our federal public funds are being invested in an obsolete canalization project. The project, as designed, leaves out a fundamental component of urban hydrology that causes sudden and recurrent flooding, which is the collapse of the stormwater system. The available money and existing public policy must be framed in doing things right and first solving the problem of the storm sewer system.

WHEREAS: We understand that before carrying out an infrastructure mega-project, we must agree on a common city vision that, in addition to confronting the threat of flooding and other hydro-climatic risks, reconsiders basin management and city planning from an eco-centric perspective that incorporates the most updated natural and social sciences, complies with Puerto Rico's environmental protection laws and evaluation processes, and is in harmony with nature to face the new challenges that await us in the future.

As residents and owners of public domain goods - the riverbed, river, bank and flora and fauna of various communities in the Rio Piedras basin, from Caimito to Puerto Nuevo - through unanimous consensus, we propose the creation of an Integrated Management Plan for the Piedras River Basin in conjunction with its communities. This plan would be based on principles of resilience and social and environmental justice, protecting the safety, health, and quality of life of our communities, and allowing long-term sustainability.

THEREFORE: Throughout the Community Summit we agreed on the following key elements to include in the Plan:

RIO PIEDRAS WATERSHED COMMUNITY COALITION

a) Urban-ecological planning: We need a detailed study of the sewer system to guide us in repairing and upgrading existing infrastructure. Our goal is to increase its ability to capture water and protect the ecological services, recreational values, and housing rights of the basin.

b) Green, blue, and gray infrastructure: Criteria must be established that prioritize nature-based solutions, for example, the protection, recovery, and reforestation of public spaces and green corridors as a tool for permeability and urban drainage. Green infrastructure measures must be developed that offer multiple benefits such as reducing surface runoff, intercepting rainwater, and regulating temperature throughout the basin. A construction moratorium must be established in flood zones and in the upper basin until a land use plan is approved for the entire river basin.

c) Multi-level and multi-sectoral governance: Create an Interagency Committee made up of representatives from different areas, such as the Municipality of San Juan, the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Department of Transportation and Public Works, the Aqueduct and Sewer Authority and the Housing Department. Representatives of the Piedras River Watershed Community Coalition would be part of the committee with an active role in the formulation and evaluation of proposals. We also suggest an Independent Technical Committee made up of local scientists, planners, and designers to review the Interagency Committee's recommendations based on the most up-to-date science and local conditions.

d) Community participation and action: We commit to submitting proposals and being proactive in contributing our experience and knowledge to make this vision a reality. We will serve as a support and resource during extreme flooding events, serving as sentinels for an early warning system. We will seek to expand grassroots education and citizen participation efforts in our communities, sharing successful strategies and resources with our fellow community leaders in the watershed.

RIO PIEDRAS WATERSHED COMMUNITY COALITION

THEREFORE: Our plan agrees with the recommendations of local engineers and scientists and is aligned with the principles of climate resilience and environmental justice that guide the actions of federal agencies under the National Climate Resilience Framework and as required by Congresswomen Nydia Velázquez and Kirsten Gillibrand in a letter to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

THEREFORE: We want the development of this plan to be a model of shared and participatory governance in decisions affecting our communities, the capital city, and our island territory. We demand that local agencies take the urgency of this matter seriously and define a mechanism for community information, communication, and participation in the institutional process. Every day is important to prevent and protect ourselves.

THEREFORE: As members and community stakeholders, we call on everyone to work together in finding solutions that protect our communities and the Piedras River basin. This is a shared responsibility and a call to action. We strongly believe in unity: the river is one, San Juan is one, together we will find solutions that benefit everyone.

In view of all the above, the Rio Piedras Watershed Community Coalition calls on government agencies, political leaders and impacted communities to come together in the participatory creation of an Integrated Management Plan to protect the Piedras River basin, its ecosystems, and communities, and promote adaptation and climate resilience in a responsible and sustainable manner.

RIO PIEDRAS WATERSHED COMMUNITY COALITION

Supplemental Documents

Alianza por la Cuenca del Río Piedras. 2023. The Río Puerto Nuevo (Río Piedras) Channelization Project. A Technical Review by the Alianza.

Cruz, Andrea. (2023, November 28). [“No da abasto infraestructura pluvial”](#). *El Vocero*.

Díaz, E.L. (2023, November 22). [“Planificación y diseño de una nueva generación de infraestructura”](#). *El Nuevo Día*.

Lugo, A.; Nytch, C. J.; Ramsey, M. 2013. [An analysis of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers documents supporting the channelization of the Río Piedras](#). *Acta Científica* 27: 1-3.

Co-led by Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and Representative Nydia Velázquez 21 different congress representatives (4 Senators and 17 House Representatives) and the endorsement of 22 local and national organizations, including: San Juan Bay Estuary Program, College of Architects and Landscaping Architects of Puerto Rico, Ciudadanos del Karso, Puerto Rico Sea Grant Program, ENLACE, Grupo de las Ocho Comunidades Aledañas al Caño Martín Peña, CAMBIO PR, University of Puerto Rico Environmental Law Clinic, Alianza por la Cuenca del Río Piedras, Guarda Río, Comunidades en Defensa del Río Piedras, Amigos de Puerto Nuevo por la Cuenca, EduReCréate, Center for Biological Diversity, University of Puerto Rico-Río Piedras Environmental Sciences Program, University of Puerto Rico-Río Piedras Center for Applied Tropical Ecology and Conservation (CATEC), University of Puerto Rico-Medical Sciences Environmental Public Health Program, Foundation for Puerto Rico, Para la Naturaleza, Sierra Club, Surfrider Foundation, Environmental Defense Fund.