

REQUEST FOR  
PROPOSALS

# water: designing an equitable water future for new york city

DESIGN TRUST  
FOR PUBLIC SPACE  
NEXT 30 YEARS

Water is the theme of the Design Trust for Public Space's 12th Request for Proposal (RFP) cycle and a celebration of the organization's 30th-Year Anniversary. The two-year initiative will interrogate the relationship between New Yorkers and water, an essential and impactful element. The Water RFP recognizes that the future of the city's public life depends on shifting our relationship with water in all its various forms—rain, oceans, rivers—and the multiple ways we engage with it—construction, art, play, drinking, sewage.

**Water has shaped New York City as it exists today.**

The Wildlife Conservation Society's Mannahatta Project revealed that, before colonization, this densely "built-up [city]" was once a remarkably diverse, natural landscape of hills, valleys, forests, fields, freshwater wetlands, salt marshes, beaches, springs, ponds and streams." Over time, humans in this region have made enormous changes to our landscapes, waterways, and places, an artifice of human intervention that reflects culture and value-making.

New York City exploded into a global metropolis because of its natural and plentiful water supply, auspiciously created through a series of enormous infrastructure investments, starting with the Old Croton Aqueduct in the 1830s. Today, water flows into the city—naturally and minimally treated—from public land in the Catskills, sustaining our large population. Coupled with the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, opening economic exchange with the national interior, New York became a hub of global exchange and culture. Water is suffused through the history and present reality of our city: a legacy of ports and shipping, rezoned waterfronts and parks, expanding ferry systems, miles of public beaches, and waterways that exfiltrate tons of trash every day.

**Naku ntsia'akua  
tekui kana ini ño'ò ña  
kutiakundo te kinkua  
kidabdoxite**

**How beautiful is the life-  
giving water that births  
from Earth and how badly  
we treat her**

Mixtec wisdom

Today, however, water is an existential threat to the city, especially for those people living in communities defined as disadvantaged. In recent years, a greater share of precipitation has come in large one-day events. Since measurement started in 1910, 9 of the 10 largest single-day rain events have happened since 1996. Evidence shows that trend compounding in recent years; September 2023 was the wettest month in New York City history since 1882. These extreme events flood basements, streets, and transit systems, posing enormous financial hardship for an already burdened area. New York City areas most impacted by flooding include Southeast Central Queens, North Staten Island, and the Southeast Bronx, all areas identified as disadvantaged.

New York remains a city of water, with

- » 520 miles of waterfront but only 30 public access points;
- » 60 miles of rivers carrying mostly polluted water, five historic canals including the Gowanus;
- » 1.2 million acres of protected watersheds located more than a hundred miles away;
- » a daily consumption of 1 billion gallons of fresh water and disposal of 1.3 billion gallons of wastewater, 14 wastewater plants, a combined-sewage system, and increasing sewer backup complaints;
- » 91 public pools, 14 miles of public beaches and many New Yorkers lacking swimming skills;
- » over 2,000 community gardens and urban farms;
- » 170,000 fire hydrants, and 155 million gallons of water lost everyday due to leaky pipes;
- » a projected sea-level rise of 5.4 feet by 2100, and 46.37 inches of average annual rain with an estimated 30% increase by the end of this century.

This project aims to tell the story of water and the future of New York City, through efforts that lift up the human experience of and connection to water. It will welcome a cohort of diverse groups into a citywide conversation, solve concrete and urgent challenges about water, elevate job opportunities in the “blue economy,” and build momentum for a prosperous story of water equity in New York City.

The Design Trust for Public Space unlocks the potential of New York City's shared, civic spaces through the advancement of new research and collaborative projects. Central to our mission and program is our request for proposals (RFP), which asks all New Yorkers for ideas to realize projects that address a key public space concern in New York City. The Design Trust initiated its public calls for projects in 1995, piloting a new model for community participation in planning and policy, a model that has been replicated around the world. The public call model was designed to realize more equitable solutions for important challenges facing New York's built environment. It trusts that great ideas exist in every community and that through collaborative and creative work, those ideas can be unlocked.

RFP winners will work with Design Trust to develop their ideas into actionable projects. Through a nine-month incubation period, with the guidance and support of the Design Trust and a range of partners, including city agencies, stakeholder groups, and private sector experts, selected projects will receive funding and expertise to advance their proposals.

Each project will work towards a big idea that can change a system—through new funding, legislation, rule-making, programs, or coalitions—that makes New York City more environmentally just, and can similarly inspire other cities to make the same change.

The organizations and projects will be selected according to a well-established model developed by the Design Trust. Great effort will be taken to make the process as inclusive as possible, providing technical assistance, hosting information sessions, and having manageable application standards. An initial Statement of Interest (SOI) will help to identify roughly 20-25 finalists, of which 10 will be interviewed. The final five recommended by the Committee will be affirmed by the Collaborating Organizations and the Design Trust Board of Directors' Program Committee.

# key questions

## Who Is Eligible?

- Individuals of all backgrounds, expertise, and experience levels.
- Organizations of all types, including non-profits, public agencies, private sectors firms, small business, and others.
- Partnerships and joint efforts are welcome.
- Applicants who can't accept stipends are still eligible to apply.

## What Kinds of Proposals Fit Well?

Those proposals that are...

- working to move an important idea into the next phase of development.
- seeking innovative partners and access to experts in the field.
- wanting to grow the audience for their ideas or scale up efforts.
- growing an idea that could positively impact all New Yorkers.
- seeking ways to center marginalized voices and communities.

## What Proposals Might Not Be the Best Fit?

Those proposals that are...

- only seeking funding for their projects and ideas.
- focused on completing a capital project.
- ones whose project activities are nearly complete.
- very distantly related to the theme of water.
- not focused on improving the lives of New Yorkers.

## What Do Winners Receive?

- \$10,000 stipend
- Nine-month guided project development with a cohort of other projects
- Access to subject-matter experts and leaders
- Presentation at a major convening
- Potential to move into a fully-developed Design Trust project
- Public promotion on Design Trust website
- Invitation to Design Trust Annual Benefit and DT Council events

## What Do Winners Do?

Winners will be asked to participate in a nine-month, guided “incubation” period. During this time, each team will develop their ideas into a final deliverable, which could be a white-paper, a small publication, a website, a policy brief, or other creative product. The teams will be supported by a network of experts and professionals. At least three times over the incubation period, the cohort of teams will meet to share ideas, learn from each other, and present in-process ideas.

## How Do I Learn More?

- Sign up for a webinar to learn more and ask questions. Information available at [designtrust.org/rfp](https://designtrust.org/rfp)
- Send inquiries and questions to [programs@designtrust.org](mailto:programs@designtrust.org).
- Applicants who are asked to submit a full application will have access to “office hours,” with the Design Trust team to refine and shape their proposals.

At the conclusion of this process, all winners will have the opportunity to present at a major convening focused on water in early 2027. Some projects, based on the interests of the participants and the availability of additional resources, will be considered to continue working with Design Trust for Public Space.

## Accessibility

The Design Trust encourages people of all abilities, ethnicities, genders, national origins or ancestries, socioeconomic statuses, races, formerly incarcerated statuses, religions, and sexualities to apply. Design Trust is committed to accessibility and to working together with you to develop an accessibility plan, should that be needed, either in the application process or, if selected, during the project period.

- A text-only version of this document is [available here](#).
- Translation of this document is [available here](#).

## Application Instructions

The Request for Proposals follows a multi-step process that is meant to be accessible and simple. This includes 1) an open, brief Statement of Interest (SOI) form; 2) an invited full application, and 3) an interview with the selection jury. All candidates should start by answering the questions in the SOI form, linked here:

### STATEMENT OF INTEREST

Applicants should submit their Statement of Interest by November 10th, 2025 at 5:00pm via the link above. The Design Trust will host optional webinars on October 9th and 14th at 12pm and 6pm respectively where interested parties can learn more about the request for projects and ask questions. Please sign up for the [webinars here](#). The webinars will be recorded for those that cannot make those times.

A select number of applicants will be asked to prepare full applications, with instruction to follow that notification. Those teams will have access to “open office hours” with the Design Trust staff to ask questions and receive feedback in a one-on-one format. A jury meeting in March, composed of Advisory Committee members, Design Trust staff, and Design trust board members, will advise on selecting the winners.

## Schedule

Launch Event	September 24, 2025
RFP Opens	September 25, 2025
Webinars	October 9 (12pm) & 14, 2025 (6pm) - Virtual
SOI Due	November 10, 2025
Finalists Notified	December 11, 2025
RFP Office Hours	Mid-January, 2026
RFP Due	February 26, 2026
Jury Meeting	Mid-March 2026
Winners Announced	April 2, 2026
Kick Off Meeting	May 2026
Workshop #1	June 2026
Workshop #2	September 2026
Workshop #3	December 2026
Celebration	February 2027
Final Convening	April 2027

# advisory committee

7

**Atef Ahmed**

Port Authority of NY & NJ

*Manager of Environmental Programs*

**Lee Altman**

SCAPE

*Principal*

**Dara Byrne PhD**

Macaulay Honors College, CUNY

*Dean*

**Terri Carta**

Jamaica Bay-Rockaway Parks Conservancy

*Executive Director*

**Alan Cohn**

NYC Department of Environmental Protection

*Senior Policy & Science Advisor*

**Ray Fusco WEDG**

Hudson Canyon Consulting

*Owner*

**Vincent Lee PE, LEED AP, ENV SP**

Arup

*Principal*

**Daphne Lundi**

Urban Ocean Lab

*Managing Director*

**Lisette Mendez-Boyer AIA, AICP, LEED AP**

HKS

*Studio Design Leader, Cities & Communities*

**Kara Meyer**

+ Pool

*Managing Director*

**Mary Miss**

City as Living Laboratory

*Founder & Public Artist*

**Katie Mosher**

Billion Oyster Project

*Senior Director of Programs*

**Siddhartha Sanchez**

Bronx River Alliance

*Executive Director*

**Eric Sanderson PhD**

New York Botanical Garden

*Vice President, Urban Conservation Strategy*

**Alice Shay**

Buro Happold

*Principal, Urban Planning & Strategy Leader*

**Shawn Slevin**

Swim Strong Foundation

*Founder & Executive Director*



