

CONGRESSWOMAN MIKIE SHERRILL

Member Testimony

*T&I Subcommittee on Water Resources & Environment Hearing
“Proposals for a Water Resources Development Act of 2020:
Members’ Day Hearing”*

10:00AM February 27, 2020
2167 Rayburn House Office Building

Thank you, Chairwoman Napolitano, Ranking Member Westerman, and Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today. I want to particularly recognize my New Jersey colleague, Rep. Malinowski, for his work on this subcommittee to advance New Jersey’s priorities.

I’m here because flooding has plagued North Jersey for generations. One of the first things I did after taking office was to convene a roundtable with my local mayors to get up to speed on their challenges. They need the federal government to be a dependable partner to make sure all local, state, and federal officials and stakeholders are working together to mitigate flood risk.

Instead, the basic takeaway was their overwhelming frustration with federal inaction. These towns feel abandoned. They've had discussions for decades, but they deserve federal authorities that do more than talk. They deserve action.

I know many of you feel the same way. It's our job in Congress to make the government work for the people we represent. The Water Resources Development Act, or "WRDA," which you will write is a tremendous opportunity to make long-overdue progress, and I urge you to consider a few key opportunities that are in my district.

The first is the Peckman River Flood Risk Management Project. The Peckman River Basin has frequently flooded, and for more than a generation the towns of Little Falls and Woodland Park have faced these challenges largely on their own.

The House authorized a study in 2000. There was a favorable reconnaissance report in 2001. But then nothing happened. These communities waited twenty years while the study languished.

Fortunately, thanks to the hard work of the Army Corps New York District staff, the Peckman River Basin Flood Risk Management Feasibility Study was released last October, and we expect a Chiefs

Report this April. I urge the Committee to consider that Chiefs Report and to provide authorization for the Peckman River project in the WRDA bill so that we can move this project forward.

I also represent the historically flood-prone Passaic River Basin. Flooding along the Passaic has caused eleven federal disaster declarations since 1968. The Corps of Engineers estimates that when viewed over time, the average annual flood damage in the basin is over \$160,000,000. Congress authorized a study in 1975, and then – after more than a decade – authorized a plan calling for a dual inlet diversion tunnel extending to Newark Bay. This plan was controversial, and there have been numerous concerns about its cost and environmental impact.

The Army Corps and the state of New Jersey have gone back and forth since that time. I respect that there are, and have always been, strong differences to resolve. But my communities are at risk. In fact, since Congress authorized the project in 1990, flooding from the Passaic River has caused over \$3.5 billion in losses. We cannot afford to continue to argue without moving to action.

This is so important to my district that I convened a *second* meeting last October of mayors, NJDEP officials, and Army Corps staff

from the New York District. There was broad consensus: we must move forward, and the best place to start is to provide all necessary authority to bring those studies and plans up to date. I urge the Committee to work with me to overcome any legislative barriers that stand in the way, and to push the Corps to deliver.

There are so many additional issues beyond these two projects. We need to do everything possible to improve resilience, because we know that greater weather variability and rising sea levels are already a threat to critical infrastructure. We should also promote greater use of natural, nonstructural measures and improve the utilization of expertise from state and local officials.

In fact, as the Chairwoman of the Science, Space, and Technology Environment Subcommittee, I am chairing a hearing later this afternoon examining flood maps. It painfully clear that there is more we can and must do to improve federal coordination so that we are listening and responding to local experts and community leaders on the ground. These communication breakdowns are costly. Better coordination will also ensure we utilize the best available science to more accurately assess flood risk, and then communicate that information more effectively to communities and homeowners.

Lastly, I encourage this Committee to prioritize issues of equity. Pastor Sidney Williams Jr. leads the Bethel AME Church in Morristown, and in 2001 when Tropical Storm Irene caused the Whippany River to surge beyond its banks, it filled the basement of the Bethel A.M.E. Church with four feet of water. Too often, the flood risks of low-lying and underserved communities go unaddressed and their mitigation needs are never met. Many project ratings and determinations depend on economic assessments that favor richer neighborhoods and perpetuate an ongoing cycle of disinvestment. We can – and should – revise non-federal cost shares and remove other barriers that disproportionately impact low-income, minority, and indigenous communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about these vital concerns. I look forward to working with all of you, as well Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Graves, and all the members of the full Committee to finally, on a bipartisan basis, deliver long-sought progress for communities along the Peckman River, the Passaic River, and many other flooding, navigation, and environmental restoration projects across the country. We owe action to the North Jersey, and the American people. Thank you.