

# Ants Among Buffalo

Red Hook experiences with the Brooklyn-Queens  
Expressway (BQE)

by Red Hook Initiative

## Introduction

Over the past few months, Red Hook Initiative has been working as a community partner on the Department of Transportation BQE Corridor Vision Project. Red Hook community members have been actively engaged on these issues for many years. This report is meant to be a **living document** to share the history of Red Hook and its relationships to the BQE with community members and stakeholders; it contains findings from Phase 1 of our engagement process and it will continue to be updated as we

move forward with the project of redesigning and reimagining the BQE.

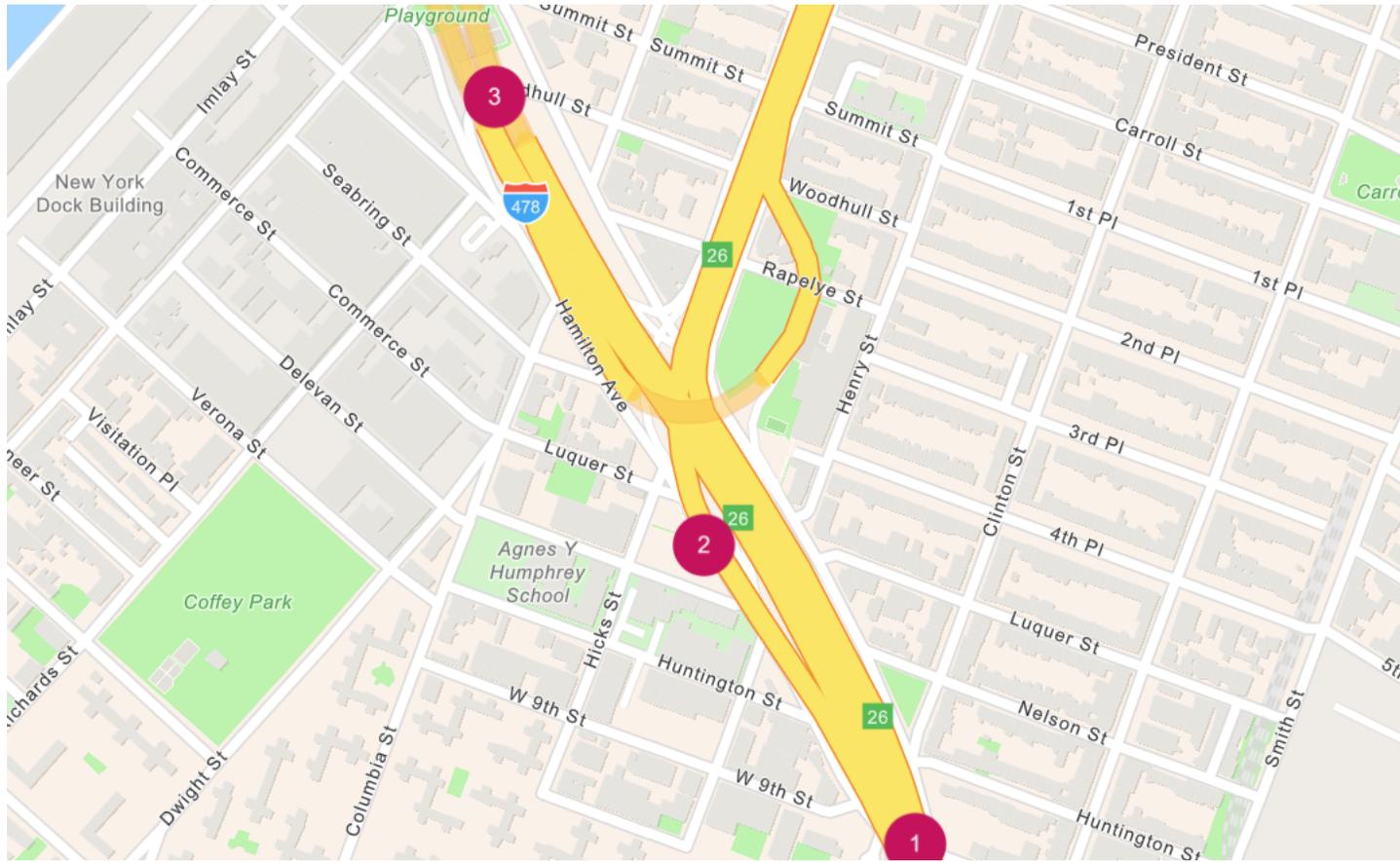
To read more about the DOT BQE Corridor Vision Project click [here](#):

### **BQE Corridor Vision Project**

The placement of BQE was designed to **foster separation** between Red Hook and the rest of Brooklyn. It is an instance of **racist and classist urban planning** that has strengthened the oppressive forces in Red Hook across policy sectors. It was purposefully placed here leaving Red Hook Houses, Brooklyn's largest public housing development, **separated from critical resources and transportation**. The solutions from the city and state DOT must center Red Hook and must turn to Red Hook residents as the experts of their own neighborhood. **Just as the development of the BQE was massive in scale and intentional in purpose, so must be its undoing.**

**Geographic Context:** The BQE defines the full east border of the Red Hook community and the Gowanus Canal defines the southern border; the remainder of Red Hook's periphery is defined by water. The map below showcases where Red Hook primarily interfaces with the BQE.

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Esri Community Maps Contributors, NYC OpenData, New Jersey Office of...

500 ft Powered by Esri



## Hamilton Avenue Crosswalk



The intersection of West 9th Street and Hamilton Ave is the main crossing for residents as they leave and return to Red Hook. Crossing Hamilton Ave requires crossing 6 lanes of a busy truck-filled high-speed avenue that runs under the BQE. It is the route to and from subway, to work, to school, to resources, and many Red Hook residents navigate this intersection daily.

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## Hamilton Avenue Footbridge



The footbridge connecting Red Hook to Carroll Gardens goes both above and below the BQE. The primary use of the bridge is as a means of travel for students getting to and from school. Community members expressed concerns of safety on the bridge and noted that it shakes, is not well maintained, has poor lighting, is lacking any snow and ice removal, and recent renovations have prioritized bike riders over pedestrians.



This tunnel connects Brooklyn to Manhattan. It is heavily trafficked, with over 50,000 vehicles traveling on it on an average weekday. This traffic contributes to polluted air for the nearby schools and residential areas.

The Red Hook community has been impacted by the BQE since it opened in 1954 and has been actively pushing for changes and improvements for decades. This report documents Red Hook experiences with the BQE and notes how changes should be made.

## **About Red Hook Initiative**

At Red Hook Initiative (RHI) we believe that social change to overcome systemic inequities begins with empowered youth. In partnership with community adults, we nurture young people in Red Hook to be inspired, resilient and healthy, and to envision themselves as co-creators of their lives, community and society.

Youth development, community building and community hiring are at the core of our approach to strengthening Red Hook's future. RHI's model gives young people and residents the tools, resources and opportunities they need to interrupt the systems and barriers that perpetuate historic inequities for the Red Hook community. Residents lead the way toward a more equitable, hopeful future.

## **Executive Summary**

In early 2023, as a community partner on the BQE Corridor Vision project, RHI conducted a study on the Red Hook community's experiences of the BQE. The first phase of this project included research and community engagement, in which our team spoke to community members to hear their concerns and visions regarding the BQE. The team heard from 687 people in total, all of whom either worked or resided in Red Hook, through a wide range of methods including office hours, a community survey, street observations, school

dismissal pop-ups, school presentations, flyering, and 1:1 conversations with Red Hook Houses residents. While the timeline of this project has been short, we want to acknowledge the long history of Red Hook residents' activism to make necessary changes to the BQE, which has inspired and informed our current organizing.

The findings of the BQE Redesign Project reflect the profound impact the BQE has on daily life for Red Hook.

**Red Hook residents cited:**

- **Major safety concerns**
- **Historical structural racism**
- **Negative environmental impact**
- **Concerns about the physical environment**
- **Obstructed access to resources**

In addition to prioritizing short-term and longer-term urgently needed changes such as: significant pedestrian improvements, more time to cross, better lighting, improved cleanliness, and improved bike safety

**Red Hook residents called for ongoing meaningful participation of Red Hook community members in relation to future design and changes to the BQE corridor.**



left image is view of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway under construction in the early 1950s, separating the Red Hook and Carroll Gardens neighborhoods (Brooklyn Daily Eagle; Brooklyn Public Library, Brooklyn Collection); right image is an arial view of BQE, Hugh Carey tunnel, Red Hook and Carroll Gardens from 2023

## **Our Process & Methods**



Total # of People We Heard From: 687	
Method	# of people
Office Hours	75
Survey	356, 314 of which live or work in Red Hook
School Dismissal Pop-Ups	60
School Presentations	50
Youth Group Presentation & Observations	30
Outreach Days within Red Hook Houses	50
Pop Up at RHI Youth Programs	30
Red Hook Initiative Staff Presentation	36

- Street Observations:** We worked with 30 Red Hook youth to conduct observations along Hamilton Avenue, under the BQE, and along the foot bridge; observations were recorded by the youth in a feedback form; following observations, the youth drew new maps of the BQE corridor highlighting how they reimagined the space.



Community members meeting with RHI outreach worker to complete survey.

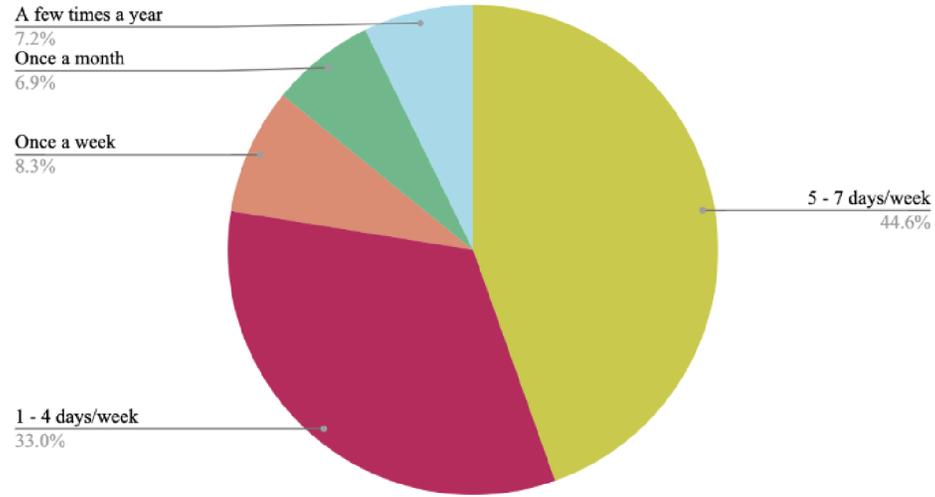
- Community Conversations:** We spoke directly with community members via community conversations, conducted during office hours, school dismissal pop-ups, and a school presentation.

- **Survey:** The survey centered around how Red Hook residents experience the BQE and how they feel while interacting with the BQE and invited people to imagine what they wanted the BQE to look like. Who we heard from:
  - 86% of respondents cross the BQE corridor at least once/week, and 44.6% cross 5 - 7 days/week.
  - 74% live in Red Hook and 60% live in NYCHA housing.
  - 35% of the respondents were Black, 21.9% of the respondents were Latinx, 23% of the respondents were Asian, and 15.7% were white.
  - 35 respondents have a physical disability or limited mobility.
  - 60 respondents reported having asthma or COPD.
  - More respondents reported walking under/over the BQE (42%) than other forms of transportation.

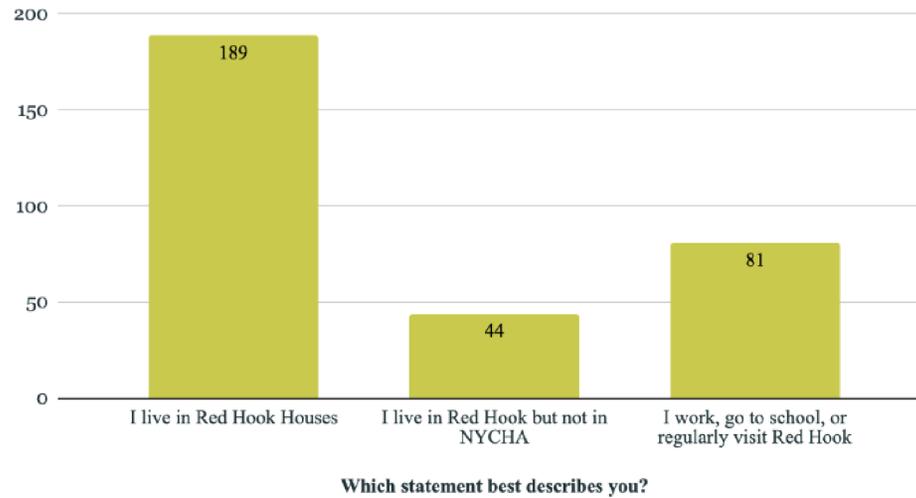


Quincy leading office hours and promoting the BQE survey.

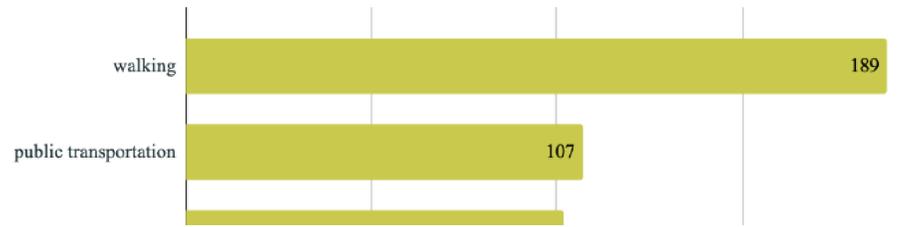
### How often do you travel in or through "the BQE Corridor"?



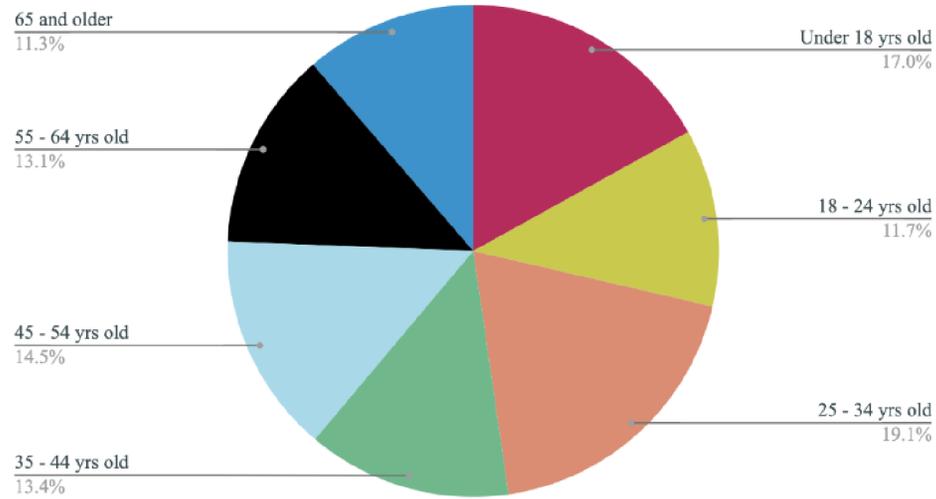
### Survey Respondents' Relationship to Red Hook



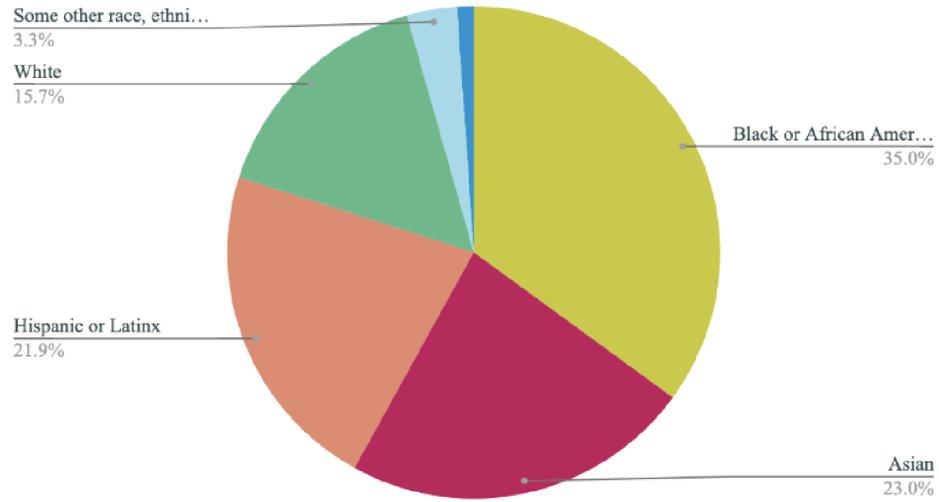
## How do you primarily use or experience the BQE



## Age Group



## Race and/or Ethnicity



## History of Red Hook & BQE



**1939**

Red Hook Houses opened in 1939, the largest public housing development in Brooklyn. Initially built for dockworkers working in Red Hook, residents were mostly white immigrants.



**1954**

The BQE opened dividing Red Hook from the rest of Brooklyn

Robert Moses was the one who is responsible for BQE we see today.

The BQE was created in order to decrease the transportation time between the boroughs, to aid businesses, and to segregate; this was all done without regard for the impact on residents of the Red Hook Houses.



## 1960s

As industry in New York City shifted, the docks in Red Hook closed, and racist federal policy eased the way for white families to buy property and move out of the City. The population of the Red Hook Houses transitioned from being majority white immigrant dock workers to being majority Black and Brown residents.

The neighborhood of Carroll Gardens was created during the 1960s, when the BQE was built, which separated Red Hook from Carroll Gardens; the BQE cut Red Hook off from vital resources.





## 2014

Red Hook Transportation Study was undertaken by the New York City Department of Planning. The report cited significant safety concerns for pedestrians: "Hamilton Avenue is dominated by vehicles and trucks passing through the area, which makes the pedestrian environment unpleasant and potentially unsafe to use. The project team found inadequate pedestrian crossings, pedestrian facilities in disrepair and insufficient lighting."



## 2014

Mayor Bill De Blasio rolled out the Vision Zero campaign as official city policy; Vision Zero invests in comprehensive engineering, enforcement, and education strategies in order to prevent injuries and death at the hands of unsafe New York City streets. The Vision Zero process confirmed many Red Hook community members'



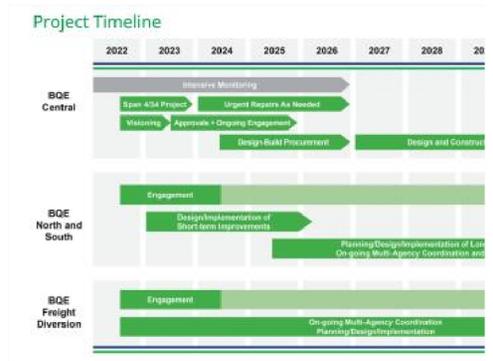
## **2018**

Red Hook young people conducted a community research project on crossing under the BQE and advocated for changes and improvements to be made to the BQE; DOT met with the youth researchers and activists to figure out how to address their issues.



## 2021

Imorne Hornton, a 31-year old man from Red Hook, was killed in a hit-and-run at the dangerous intersection of Hamilton Avenue and Court Street, a dangerous intersection along the BQE. “We just want justice,” Imorne's mother, Tasha Horton said, according to the outlet. “This is my oldest son and I miss him dearly.”



## 2023

The New York City Department of Transportation begins its BQE Corridor Vision Project.

## Oral History of the BQE Footbridge: Vanessa McKnight describing her experiences from the mid 1970s





Vanessa McKnight, Red Hook community leader

“ **Every day was a serious, serious challenge on racism.** We would come across the bridge and there would be guys there, white young men from the Court Street side (we didn't call it Carroll Gardens then.) They were not even our same age group, but like the older brothers and sisters, like 17, 18 years old, and **they had bats and chains and rocks.** When we got to the top of the bridge, we would lower our voices, whisper, and listen. **When we could hear the bats and chains clanking we already knew,** we had to run either way - try and out run them running towards school, or run back home. Nine times out of ten we would run back into the development as opposed to trying to run into the school. **They would beat, especially on the black young men, they would beat them.** Young girls would stick by the boys and try and pull

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them off. And, the thing was, **no adult ever tried to stop the violence or do anything.** Don't get me wrong, adults were aware, they were very aware but it was eyes wide shut. Teachers knew, shop keepers knew, the police knew. But no one did anything to stop it. So the boys

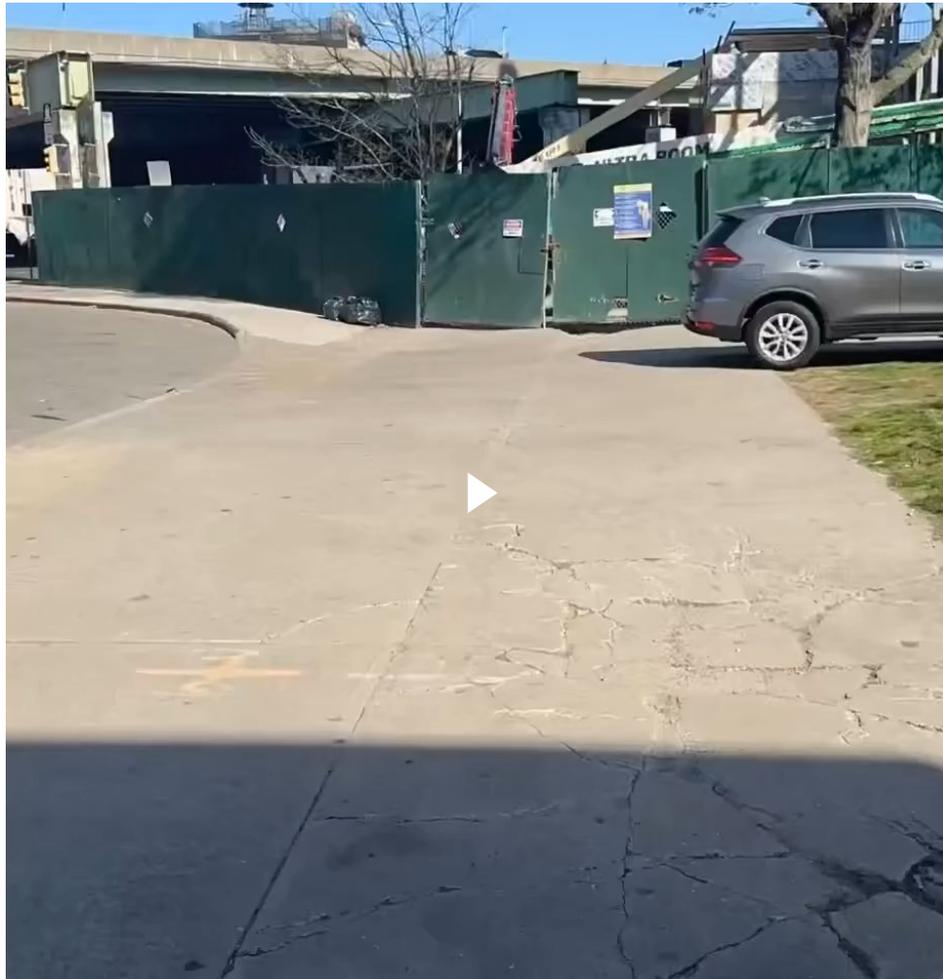
stopped going to school. A lot of young people stopped going to school for a long period of time. We were forced to choose between getting beat up with bats or dropping out. This was in junior high school when we were only 11 or 12 years old. **I remember sitting right next to my classmates thinking it could be your brother who was just beating the shit out of my brother.**

## **Findings**

### **#1: Safety Concerns**

**When asked how they feel while crossing Hamilton Avenue, Red Hook residents report feeling "unsafe, nervous, dangerous, scared, inconvenienced, awful, rushed, hyper-vigilant, alert, dirty, chaotic, caution."**





Crossing Hamilton Avenue: There are only 33 seconds to cross this intersection.

“ Stressed! I’ve had so many close calls at the W9th intersection, with cars and

”

trucks barreling through crosswalks  
against the light.

“ I feel like I’m heading to a dangerous  
neighborhood because the BQE corridor is  
so ugly and not designed. ”

“ Awful. Simply awful. And threatened. ”

“ Very exposed - what if you tripped over??  
There is no time! You have to run as it is. ”

“ Always have to triple check for traffic.  
Roommate got hit by a car running a red  
light. ”



## #2: Environmental Impact

Red Hook has suffered decades of environmental racism and injustice, from geographic isolation resulting from the construction of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, to long term environmental impact of the Columbia Smelting and Refining Works site, to disinvestment in the Red Hook Houses, New York City Housing Authority's (NYCHA) largest public housing complex in Brooklyn.

“ I feel like I can't breathe from the pollution. ”

- 40% of respondents called for “cleaner air to breathe” as a top community benefit they would like to see from the BQE redesign.
- 47% of the respondents reported that air quality/pollution was a top concern.
- **Environmental Justice Context**
  - Within New York State's recent “Disadvantaged Community” map, Red Hook Houses (Census Tract 85) is identified with several alarming indicators: 74th percentile for asthma emergency room visits, 99th percentile for potential exposure to PM 2.5, 60th

percentile for premature deaths, and 62nd percentile for COPD emergency room visits.

- Issues of traffic are further exacerbated in Red Hook by the expansion of last-mile warehouses within the Red Hook community. Over the course of the past 3 years, 6 last-mile warehouses including 3 Amazon sites have opened or are under construction. The development of these sites will cause further traffic congestion and pedestrian safety issues; see Red Hook Traffic and Truck Study for more details on traffic and last-mile warehouses.

## Red Hook Traffic and Truck Study

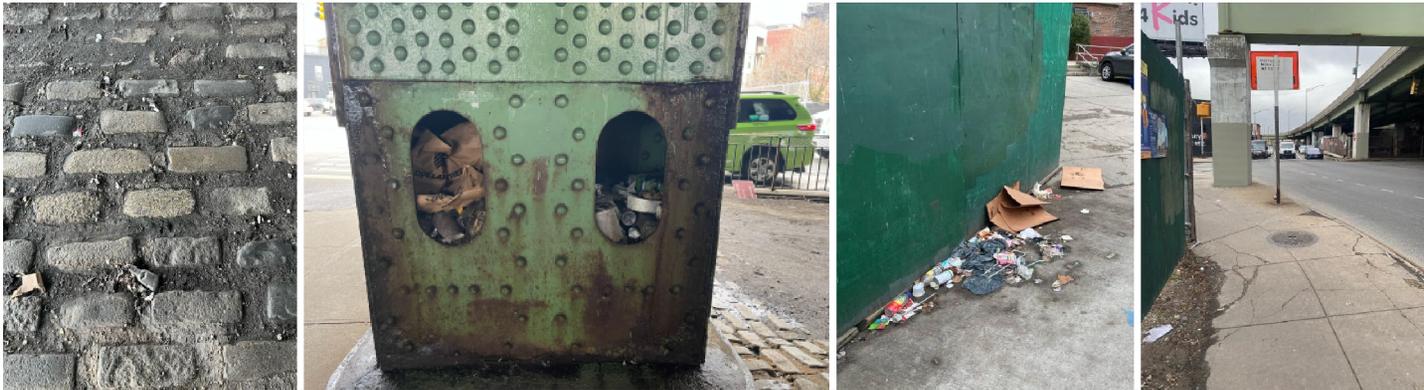


### **#3: Physical Environment**

**Red Hook residents noted that the BQE's appearance as neglected, dirty, and unsafe is a signal of the treatment of Red Hook as a whole. The physical environment under the BQE along Hamilton Ave is under-maintained with uneven ground, litter, broken sidewalks, large puddles and leaking, major construction equipment, broken fences, an absence of lighting, and no trash cans.**

“ ... under the highway it’s super dirty and it’s very unsanitary. It needs to be cleaner and better, it makes me feel disgusted. ”

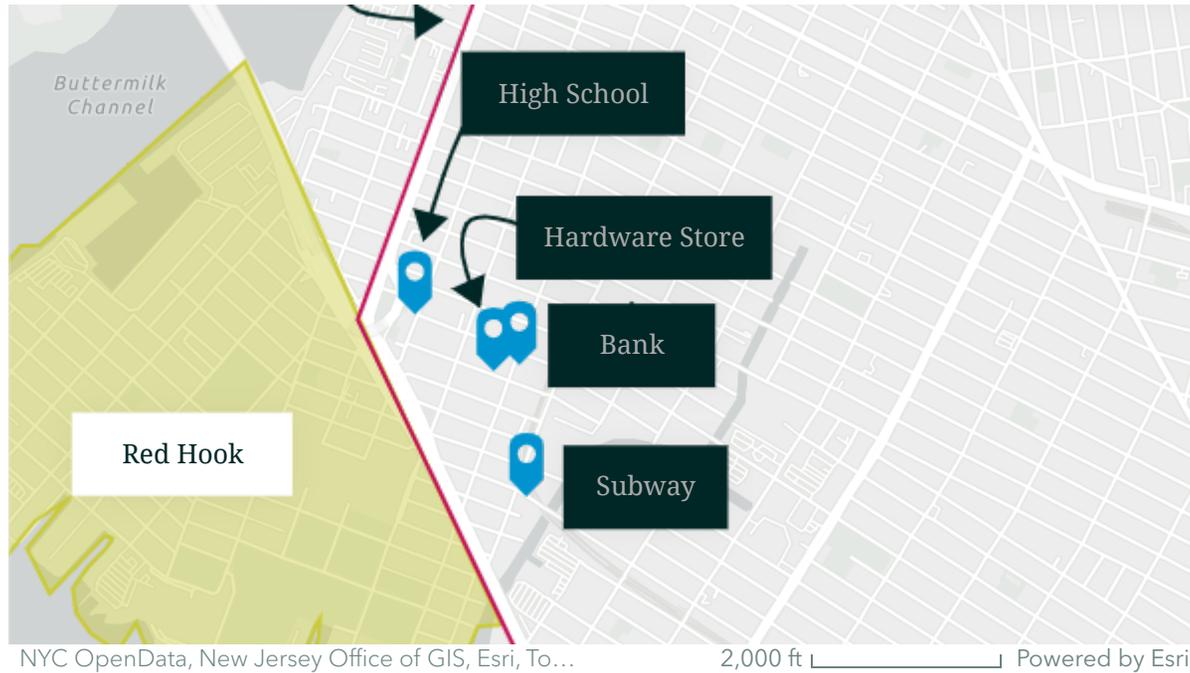
“ It feels like it brings my mood down. There’s really nothing pleasant just a lot of garbage. ”



left to right: an image of worn, uneven, dirty, and litter-ridden cobblestones in the median under the BQE; one of the columns holding up the elevated BQE, stuffed with layers of garbage; a pile-up of trash along a construction wall on the side-walk along Hamilton Ave under the BQE in Red Hook; an image of oncoming traffic from cars exiting the BQE and the Hugh Carey Tunnel onto Hamilton Ave, with broken sidewalk and a dirty construction wall

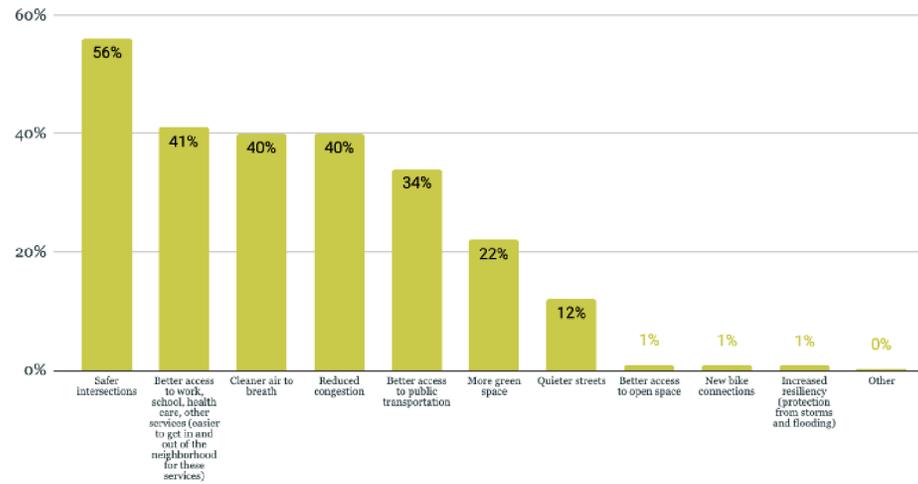
#### **#4: Access to Resources**

**The BQE defines the perimeter of Red Hook; in doing so, it cuts Red Hook off from accessing necessary resources, such as transportation and school.**



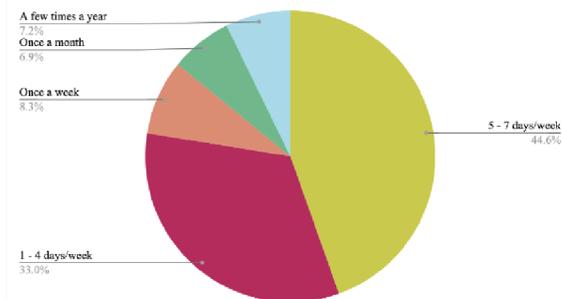
What do you need to cross the BQE to get to?

What are the TOP THREE community benefit(s) would you most like to see come out of the BQE Corridor Vision process?



- 34% of respondents included access to resources as a top benefit they would like to see from the BQE redesign project.
- In our youth observation sessions, young community members noted that this intersection is the way in and out of the community to access the only train station.
- Many people we spoke to traveled across the BQE 5-7 days a week, which indicates how frequently the Red Hook community needs to leave Red Hook in order to access resources.

How often do you travel in or through "the BQE Corridor"?



## Key Considerations

- **Concerns About Gentrification**
  - While residents were undoubtedly in agreement over the poor conditions of the BQE, residents also expressed concern over the increasing gentrification of Red Hook. Residents worried that if improvements were made to the BQE then their rent might increase and that neighborhood stores might increase their prices.
  - **"Are these conditions keeping the neighborhood from being gentrified? If we fix them will it become harder and more expensive in Red Hook?"**
- **Concerns About Construction**
  - Residents of the Red Hook houses have been subjected to ongoing disruptive construction on their buildings and grounds for many years due to the impact of Hurricane Sandy on crumbling public housing. One theme that emerged was wariness about the impact on the Red Hook community of years of intense construction in relation to a BQE redesign
- **These Concerns Are Not New**
  - The Red Hook community has been impacted by the BQE since it opened in 1954 and has been actively pushing for changes and improvements for decades.
  - The issues with this corridor are not new to the Red Hook community. Local schools, community activists, public housing leaders, and young people have fought

for increased safety which has resulted in little to no action by the DOT.

## **What's Next?**

### **Phase 2 BQE Visioning**

We have completed Phase 1 of our project and are now moving into Phase 2. In Phase 2, we will:

- Share preliminary concept ideas and designs from DOT for community feedback on interventions
- Continue identifying long-term interventions and gathering input from community members on prioritizing long term projects
- Explore potential strategies for long term changes to the BQE corridor and continue conversations with community, stakeholders, and elected officials about building local power to ensure community priorities that emerged from this project are acted upon
- Ongoing comments and questions (see below for how to stay in touch!)

### **Community Report Back**

We will be working over the months of April and May to share these findings with the Red Hook community and to launch Phase 2 of our visioning project. We'll do this by reporting

back to all of those that provided contact information to us with the survey, through school and community partner updates, on social media, and at a public community meeting.

To stay in touch and be informed of community meetings, please leave your contact information [HERE](#).

To leave comments, feedback, suggestions based on what you read here, click [HERE!](#)

**Thank you to everyone who participated in this project and we look forward to speaking with you again soon!**

## **Dedication**

This report is dedicated to the Red Hook community members who have lost their lives because of the Red Hook BQE corridor's dangerous conditions.

## **About Our Team**

Red Hook Initiative built an internal team within our Community Building program to lead the BQE visioning project. We worked in collaboration with Maddy Fox, Associate Professor of Sociology and Children and Youth Studies at Brooklyn College and founding member of Public Science Project.





**Kiyana (she/her)** I am the Lead Youth Organizer at Red Hood Initiative, committed to creating change and improvement of the issues affecting youth in public housing. I also create a space for young people to learn how to advocate for equity and social change for the community. I've been utilizing the BQE for most of my life and was excited to hear they finally have noticed that some sort of implementations needed to be done.



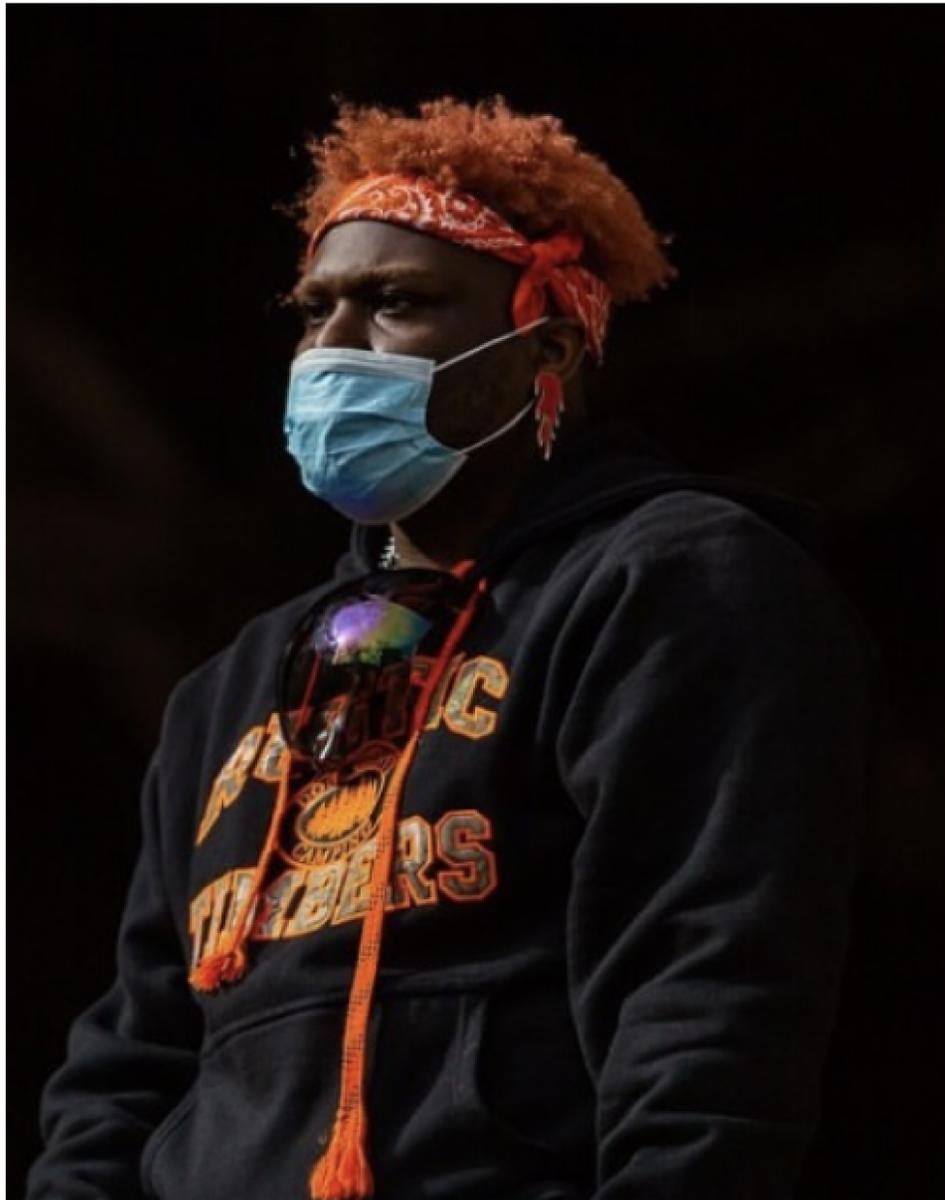
**Daniel (he/him)** I am community Youth Organizer at Red Hook Initiative. Driven my desire to help people in anywhere I live in and have recently graduated from BMCC with Associates of Arts and will be enrolled in a 4 year CUNY school and complete my undergraduate studies. My career goal is to become a First Responder. Something I would like to see more environmental protections and more safety accommodations for disabled persons and in cases of weather like snowstorms.

Maybe an annual inspection that provides this type of data  
could also help with the redesign.



**Catherine (she/her)** I am the Director of Community Building at Red Hook Initiative and have been working in Red Hook since 2012. I live two blocks from the BQE in Greenpoint and

travel across the BQE corridor at Hamilton Avenue every day on my way to work. My hope for this project is that it will elevate the voices of the Red Hook community concerning the dangerous and disruptive BQE corridor and move us towards comprehensive planning for meaningful change.



**Na-Lekan (they/he)** Na-Lekan is an awarded human rights activist and community organizer who has dedicated their life to fighting for social justice and equity. He has been recognized for his outstanding contributions to the field and is

respected for his tireless efforts to empower marginalized communities. The BQE is a long standing part of the Red Hook community. However, not only a direct representation of racist ideologies, but also a direct representation of classist ideologies. In that regard, the BQE doesn't properly represent the people who use it. Reimagining the BQE is reimagining a safer, more inclusive world for those once neglected in honor of its creation.



**Anabelle (she/her)** I am an MSW candidate at the Silberman School of Social Work doing my field placement at the Red Hook Initiative. I am passionate about community-based

advocacy and love working in collaboration with Red Hook residents to make changes within the neighborhood. In terms of the BQE, I want people to know the level of systemic harm that has been inflicted on the Red Hook community by cutting Red Hook off from necessary resources via the BQE.



**Quincy (they/them)** I am a graduate of Purchase College with a degree in Liberal Studies and have been working at the Red Hook Initiative for almost a decade. I am very passionate about trying to make my world and my home a better place. I always try to lead by example and to enjoy my time while doing it. Life shouldn't be serious so I try not to be. :) I am really excited to see the changes that will happen on the BQE, it's about time and it is well needed!



**Ashley (she/her)** I am a community youth organizer at the Red Hook Initiative. I've been a Red Hook resident for 10 years and have recently been learning a more about our neighborhood since i've began working here. I have always had a passion for community work and creating safer spaces

for marginalized groups such as those who live in this neighborhood. My greatest concern surrounding the BQE is the segregation it has created and how many people are not informed on that history and how important it is.



The end of the footbridge on the Carroll Gardens side,  
formerly called the 142 Bridge.

## **Thank you**

We appreciate and recognize the community members and partnering organizations that contributed to this report.

Cover illustration: Maria Mottola <https://www.mariadraws.com>

Last updated: April 24, 2023

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