HOBOKEN, N.J. — Every time a powerful nor’easter or tropical storm threatens New York, residents of this small city on the New Jersey bank of the Hudson River start having flashbacks to the devastating inundation they endured when Hurricane Sandy hit in 2012.

Hundreds of millions of gallons of water poured in from the river and left most of Hoboken underwater and many of its residents without power for a week. Almost immediately, city leaders decided that Hoboken had to be fortified against future
floods.

A solution seemed imminent in 2014. At a celebratory announcement, Gov. Chris Christie joined federal officials to herald the city’s winning a $230 million grant to finance a plan by Dutch architects to hold back the Hudson.

But more than three years after the hurricane, Hoboken is just as vulnerable to a deluge and the plan to defend it is mired in controversy. Furious residents have sounded off to city and state officials, opposing any remedy that might diminish the city’s character or its biggest selling point: the dazzling views of Manhattan.

The backlash could cost the city the money Washington has offered. Some residents have even endorsed that outcome.

“Please do not destroy the one valuable asset this city has, which is its view and the charm of tree-lined streets,” one resident, Suzanne Collins, wrote to state officials, saying Hoboken should “reject these funds.”

The plan would inevitably involve erecting sea walls between the river and the low-lying parts of the city, possibly over 12 feet high in places. And, as Dawn Zimmer, the mayor of Hoboken, has learned, “wall” is a fighting word.

“This is a historic opportunity for our city, an opportunity that no other city in the country has,” Ms. Zimmer, a Democrat, said in an interview in her City Hall office, a few blocks from where the surging river rushed in.
But irate residents, including Natalie Morales, a news anchor on the NBC “Today” show, have confronted Ms. Zimmer with their objections and directed their outrage to state officials. The mayor said she feared the public discord would cause Hoboken to lose out on its best chance to get help from the state and federal governments.

Wedged into the coastline between the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels, Hoboken is one of the country’s most densely populated places, with more than 50,000 people living in slightly more than a square mile. Some of the land closest to the river is elevated, but most of the city lies low and is notoriously susceptible to flooding even after just a heavy downpour.

City officials have tried to ease the flooding problem with pumps and cisterns, but stopping the river would require walls, Ms. Zimmer said. Not that she would call them that.

Instead, she is careful to use less provocative terms, such as a “flood-protection measure,” and emphasizes that a wall could double as an “amenity,” such as a bench or planter, that would fit into the urban landscape. But a wall by any other name has stirred indignation among prospective neighbors, who have vented in
public comments sent to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, which is responsible for devising a plan that will meet the federal requirements.

“No to the wall,” Stacy Wallace-Albert wrote in all capital letters, succinctly summarizing the opinion of many neighbors.

There is no hard and fast plan to build a wall anywhere yet. A barrier was just one part of a plan from a team led by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, a Dutch firm founded by the architect Rem Koolhaas. The plan was submitted to Rebuild by Design, a post-Hurricane Sandy design competition overseen by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

That plan, called “Resist, Delay, Store, Discharge,” involved strategies for holding rain and floodwater and slowing its release into the city’s sewer system. But its fundamental purpose was to prevent a repeat of what happened in Hoboken during Hurricane Sandy.

State engineers have drawn up five configurations, including some that would place a wall on the waterfront and one that would have it wind along city streets and end on a block lined with brownstones. They are scheduled to whittle those
alternatives down to three within several weeks, but the uproar from residents may have set back that schedule.

Resentment started bubbling up late last year at additional public meetings requested by Ms. Zimmer to elicit the opinions of a cross section of her constituents. She got an earful.

Some residents said that the waterfront and the front-row view of Manhattan were Hoboken’s most attractive features, and that to obscure the panorama would be foolish.

But the loudest opposition came from residents along Garden Street, which runs south several blocks from the river. Once they understood that one concept involved a wall four feet high or taller dividing their narrow street, they rebelled.

“You’re going to ruin the character of the neighborhood,” one woman said. One of her neighbors added: “I got denied a zoning thing I wanted to do in my home, but you’re going to put a four-foot wall in front of my house. No good.”
Online, the reaction was even more vituperative. Some residents started a petition calling for the rejection of the Garden Street proposal, saying the plan would expose “taxpaying homeowners who were not in a flood zone to new flood risks by trapping them on the ‘wet side’ of the new wall.”

Among the over 700 people who have supported the petition was Ms. Morales, who lives on one of the blocks that would be affected. The newscaster took a shot at Ms. Zimmer on the petition site, writing, “This is corruption at its finest!” and alleging a “kickback scheme at the highest level.”

Ms. Morales did not respond to several requests for comment. A spokeswoman for the “Today” show, Megan Kopf, declined to comment about Ms. Morales’s postings or whether NBC News had policies covering the involvement of its journalists in local politics.

Ms. Zimmer seemed mystified by Ms. Morales’s statements, saying she had met her only once before the newscaster showed up at a meeting about the Rebuild by Design process and challenged the engineers. “Did any of you guys walk the streets before you did the plans?” Ms. Morales asked them.

The mayor shrugged off the personal attacks, but she and other residents said they
were troubled by the idea that Hoboken should pass up the $230 million.

Sitting in his home-furnishings store that was flooded by Hurricane Sandy, Brian Battaglia shook his head at the thought. “To walk away from doing anything in Hoboken that stops the water from coming in seems unbelievable,” he said, recalling how the rising water burst through the back door and shoved everything to the front wall.

“If you didn’t drive down the back side of town and see people’s lives thrown out in the street, you might feel that way,” Mr. Battaglia said.

LaTrenda Ross, a 27-year resident of public housing in Hoboken, said she had not forgotten what Hurricane Sandy wrought. “To go through that for two weeks with no heat, no lights, no nothing, no food, it was a disaster,” she said.

Ms. Zimmer said she would be happy if a way could be found to resist a rising Hudson without limiting access to the waterfront or disrupting residential blocks. The Department of Environmental Protection said it would consider altering the proposed configurations to placate residents.

In the meantime, Ms. Zimmer has met with small groups of residents to try to assuage their fears. She said a friend recounted how her young daughter came home and explained that “they’re going to build a wall 12 feet high” that would block a schoolmate’s bedroom window.

Ms. Zimmer told her friend, “That’s not going to happen.”


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How Sea Walls Around Hoboken Might Have Stopped Hurricane Sandy’s Floods

By FORD FESSENDEN and JEREMY WHITE FEB. 7, 2016

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Walls at Weehawken Cove

Five alternatives are being considered by the state. All call for a wall, or a gated jetty, at Weehawken Cove, where 240 million gallons of water flowed in. A controversial alternative stretches the wall south down the middle of Garden Street. Here, the model shows how one possible wall might affect flooding. Eventually, water coming from the south floods most of the city.
Walls at both ends of town might keep almost all of Hoboken dry, but only if gates at the railroad underpasses on Marin Boulevard and Grove Street were built to keep out flooding from Jersey City. At the Long Slip Canal between Jersey City and Hoboken, where about 230 million gallons surged into Hoboken, some plans call for a wall alongside Observer Highway. Another proposes a gated dam in the water outside the Hoboken ferry terminal. The Stevens model shows the impact of a barrier in the south.

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**Stopping the Flood from the South**

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**Fully Walled City**

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