



Testimony on the 2021-22 Executive Budget

Joint Assembly Ways and Means and Senate Finance Committee Environmental Conservation Hearing

January 27, 2021

Submitted by Ruth Foster, Executive Director, NY Climate Advocates

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for this hearing on the Environmental Conservation budget. I am the Executive Director of New York Climate Advocacy Project. We strive to identify policy solutions to the climate crisis and to build the movement for a sustainable energy future. We work with two important climate coalitions. SHARE and Divest NY. I serve as co-chair of the Sheridan Hollow Alliance for Renewable Energy (SHARE) which works to support environmental justice communities in Albany by promoting a transition to renewable energy. I am also on the leadership team for Divest NY which worked to get the New York City and New York State pension funds to divest from fossil fuels, and is now focusing on divestment of the New York State Teacher's Retirement System.

I am submitting testimony to highlight the need for climate action to focus on environmental justice communities.

- 1. We Request \$600,000 in the State Budget to ensure that the Capitol and Empire State Plaza complex (Plaza) run on renewable energy and that the Sheridan Avenue Steam Plant (SASP) stops polluting the community in the shadow of the Capitol.**

Albany's Sheridan Hollow and Arbor Hill neighborhoods have high percentages of people of color and low income people, clearly fitting the definitions of "disadvantaged communities" in the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA), and "environmental justice" community in DEC regulations. People in these neighborhoods report high rates of cancer and asthma.

The SASP located just blocks from the Capitol, has burned fossil fuels, polluting the neighborhood for over a century. Further, next door to SASP the ANSWERS trash-to-steam plant released toxic chemicals into air until it closed in the 1990s.

DEC's Commissioner Policy 29 provides that:

No group of people, including a racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic group, should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations.

Therefore, the SASP must be shut down, and to do this the Plaza needs to transition to renewable energy sources.

We are grateful that the New York Power Authority has instituted a number of renewable projects utilizing funds initially slated for a proposed fracked gas power plant in Sheridan Hollow after project was abandoned. However, these projects do not address the heating and cooling needs of the Capitol and Plaza. A study must be conducted to include a look at geothermal, thermal load sharing and conservation options that will replace the need for the SASP.

2. New York should enact the Climate and Community Investment Act (CCIA) to jumpstart the state's transition to a renewable energy economy.

The landmark CLCPA mandates that New York achieve an 85% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions compared to 1990 levels and net zero emissions by 2050. The mandated reductions must be economy-wide, including in transportation, buildings, and home heating and cooling.

The CCIA, by putting a tax on carbon emissions is needed to provide much needed funding and to incentivize the transformation of our economy. It creates the opportunity to lessen the use of fossil fuels, to provide jobs and improve the quality of life of New Yorkers through a massive transition to renewables.

3. The Executive Budget must ensure that New York meets the CLCPA mandate to Invest 40% of energy funds with disadvantaged communities. We request \$250,000 to position Sheridan Hollow in Albany as a leader in this community transition to renewable energy.

The CLCPA also contains an investment mandate, which requires that at least 35%, (with a goal of 40%) of state energy and related funds be spent in “disadvantaged” communities. This important provision reflects the correct view of the Legislature and the Governor that Black and Brown and low income white communities throughout our state that have for years borne disproportionate burdens of climate and other pollution through, among other things, the placement of fossil fuel and other polluting facilities in or near their communities. Therefore, these communities must receive priority funding to address the systemic underinvestment and pollution they have experienced.

As stated above, Sheridan Hollow and Arbor Hill are such communities. Due to the long history of these neighborhoods being polluted in order to heat and power New York's government buildings, we believe that they should be among the first to benefit from these funds. Therefore we request \$250,000 in targeted funding for a study to identify ways to transition these communities toward our new renewable energy future. Due to its history of being polluted by state government, Sheridan Hollow and Arbor Hill should be one of the communities in the front of the line to utilize these funds to transition to a cleaner and renewable energy source with quality jobs and job training. This study would

help position this key environmental justice community for just transition funding as it becomes available and ensure effective utilization of the various funding sources.

4. Finally, we call for an end to all non-essential fossil fuel subsidies.

New York continues to subsidize the fossil fuel industry with approximately \$1.6 billion in tax breaks. The burning of fossil fuels has created a climate catastrophe and the pandemic has caused economic hardship for countless New Yorkers. There is no justification to give handouts to the big corporations that continue to destroy our climate. We can't solve the climate crisis and get to net zero emissions by 2050 as required by the CLCPA by subsidizing the oil and gas industries. The money must be put to use where it is needed -- to help those who have been impacted by the pandemic and to transition our economy to a renewable energy economy.

While some of these subsidies help low income communities such as home heating aid, some of the subsidies are simple handouts to the fossil fuel industry. Therefore we call for an immediate end to non-essential subsidies and a plan to eliminate all subsidies without creating harm to disadvantaged communities.

In summary:

The climate crisis demands that we stop our dependence on fossil fuels. New York's new climate law mandates a rapid transition to renewable energy. The CCA will help speed up the transition by reducing carbon pollution and providing funding to the renewable transition.

In addition, we must stop subsidizing the fossil fuel industry that is creating the climate crisis.

As we transition to renewables we must support disadvantaged communities that have been burdened by polluting powerplants and are often the first communities to be impacted by climate disasters.

By funding studies to transition the Capitol and Plaza to renewable energy sources we can showcase our Capitol and Plaza as models for how to transform large building complexes. By studying and preparing a plan to transition the neighborhoods that have been impacted by the Sheridan Avenue Steam Plant we can learn how to transition disadvantaged communities into climate resilient communities while providing quality jobs and job training.

In closing, New York is making big strides in tackling the climate crisis. Now is the time to get started.

I once again thank you for this opportunity to testify. I may be reached at rmfosterny@gmail.com or 518-588-0187 should the committee want more information on these issues.