THE GREEN CITY: CLIMATE POLICY FOR NEW HAVEN

An Imagine Better Brief
scientists and engaged citizens have known about the existential threat represented by global warming and climate change. In 2019, New Haven declared a climate emergency. Four years later, as record after record for heat and extreme weather are set, and as the ashes from forest fires hundreds of miles away arrive in our lungs, it has become clear that the climate crisis has arrived, and will only intensify in the years to come.

FOR DECADES

Thinking globally, acting locally

New Haven cannot solve this global crisis on its own. But there is a moral and practical imperative to respond to this imminent threat through both mitigation and adaptation efforts. Individual and collective efforts will be required, and policymakers have a crucial role to play. And we now know that reducing the use of fossil fuels helps not only in the long run, but with immediate public health benefits for individuals and communities as well.

Along with declaring a climate emergency in 2019, the Board of Alders has also created the Office of Climate and Sustainability, which is charged with implementing the city’s climate framework, and a Climate Task Force that guides its strategy. This office has made ambitious commitments, and works with each part of the city government to implement them. This systemic approach is necessary, but so far the city has failed to treat this as the emergency it has declared it to be: some key programs are still in the planning stages after five years. Using emergency powers we can fast track changes needed to combat climate change. We need to combine the energy of local activists of all ages who have helped push the city forward on these issues, the new knowledge of risks and best practices that is continually emerging, and the resources and authority of the city government to lead. Every other plan we have is made more uncertain by climate change, so this needs to be an urgent, systemic priority. It’s time to really treat the climate emergency as an emergency. Using emergency powers we can fast track changes needed to combat climate change.
Emergency Powers

“Because of the existing and increasing possibility of the occurrence of disasters of unprecedented size and destructiveness,” the municipal code gives the office of the mayor special powers to deal with civil emergencies. Among these powers are the mayor’s ability to promulgate “orders, rules, and regulations as may be necessary” to combat the emergency. Sec. 11-6. The emergency rules “shall supersede all existing ordinances, orders, rules, and regulations.” Sec. 11-7.

This gives the city government the power to be nimble when dealing with a crisis. After a summer that included gray days with smoke-inflected air from Canadian wildfires, that crisis is here and our local government needs to tackle it accordingly. Recognizing that the city considers the climate crisis an “emergency,” our city can use emergency powers to fast track changes that reduce local carbon emissions.
We need to:

- Complete transition of electric grid to clean energy from fossil fuels - create renewable sources of energy for the city. Collecting solar energy can not only be revenue-neutral, it can be revenue positive. We need to use all city space possible to collect solar energy to speed along this transition.

- Infill housing has been found to be key to reducing local carbon emissions. We need to suspend and change rules that impede local housing construction.

- Build the infrastructure that encourages mobility alternatives like public transit, cycling, and walking through smart density development and user-friendly planning.

- Expand the tree canopy throughout the city, particularly in low-income neighborhoods with low tree coverage. Reevaluate current tree planting restrictions to make sure the city's canopy plans support expanded share coverage and maximize the air-cleaning potential of trees.

- Accelerate goals for electrification of city fleets: these commitments must be made now, especially because lag times for delivery are increasing as other cities take up this low-hanging fruit. The city must also look to convert as many city vehicles to ebikes as possible. Prohibit or place user fees on pollutants for which alternatives readily exist.

- Publicly support an Environmental Impact Statement before any expansion of Tweed Airport occurs. The city made a generations-defining decision when it brought highways into downtown. This decision - though supported by the smartest minds, armed with data about economic development - had significant detrimental effects on the health of residents, particularly asthma rates and air quality. We must ensure that we do not make similar mistakes with the airport.
• Explore additional highway removal projects. Cities all over the country and the world are reaping the economic and environmental benefits of removing highways from their towns and turning them into livable spaces. New Haven has dabbled in this endeavor with its conversion of the Route 24 connector. But like so much municipal policy in the Elm City in the last decade, these efforts are decidedly less ambitious than those in other cities. The city should explore removing or reducing I-95 and I-91’s footprint within the city limits in an effort to reduce local emissions, improve asthma rates and increase taxable property in New Haven.

• Intensely pursue and use Inflation Reduction Act subsidies and grants for both public projects and private consumption

• Accelerate residential heat pump installation program.

• Accelerate and subsidize electric transportation infrastructure (charging stations) development.

• Divest from fossil fuels in pension funds and other investments.

• Build neighborhood and citywide composting programs to encourage composting of biodegradable waste, which mitigates methane produced by such waste in landfills. Reducing food waste and composting are both significant steps that actors at all levels can take.

• Accelerate job training programs for New Haveners to take up green transition trade work and public works jobs

• If necessary, increase staffing at Climate and Sustainability office or with specialists in other city departments to increase public outreach and speed progress toward goals.