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Climate Justice Working Group Update

**By Jeff Jones**

The Climate Justice Working Group continued its progress toward a recommended definition of Disadvantaged Communities (DACs), with a final vote scheduled for either the 9th or 13th of December. The definition, mandated under the CLCPA, will go to the Climate Action Council, which is expecting to receive a draft scoping plan from staff, also on December 9th (see Climate Action Council Update, by Anne Reynolds, Dec. 1st). CJWG Chair Alanah Kaddell-Tuckey, Acting Director of DEC's Office of Environmental Justice, commented that discussions are underway to determine when and how the working group will next engage with the Council.

Reviewing the agenda for the session, Illume Consultant Alex Dunn highlighted the work being done to finalize the list of indicators – approximately 45 different elements, including financial thresholds for individual thresholds, and the need to agree on an “iterative approach” that recognizes that annual review of the DAC criteria will be necessary.

Before that process is complete, however, working group members re-stated their request for a clearer sense of what programs already being implemented by state agencies will be part of New York's climate investments. The goal is not only to determine how much additional funding is directed to DACs, but also to help determine the extent to which existing state programs impact individual households vs. regional investments. “We want a sense of the totality of climate funding we are all talking about,” New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (NYC-EJA) Director Eddie Bautista said.

According to Chris Coll of NYSERDA, a leading researcher for and advisor to the CJWG, this exercise, referred to as “geo-coding,” is difficult and time consuming. This is largely due to the fact that different state agencies track potentially relevant programs in different ways. There are programs focused on households based on income – heating assistance, for example, as well as commercial, industrial and transportation programs that could come under the CLCPA. Coll said that staff is looking at clean energy spending as the “primary metric” toward the 40% goal, most of that in energy assistance. Evaluating and tracking programs already in existence, along with those being discussed by the CAC, will be difficult over time as the main thing lacking is a baseline reference.

Looking at exponential growth in potential clean energy funding, both from CLCPA and federal infrastructure investments, several working group members raised concern about the need to prioritize support for minority and women-owned businesses and opportunities.

Rahwa Ghirmatzion, of PUSH Buffalo, raised concerns that current programs are often a missed opportunity to invest in businesses and jobs rooted in and created by people in the communities they are designed to support. Sonal Jessel of We Act for Environmental Justice raised the danger of funding big, established companies rather than disadvantaged community-based companies, and referred to the worker cooperative model as one that should be promoted. Bautista noted that a NYC-EJA program designed to support MWBE programs had been picked up by NYSERDA some years ago, with limited success.

The remainder of the session focused on individual and regional impacts related to using income as a primary DAC category. Decisions will be required soon, taking into account urban and rural needs, tied to historic neglect, the climate crisis and meaningful investment impacts from the clean energy perspective. Various scenarios could have DACs defined as ranging from 41% to 58% of all New York households.

The CJWG is scheduled to next meet on Dec. 9th, with a possible vote on Monday, Dec. 13th.