



119 Washington Avenue, Suite 1G
Albany, NY 12210
518.432.1405
info@aceny.org | www.aceny.org

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Last Climate Action Council Meeting of 2021

By Anne Reynolds

After 18 meetings of the Climate Action Council, and dozens more meetings of the various advisory panels, on December 20 the Council debated and then voted to release the Draft Climate Scoping Plan for public review. The Scoping Plan is a lengthy document laying out an extremely ambitious plan to nearly-completely transform NY's energy sector over a twenty-eight year period. Although the Draft includes a reference case and three additional scenarios, the overwhelming majority of each scenario is the same, and can be partially summarized as: build renewable energy and electrify everything.

There are, of course, many more recommendations covering agriculture, forestry, local government, waste management, and other topics – in addition to many more detailed recommendations for the three biggest-emitting sectors: buildings, transportation, and electricity. There are also more nuanced approaches for hard-to-electrify sectors and activities. And there are still remaining controversial issues that were being debated by the Council right up until the vote, such as: should – and how should - NYS establish a price on greenhouse gases among the many options for doing so? How should we describe the need to downsize or decommission the natural gas system? What recommendations have a funding source already and how are we going to pay for the rest? Despite these and other continuing differences of opinion, there was no question that to meet these goals, NY clearly needs to:

- radically decarbonize and electrify existing and new buildings;
- build renewable energy facilities, storage, and transmission at a great pace;
- rapidly electrify transportation vehicles;
- aggressively reduce methane emissions from the waste system, and
- ramp up efforts to sequester carbon in NY farms and forests.

The need for these measures is not in doubt if NYS intends to meet the Climate Act's goals.

Prior to the discussion of the Draft Plan on December 20th, the Council heard an update on the jobs study, the integration analysis, and a report on the progress of the Climate Justice Working Group on the definition of Disadvantaged Communities – a critical piece of NY’s implementation plan for the Climate Act. Regarding the jobs study, Carl Mas of NYSERDA and Phil Jordan of BW Research augmented their previous report with the findings of the workforce analysis – the Secondary Employment Outlook and several sensitivity analyses. As previously reported, the job losses are more than offset by job gains in the modelling. The Secondary Employment Outlook examines the type and quality of jobs lost and gained in more detail. Mr. Mas also presented some slides on the uncertainty in the benefit cost analysis and the requested assessment of air source vs. ground source heat pump deployment; findings indicate that while higher deployment of ground source heat pumps will significantly reduce electric system costs by reducing winter peak demand, the total costs are higher given the complication and costs associated with ground source heat pumps vs. air source heat pumps.

The update from the Climate Justice Working Group (CJWG) explained that the group had narrowed down the suite of indicators used to define disadvantaged communities (DACs) to 45 – 20 that assess environmental burdens and risks and 25 that describe population characteristics and health vulnerabilities. Applying these 45 criteria to New York State results in a definition of Disadvantaged Communities that encompasses roughly 35% of NYS households. The CJWG also decided to include all low-income households in the definition as well (that is, even if they were not otherwise mapped in a DAC using the criteria), which would result in roughly 48% of households being covered by a DAC. The update also began the discussion of how NYS will measure what percentage of funding is invested in DACs.

Following these informative updates and a lengthy debate about portions of the Draft Scoping Plan, the CAC then voted to release it and State staff indicated it would be released to the public on December 30th. Despite remaining points of contention, the document overall is an amazing compilation of work, analysis, and input on ways NY can reduce emissions to the levels required by the Climate Law.

The overwhelming majority of the recommendations achieved full consensus on the advisory panels and within the Council, and there is no shortage of actions that can be taken during 2022 – by the Legislature and others – while the plan continues to undergo public review and comment. with six opportunities in 2022.