

NAACP & NJDEP's Climate Action Community Dialogue | Summary Meeting Notes

Date: April 23, 2025

Purpose: A listening session for DEP to hear directly from community members about any previously identified climate action and air pollution priorities and any new climate-related issues facing your community. Feedback and suggested solutions will shape New Jersey's Comprehensive Climate Action Plan – which will be released later in 2025.

Attendees: 15, including residents and members of the North Brunswick Environmental Commission, South Brunswick Environmental Commission; Metuchen, Edison and Piscataway Branch of the NAACP (MEAB); NAACP Southern Burlington County; the NJ Progressive Equitable Energy Coalition (NJPEEC); and CAIR Action; plus, several DEP Staff from the Division of Climate Mitigation and Monitoring.

Community Co-Organizers: William "Bill" Casey and Keith Voos of the NAACP-MEAB co-organized and co-hosted the event with NJDEP's Division of Climate Mitigation and Monitoring. Marcus Sibley, the Environmental & Climate Justice Chairmen for the NAACP Southern Burlington County and the Chairman of NJPEEC facilitated the discussion among community members. Each of these NJ community members played an essential role in consulting the DEP on background materials provided and creating an atmosphere where participants could more freely share their insights, issues and experiences.

Summary of Climate Pollution Issues & Actions Identified by Meeting Participants:

Education & Engagement

- **General public lacks the level of understanding about climate change** necessary for knowing what actions to take, and which actions have the most significant impact on reducing emissions
- **Not enough educational training support** for climate change resources and DEP online tools; including implementation support
- **Make climate change materials and outreach activities more accessible** (by writing materials at an 8th grade reading level, providing virtual meeting options and compensating community members for their time, translating into multiple languages, and providing educational webinars or trainings for the public.)

Transportation

- **Air pollution concerns from cars and trucks**, especially from diesel trucks
- **Air pollution concerns from idling vehicles** – especially police vehicles
- **Not enough footpaths, sidewalks, or bike lanes/paths** that allow people to get around without a car, even for short trips; a built environment creates barriers to low-carbon transportation alternatives
- **Not enough electric jitney or transit buses**, bus service

Waste and Incineration

- **Incinerators** are major polluters that disproportionately impact overburdened communities and there is a desire among community members to shut them down.
- **Need initiatives that help promote the shift towards zero-waste systems**

Land Use & Development

- **New warehousing and data center development** increases traffic, truck emissions, and decreases available land for affordable housing or other uses.
- **Concerns about new development** that does not include clean energy technologies or equipment (solar panels, EV chargers etc.)
- **Perception that citizens [Environmental Commissions] do not have a real say in local development decisions** that affect emissions and pollution
- **Lack of mixed-use development**, where stores, businesses, offices, and other destinations can be built with residences in a more compact and efficient manner

Electric Generation

- **Need more solar and should not give up on off-shore wind**
- **Need more opportunities for smaller, (distributed) renewable energy resources** at the district or neighborhood scale.

Residential Buildings

- **Need for clearer communication and greater access to home energy and electrification incentive program opportunities**; making it easier for people to understand what is available
- **Existing electrification rebates and incentives are inadequate** in size, especially for supporting low- and moderate- income households

- **Difficult for apartment buildings to do energy-efficiency retrofits**

Workforce Development

- **Need investments in paid apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship, technical and vocational workforce training programs and career development** that actively include and support woman and those from other underrepresented groups
- **Need to create and market good-paying, ‘green’ trade jobs in a way that is attractive to young people**

Detailed Notes:

1. What needs to happen and/or be in place for communities to have an effective role in responding to climate issues?

Education and awareness raising

Public Facing Tools

Tools and resources for communities need to be accessible, meaning that they educate and explain scientific concepts at a middle school level, including guidance on how to use the tool and examples of how the tool is being used. Attendees voiced support for more live technical support and training.

“I don’t have a background in science. It’s important to have scientific things explained at the level for a 9-year-old.”

“How can we talk about this [climate change, its impacts, and how to address it] without lecture?”

[EJMAP](#) and similar tools were cited by participants as forms of technical tools and resources that give communities greater ability to engage and respond to environmental issues and influence local planning boards. One participant spoke about how they were excited about DEP’s EJMAP but struggled to understand how to meaningfully use the tool.

“When I saw EJMAP, I just loved that. I wanted to use it here in North Brunswick because we were opposing another warehouse development, and I wanted to use it to make the case for why this is an EJ community. When I opened up the tool, I couldn’t make use of it. We need the implementation piece—guidance and examples on how to use the tools. An implementation piece and an education piece.”

There was a desire from some participants for a tool that would help them assess their environmental footprints as a town, so that residents could hold their township officials accountable.

DEP shared that they are working on a tool that would provide some of that (related to GHG emissions). DEP is gathering the underlying data so a municipality or resident could select their town from a dropdown and see where their baseline GHG emissions are coming from and compare the impact of various actions and strategies to reduce emissions.

Accessibility

Participants urged the DEP to make these meetings hybrid (virtual + in-person) and/or hold them virtually [online] so more people can participate. Participants voiced that it’s important to ensure that feedback comes from all parts of the state from a variety of perspectives.

Audiences + Engagement Strategies

Several participants felt that tabling at events, printed educational materials, large-scale advertising (such as on billboards), and sharing educational communications via social media and videos could be effective actions for raising awareness. Specifically, by involving social justice groups and working with community-based organizations. Libraries, churches and senior groups give out information about programs [including energy-related incentives programs] and is where they learn about these opportunities.

Empowering Local Decision Making

There was a discussion about how Environmental Commissions (ECs) could be more effective in implementing local changes for environmental justice and climate.

The group seemed to agree that local town planning boards and zoning boards had more decision-making power on development actions that impact GHG emissions and environmental quality (such as the construction of “huge warehouses,” “AI data centers,” and new housing and apartment buildings which may not have electric appliances and equipment). Participants shared the opinion that when these developments come before a town’s environmental commission, the environmental impact statements and the decision to move forward with the development already been made by the planning board. Some people feel discouraged and that what they want doesn’t end up having an effect.

“It can’t be that you’ve already baked the cake, and you’re just asking me what kind of icing to put on it.”

New warehousing and data center developments were identified to have broad implications for communities including increased diesel trucks that produce traffic congestion and air pollution and increased localized energy use/demand which means more emissions. New warehousing was also noted to limit available space and locations for new affordable housing in the community, which was a concern for participants.

Participants felt there should be laws requiring that new buildings like these warehouses have solar on their rooftops or parking lots and install electric vehicle charging stations. One participant felt that there is an opportunity for smaller (distributed) energy resources where people could share power with neighbors, or facilities could provide (clean, renewable) power to the surrounding community. All agreed that EC’s should have more decision-making power around township development projects.

Representation on local boards was also discussed, including how one gets on them and whether they are paid positions. A participant noted the equity considerations and concerns related to representation on these boards, other advisory committees, and even the community engagement the DEP is conducting now for this Comprehensive Climate Action Plan:

“If you want prolonged success, we need to compensate people for their time and expertise. If you overlook that, you are going to lose the expertise.”

2. What do you know of NJ’s plans to make fair access to clean and affordable energy available?

Only a few participants were aware of some electrification and energy incentive programs that are available. Generally, most participants were not familiar with [NJ Clean Energy Programs \(NJCEP\)](#) or [utility assistance programs](#) or [other utility program offerings \(like those from PSE&G\)](#); or they knew about them but did not know the details. Consensus was that:

“It’s a lot of work to find out this stuff.”

There was a discussion about how DEP, environmental commissions and organizations could spread the word about these incentive programs.

Participants voiced urgency and concern about getting more people to know about existing incentive programs and rebates out of fear that if money is left on the table that could provide justify cutting the programs due to low participation or rebate usage. One participant noted that libraries, church groups, and senior groups give out this information and have been the avenue through which they have learned about them in the past.

3. How would you like to see home electrification and energy incentive programs expanded?

One participant felt that the existing incentives— particularly rebates for electrification—are not enough to incentivize people, especially low- and moderate-income households. Emphasis was placed on making sure programs relate and are connected to affordability.

4. What alternative ‘clean’ or zero-emission energy sources should NJ pursue to meet future electricity demand?

Resounding support among participants for more solar and continued investment/pursuit of offshore wind. Participants voiced support for requiring new construction to have solar, green roofs, charging stations, and permeable pavement.

"We need a source of power that is not killing us. We need to find a way to more effectively communicate that we need these [solar, wind and other renewable energy sources]."

"Far too many kids are losing out because they are dealing with asthma, cancer, disproportionate impacts of growing up living in closer proximity to these polluting power plants and other facilities due to environmental racism."

There was a back and forth about whether the Comprehensive Climate Action Plan (CCAP) will have any "teeth" or if it will just be a plan. DEP clarified that while it will just be a plan, it can recommend legislation; regulations; or that the state develop model ordinances for towns and municipalities.

5. In addition to electric municipal and school buses, do options like eBikes and scooters appeal to you?

Several people noted that these options were not personally appealing to them because they did not feel comfortable using them due to their age, ability, and perceived safety concerns.

"We're bisected by route 1 so I don't see eBikes being an effective solution here."

One participant felt these transportation modes were good options, but that they need more supportive infrastructure:

"They [eBikes and scooters] appeal to me because people can't afford cars and people have to get to work. People have to get around. They should have lanes or sidewalks. I don't like them but people need to use them."

Some spoke about their desire to see more electric jitney buses or transit buses instead of the focus just being on electric cars. One participant also shared the [GO! Trenton](#) project as a possible model.

The group noted the lack of sidewalks and footpaths in their communities of North and South Brunswick, which prevents people from walking (rather than driving) to destinations that are close by to where they live.

"There are no footpaths! North Brunswick is divided by Route 1 and another big road. I live a few minutes from the Dunkin but I would NEVER walk there. We're really up against this infrastructure that makes it so difficult."

The group discussed possible solutions to addressing these issues. Some noted that problem stems from zoning, and that if there was more mixed-use zoning (mixed-used development where housing is co-located with commercial development), it would make it easier for people to get around without driving a car. Pedestrian bridges were mentioned as another potential, though not ideal, solutions to communities and pedestrians feeling bisected by major roadways.

6. What is your understanding of the term "zero-waste initiatives"? What would incentives for zero-waste initiatives, or 'circular economy' programs look like?

Some participants felt that pursuing zero-waste systems is just not doable at this time because of the changes to the "American life" that is required. Others felt that there were some easy ways to promote shifts towards zero-waste systems, citing things such as the plastic bag ban and the DEP providing reusable utensils for the food at the meeting itself. A \$1 charge for takeout containers so that you bring your own, instituting a deposit based-system, or passing legislation like a "bottle bill" were several other potential solutions participants noted. One participant highlighted that others states like NY put the recycling costs into the product themselves so that you can recycle it.

"We have power to push legislation that makes sense. We need more policies that make people do the right thing."

7. How could zero waste initiatives help to address concerns about the impacts of incinerators?

One participant shared that different towns that have a trash quota... if they don't meet their trash quota they will throw the recycling in with the trash. Where it is then sent to an incinerator. The participant explained that this is because towns

have contracts with the [incinerator] facilities. Incinerators generate a small proportion of electricity to the grid compared to other resources, but they release a disproportionate amount of air pollutants.

“All incinerators produce energy—but only a small amount of energy”

There was some brief discussion about ways to reduce materials being sent to incinerators and reduce the harmful pollutants emitted at those facilities.

8. What would you like to see NJ develop in terms of effective local training for good-paying jobs in a green economy?

The group was in agreement and optimistic (despite offshore wind setbacks) that there is enormous potential to train and employ residents of their communities in green economy careers such as electricians, roofers, solar panel installers, wind turbine maintenance workers; electric bus and electric HVAC (heat pump) technicians and more, and that investment in workforce development training programs are needed in order to make it happen. Speaking to the labor needs that are required to meet the State’s ambitious climate and clean energy goals, one participant said:

“We know what to teach and we have all the tools in place... Do you know how many homes are in NJ and how many installers will be needed to make that happen? There's a lot of potential for new good jobs. People are saying 'we're not ready yet'... They've incentivized the companies... But we don't have the people to go out and get trained to do that job. It's the roofer that does the racking system, and it's the electrician that does that installation of the panels. All of the homes on your block, those roofs are all going to get solar. That's a lot of opportunity to employ people.”

Participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that new green economy jobs in the ‘trades’ train and employ women. It was noted that while women have historically been underrepresented in these sectors, new investments in workforce training programs and career development in New Jersey’s ‘green economy’ could be modelled after federal government programs of the past like the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) program from the late 1970s which provided funding and support for a variety of programs including pre-apprenticeship, training, job development and other programs that helped women, particularly low-income and young women, get good-paying, union jobs in fields traditionally held by men such as the construction trades.

Participants also mentioned other ideas for developing effective local training for green economy jobs, such as: providing paid training or apprenticeships; expanding available opportunities for more apprenticeships throughout the state; fully funding and bringing back trade/tech education in schools where it has been cut; and pursuing communication and marketing campaign strategies that help ‘glamorize’ the trades. One participant, referring to the power of social media to shape people’s perception of what is cool – especially young people’s—stated that:

“We need more electricians, and less influencers. Engineers not influencers... Or more engineer influencers, electrician influencers, welding influencers...”

All participants supported the idea of paying a small additional local tax that would fund expanded vocational/“vo-tech” programs at high schools, technical schools and community colleges to train youth and young adults in the skillsets needed to advance into ‘green’ trade careers.

Participants emphasized the importance of both this comprehensive plan and the issue of workforce development training in the green economy. The recommendations the plan makes regarding workforce development and training will affect what jobs and careers kids in New Jersey today have when they grow up.