Testimony of Environmental Advocates NY

Before the New York State Senate Environmental Conservation Committee and the New York State Senate Energy and Telecommunications Committee

Hearing on the Climate and Community Investment Act (S.4264-A)

April 13, 2021

Albany, New York

Environmental Advocates NY is pleased to submit written testimony to the Senate Committee on Environmental Conservation and the Senate Committee on Energy and Telecommunications on the Climate and Community Investment Act (CCIA), which will serve as the funding source to ensure that no one is left behind as we achieve the goals set by the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA).

Path to the CCIA

In 2019 New York State made history with the passage of the CLCPA, which set the most aggressive emissions reduction targets of any state and established the standard for investment in disadvantaged and frontline communities. Two years later, we still have the most ambitious plan and other states and the federal government are now using our climate law as the blueprint for making an economy wide shift to renewable energy in a just and equitable way.

But the CLCPA was never meant to stand alone. Mandating emissions reductions was the first step, and paying for the economic shift away from fossil fuels was always meant to be step two. The CCIA was developed by the same frontline communities, environmental and social justice leaders, environmental advocates, labor partners and policy experts that developed the CLCPA. The CCIA is the people's plan for investing in communities to transition away from fossil fuels towards a cleaner, more equitable economy powered by renewable energy.

Investment Vehicle for the CLCPA

While the CLCPA is an impressive commitment the State is actively seeking to implement, the biggest barrier to implementation is the price tag. Transitioning our buildings, vehicles, industries and homes to run entirely on renewable energy is a significant investment that will need to be made in every municipality across the state. Not only is it imperative that we reach the emissions reduction targets in the right timeline to reduce the impacts of climate change, we must do it in a manner facilitating an equitable and just transition for our vulnerable and low-income communities. By charging polluters for their greenhouse gas emissions and co-pollutants, the CCIA will generate revenues – roughly $10-15 billion annually - to switch to renewable energy without financially burdening local governments, small businesses and families.

Other "market-based" proposals attempt to use the price of greenhouse gases as the means to reduce emissions, but New York already has emissions reduction mandates for greenhouse gases and co-pollution codified by the CLCPA. The CCIA is designed as a method of collecting money from industries that are profiting off the climate crisis and polluting our communities. Using the funds from the CCIA will allow the state to make investments in needed areas such as scaling up renewable energy and public transit options and expanding job-creating green infrastructure through community level energy planning.

To meet the goals of CLCPA the State will need to devote significantly more resources to electrifying our economy. While many NYSERDA programs are geared toward moving New York closer to meeting its goals, they do not measure up to the scale required by the CLCPA. Moreover, NYSERDA programs have not historically served disadvantaged communities at the levels required by the climate law. In order to meet emissions reduction targets and have a just transition to an economy powered by renewable energy, a dedicated revenue source is needed as well as a statewide, equitable investment strategy, which the CCIA provides.

As the climate crisis intensifies it is clear that there is limited time for meaningful intervention. Scientists have stated that if we do not make the right decisions and investments in the next 9 years, we will not be able to prevent the most severe and irreversible impacts of climate change. That is why we must act now by scaling up investments in mitigation to draw down the harmful emissions that make our communities unhealthy and create an unstable climate. The nation is looking for New York to continue to be a strong climate leader, which means acting with urgency to meet our statewide emissions reduction goals, and the CCIA is the investment tool that will allow us to successfully implement the CLCPA while lifting up the communities that have been impacted the most by the combustion of fossil fuels.

Investment in Public Health

Charging polluters for their greenhouse gas emissions and co-pollutants will help the state achieve the CLCPA goals and greatly improve public health. When fossil fuels are burned the chemical reaction releases greenhouse gases into the air along with harmful co-pollutants such as particulate matter which contributes to smog, nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds. These co-pollutants contribute to health risks including respiratory illness like asthma, diabetes, birth defects, heart problems, strokes, cancer and premature deaths.

Unsurprisingly, co-pollution and the related health impacts are not evenly distributed across the state. Industrial polluters, power plants and high traffic corridors associated with the deadliest levels of co-pollution are disproportionately located in low-income and communities of color. In New York, 2.7million Latinos, 2 million Black people and 1.2 million Asians live with air pollution that is higher than the state average, representing 74% of the Black population and 80% of the Asian population.

In contrast, over two thirds of white New Yorkers live in areas that are below the state average for air pollution.

As COVID-19 stormed the globe, air pollution exacerbated the impacts and increased the number of deaths caused by the virus, particularly in Black and Brown communities. In the United States Black, Indigenous, Latinx and Pacific Islander communities experienced COVID-19 death rates at double the rate of white Americans. This unequal impact is in part due to the disproportionate distribution of emissions and co-pollution that Black and Brown communities face. By charging emitters for co-pollution, the funds can be spent on community-based solutions and interventions that will improve the health of residents.

Children are also at high risk of being harmed by air pollution, and co-pollutants have been linked to the development of asthma in children. In the United States, asthma is a the most common health condition among children, and is a leading cause of school absence. Asthma-related school absences are linked to lower academic performance especially in communities of color. They also lead to missed workdays for caregivers and increased healthcare costs straining our economy. Addressing co-pollution in communities of color through the pricing and investment mechanisms detailed in the CCIA will not only improve health outcomes for the most vulnerable in our state, it will also help meet the equity mandates of the CLCPA.

Codifying Equity Investments

The CLCPA was groundbreaking not only because of the emissions reduction mandates, but more importantly because it was the first climate change policy centered on climate and environmental justice. We have the opportunity to make history again as the CCIA is the only emissions pricing proposal that charges emitters for co-pollution as well as greenhouse gas emissions, and invests in disadvantaged communities at a scale that that begins to rise to the challenge of the climate crisis.

The CCIA supports disadvantaged communities by generating funds by charging for co-pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, and reinvesting the money into communities. By charging emitters a fee for co-pollution, the State is acknowledging the disproportionate health burdens placed on low-income communities and communities of color. The funds from the co-pollution fee will then support direct investments in disadvantaged communities that will result in healthier, more resilient communities.

The CLCPA calls for no less than 40% of funds spent on addressing climate change to be spent on disadvantaged communities, and the investment strategy of the CCIA will directly implement that mandate. Of the revenue generated by charging polluters the majority will be spent directly or indirectly supporting disadvantaged communities. Roughly a third of the total funds will be used to fund a rebate program for low- and moderate-income New Yorkers to account for potential changes in energy costs. Another third will be spent on grants for communities to develop local energy plans, and 75% of these funds will be used within disadvantaged communities. Nearly a third of the funds will be spent on infrastructure to facilitate the electrification of our building stock and transportation systems and training programs for new clean energy jobs. These jobs and training programs will create opportunities for disadvantaged workers and communities. Funds will be used to support and retrain workers in industries impacted by the transition off fossil fuels. School districts and local governments will people eligible for funding to offset any reductions in property tax revenues driven by the transition.

The CCIA rightly acknowledges the high burden that disadvantaged communities face due to climate change and creates an investment structure that will support these communities in a just transition. The CCIA balances the need to provide direct support to low-income New Yorkers and small businesses and expand zero emissions infrastructure and technology, while supporting job expansion and retraining opportunities in a coordinated statewide manner. The investments proposed by the CCIA will allow the State to live up to the high bar set by the CLCPA in the timeframe that is needed.

About Us

For more than 50 years, Environmental Advocates NY has fought for policies that will restore and protect New York's environment, support healthy, vibrant communities, and secure benefits and outcomes for all within and beyond the state through education, partnerships and advocacy.