

August 22, 2023

**Remarks for Public Meeting on Proposed County Climate Action Plan**

Allegheny County Courthouse, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor, Council Meeting Room 1  
436 Grant Street  
Pittsburgh, PA 15219

Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I am Matthew Mehalik, Executive Director of the Breathe Project, an organization dedicated to improving our region's air quality and quality of life working together with over 65 regional organizations and institutions with science and public health at our core. In addition to my role at the Breathe Project, I have been advocating for sustainability policies and examples for the past 28 years. Part of this past work has been pressing the case to take action to address our unfolding climate disaster. While at Sustainable Pittsburgh prior to my current role I served on the committees that created the Pittsburgh Climate action plan in 2008, crafted Cranberry Township's sustainability and climate plan, and advised Mt. Lebanon on their climate action plan. I also launched the Pittsburgh Green Workplace Challenge that documented greenhouse gas reductions involving over 150 local companies, governments, schools, and universities through voluntary and business case-oriented actions, saving these entities over \$15.5 million in energy costs while reducing emissions. In my role as faculty at Carnegie Mellon's Heinz College, my students and I have partnered with the PA Department of Environmental Protection to assist Allegheny County communities Carnegie and Forest Hills to craft implementation plans for their climate action plans, and my students and I have produced over 100 local government and community sustainability projects in Allegheny and Beaver counties. So, I am excited about this opportunity to meet with you all today on such an important topic.

Now is the time for Allegheny County to adopt a county-wide climate action plan. Actually, the time to enact such a plan was 15 years ago, about the time when Pittsburgh adopted its climate action plan. The Union of Concerned Scientists released a report on 2008, "[Climate Change in Pennsylvania](#)," that documented how our region's climate in 2030 will increasingly resemble Tennessee's and Georgia's climate of 2008 – more days over 90 degrees; more flooding; more extreme storms.

The daily litany of increasing extreme weather events – extreme heat spells; wildfires; extreme storms; atmospheric rivers; flooding; mudslides; and the loss of life and damage to property are accelerating just as scientists have predicted. The sooner that our county falls in line with what leading local and state government entities are doing to address the ongoing climate crisis the better. It is time for Allegheny County to set a course to reduce our climate emissions – our county residents will benefit from committing to this course of action because our county's health will improve; our county's quality of life will improve; and our county's reputation will improve.

Air quality issues and climate issues are tightly intertwined. Both impacts come from the same root cause: the ongoing use of fossil fuels that produce particle pollution, ozone, heavy metals, hazardous air pollutants, volatile organic compounds, and, of course, global warming emissions such as natural gas leakage, carbon dioxide production, nitrogen oxides, black carbon, among others.

People in the Mon Valley already have air that is worse than 93 percent of the entire country for fine particulate matter, and it is well known that particles are carriers for hazardous air pollutants that are delivered directly into the bloodstream of residents. Allegheny County is in the top 1% of all counties for cancer risk from point source

air toxics emissions ([Cancer Risk in Allegheny County, Pa., May 2021](#)). 90 percent of this risk attributable to integrated steelmaking facilities, such as the Mon Valley Works, which also happens to be the largest carbon dioxide emitter in the county as well.

It is highly ironic when our Allegheny County Health Department triggers its “Mon Valley Pollution Episode Rule” warning during periods of heavy wildfire smoke – a rule that is supposed to require industrial facilities in the Mon Valley to reduce their emissions. These are instances of industry’s past climate pollution, which is responsible for the conditions producing unprecedented wildfires in Canada and Western U. S., coming around full circle to impact their operations. This is a vicious circle that can only be broken by reducing the emissions of climate pollution that drives the conditions that create massive wildfires.

Recently, NYU’s school of public health [documented the improvements of health](#) in communities near the Shenango Coke Works after it closed in 2016: Average weekly visits to the local emergency departments for heart-related problems decreased by 42% immediately after the shutdown. That is what happens when burning fossil fuels at major, outdated industrial facilities can be curtailed.

Allegheny County needs a Climate policy so that our region’s health can improve while climate harming emissions can be decreased as investments in alternatives to fossil fuel dependent technologies increase so that outdated technologies can be retired, phased out, and sunset. This needs to occur in how we generate electricity, how we heat our homes and buildings, in government operations, in the transportation sector, and throughout our commercial and industrial sectors.

The ordinance and amendments that establish a Climate Action Plan that Member of Council Prizio is proposing positions Allegheny County on sound pathway. The county needs a policy framework so that its decisions and operations can align with meeting the goals of reducing our climate emissions. As noted in the ordinance, the City’s Climate Action Plan commits to reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 50% below 2003 levels by 2030; reducing energy and water consumption by 50% by 2030, reducing on-road transportation by 50%, and contributing zero waste to landfills by 2030. These goals are achievable, and the city has nearly met these goals based on changes over the past 10 years.

With some additional leadership and updated information from policies and practices from investments from the Inflation Reduction Act and changes in capital markets, it is possible for Allegheny County to meet the target of a [43% reduction of greenhouse gases \(48% reduction in CO2\) in 2030](#) based on 2019 emission levels. These are the goals that the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has set forth in order for our society to meet a 1.5 degrees Celsius warming threshold by 2050 in order to prevent the worst outcomes from global warming.

If we succeed in getting these changes to regional policy, our county will be on the pathway to:

- Positioning our community in a strategic position for the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> centuries
- Honoring the future of our children
- Improving public health in our county’s communities
- Healing environmental injustices in communities that have borne the brunt of fossil fuel pollution for 150+ years
- Attracting investment in an infrastructure suitable for a resilient future and sustaining a workforce and skills for building that infrastructure
- Building a community that will retain our talented students from our region’s great universities
- Embracing the opportunities that innovation and creativity can bring forth
- Setting the stage for long term prosperity.

Let’s save lives, reduce burdens on vulnerable people, and take action that makes everyone proud of our county by embracing these opportunities that will be unlocked with the adoption of sound climate policy for our county.

Sincerely,

Matthew M. Mehalik, Ph.D.