

September 18, 2024

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

Gold Room, Room 410 (4th floor)  
Allegheny County Courthouse  
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 60 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 29 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.

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 addresses the ongoing climate crisis the better. It is time for Allegheny County to set a course to reduce our climate emissions.

**A. But we need to do more than just count emissions. We must embrace a justice and equity lens for our climate work.** We need to invite people who have been and will be impacted most by these extreme events into the climate planning and resiliency building process. There must be a shift in mindset to include the most vulnerable people in the process. There must be a shift to include people previously invisible to the halls of power in the planning process. Unless we shift to become more inclusive, we will put everyone at risk, because we will have left the most vulnerable at risk. A justice and equity lens is essential for the success of everyone in the county. All of 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.

**B. We must include, measure, and reduce industrial emissions throughout Allegheny County as part of the county's Climate Action plan.** 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.

According to the [SPC Priority Climate Plan](#), the industrial sector is responsible for just under half (47%) of all climate emissions in the region. These emissions are most heavily concentrated in Allegheny County, which is responsible for 40% of all climate emissions in the 10-county region. Stationary sources make up 52% of all regional emissions. For these reasons, the county must use its powers of convening, leadership, and enforcement through its hosting of the county's air quality program to reduce climate emissions in the industrial sector.

These emissions statistics are mirrored by measurement of industrial pollution and its health impacts. 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 is 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. In fact the Mon Valley Works emits [62% of CO2 emissions of all industrial facilities in Allegheny County](#).

The results of this pollution mean there are extra deaths occurring in our county from industrial air pollution. Earlier this year a [scientific study of air pollution in Allegheny County](#) revealed that there are an estimated 640 - 1,373 people per year dying from PM2.5 pollution, based on 2020 – 2022 data. This means that 3.7 to 7 times more people are dying of air pollution than Covid-19. Mortality rates from PM2.5 pollution were 33% higher in Allegheny County's low-income communities, and mortality rates were 18% higher in Allegheny County's communities of color. On average, somewhere between 2 – 4 people die each day in Allegheny from industrial air pollution. Justice and equity mean we work to put an end to these unfair burdens.

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.

**C. We need to work together to succeed.** We have a county executive interested moving forward with a climate plan through the department of sustainability. We have a county council with an ordinance and a sustainability committee pressing for a climate plan. We have many people from impacted communities present today requesting a role in the process. We have a lot of technical and policy expertise in these areas. We need to invite, align, support, and collaborate. Today's dialogue is an important step. Even more important will be creating a pathway for working together meaningfully after this meeting. Everyone here wants us to succeed together.

This collaboration framework is essential so that its decisions and operations can align with meeting the goals of reducing our climate emissions. 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 working together, our county will be on the pathway to:

- Positioning our community strategically 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 to 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 for everyone in the county.

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 collaboration around an expanded and inclusive climate policy for our county.

Sincerely,

Matthew M. Mehalik, Ph.D.

**List of linked documents, in order of appearance:**

SPC Priority Climate Action Plan (2024): <https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2024-03/epa-95318101-regional-priority-climate-action-plan-for-swpa.pdf>

National Air Toxics Assessment and Cancer Risk in Allegheny County Pennsylvania (2021): <https://censwpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/NATA-Factsheet.pdf>

ACHD Emissions Inventory, GHG Emissions setting, Mon Valley Works vs. Total (2022): <https://www.alleghenycounty.us/Services/Health-Department/Air-Quality/Air-Quality-Dashboards/Emissions-Inventory>

Allegheny County Residents Suffer Higher Mortality Rates from Fine Particle Pollution than Other Parts of the United States (2024): [https://breatheproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Fact\\_Sheet\\_5\\_15\\_2024\\_5UPDATES-1.pdf](https://breatheproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Fact_Sheet_5_15_2024_5UPDATES-1.pdf)

An Interrupted Time Series Analysis of the Cardiovascular Health Benefits of a Coal Coking Operation Closure (2023): <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/2752-5309/ace4ea>

IPCC Climate Change Synthesis Report, Summary for Policymakers (2023): [https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_SYR\\_SPM.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf)