

City's Climate Action Plan avoids region's biggest climate issue



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BY NICK CALEB
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Last week, Portland City Council approved an update to the Climate Action Plan. As a candidate for City Council, I would like to weigh in with some ideas for how we can achieve a sustainable and equitable community. For context, I have worked closely with grassroots organizers to oppose the Pembina propane export terminal and strengthen the Climate Action Plan. Despite several positive late additions, the public process and resulting plan fail to address significant elements of the struggle for climate justice and Portland's duty to ensure it.

Environmental and social justice are inseparable. A high-density city with tremendous bike infrastructure and strong resource and efficiency standards is a worthy goal, but not unless existing residents can actually afford to stay to enjoy its benefits. Similarly, policy (or lack thereof) that displaces our most vulnerable residents is environmentally unjust no matter what eco-friendly infrastructure appears after the fact. Chasing after green abstractions while ignoring the basic human right to housing runs afoul of climate justice. The city has charted a course toward a magnificent green city that only the wealthy will be able to afford to inhabit, and one that will see our most vulnerable communities suffer the worst effects of climate change.

At present, a poorly regulated market is decimating our community, from the rapid transformation of North and Northeast Portland to the wave of displacement that pushes east of 82nd Avenue. The city of Portland has to intervene in order to protect its residents. Though Portland is pre-empted by the state of Oregon from legally utilizing tools like raising the minimum wage, inclusionary zoning, rent control and real-estate transfer taxes, the city isn't fighting very hard to regain these tools nor is it experimenting with the crop of new policy ideas popping up in almost every major American city. If one looks to Seattle,

Kshama Sawant's strong leadership recently convinced a majority of Seattle's City Council to pass a resolution urging Washington state to remove state preemption on rent control. Furthermore, advocacy groups are calling for the issue of \$500 million in bonds to fund the construction of housing for houseless, low-income and working families on city-owned land. Our City Council hasn't even taken up the issue of no-cause evictions.

Out of sheer necessity, residents and community groups are beginning to organize strong grassroots housing campaigns, but the city must be flexible in giving more power away to its residents to shape the city. Rather than simply asking people to tolerate the massive changes they see, the city should build support for its plans by empowering residents and including them in important decisions at the beginning of processes so that they can shape their own communities. Consent has to be earned by building trust and involving the community in meaningful ways. The right to shape the future of the city must belong to all of its residents, not simply those who can amass the capital for large developments.

Importantly, the Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA), the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO), the Coalition of Communities of Color (CCC), OPAL Environmental Justice Oregon and other community groups are constructing their own climate resiliency plans because "our region's climate resilience infrastructure grows increasingly fractured and largely benefits wealthier, whiter neighborhoods," as reported in the Portland Mercury last week. The People's Plan from the Portland African American Leadership Forum (PAALF) is another exciting example of community-led planning. The city must support self-determination for low-income residents and communities of color as we build a sustainable city.

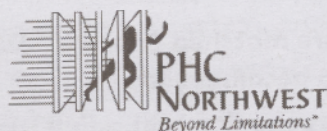
On a different note, both the Climate Action Plan and the commentary from our city leaders mostly avoid the biggest climate issue in our region: the cumulative greenhouse gas effect of fossil fuels being

exported through the Pacific Northwest to Asian markets. The Sightline Institute in Seattle estimates that if all new proposed facilities are constructed, the quantity of fossil fuels slated for export from the Northwest will dwarf the Keystone XL Pipeline project by five times and push us over the point of no return toward runaway global heating. At present, we have a narrow window to draw down global emissions in order to have a chance at lessening the impacts of potentially catastrophic climate change.

Given this context, the most significant thing that Portland could do right now to stem greenhouse gas emissions is to ban new fossil fuel export, transfer and storage infrastructure, including for natural gas and propane. Our city is host to an oil export facility operated by Arc Logistics and the Port of Portland has communicated its strong intention to export gas, despite emerging science that calls into question the assertion that natural gas and propane are clean fuels.

During natural gas extraction, methane escapes from wells. Because methane is such a potent greenhouse gas (at least 84 times more potent than carbon dioxide in the short term and 30 times in the long term), only a small amount of it needs to leak during extraction for the "clean burning" advantages of gas to be entirely erased. New studies show that methane leaks at natural gas sites can make the fuel as carbon-intensive as coal over its entire life-cycle. As a climate leader, Portland should be strongly opposing any long-term investment in an industry that could delay the transition to a truly renewable energy based economy.

If Portland were to act to stop the expansion of the dirty fossil-fuel economy, we would set a precedent that could resonate throughout the region. With Seattle city commissioners imposing procedural impediments to and participating in blockades against Shell's Arctic oil drilling rigs, we should demand a comparable level of audacity from our own city government as we try to stem climate disruption.



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