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supermarket because of the effects of drought on agriculture, for example. We're paying with reduced property values, and to clean up from flooding and super storms as a result of climate change, and so it's really time to reverse that trend. So in California, and in other parts of the country, states are looking at how to put a price on carbon that holds polluters accountable and captures some of that value, and reinvest it back into the communities that need it most. Oregon has a really great opportunity to do that now.

**E.G.:** *You're in Oregon today to testify before our Legislature. What's the most important thing you plan to tell our lawmakers, aside from urging them to pass carbon capping legislation?*

**M.R.:** Carbon pollution isn't free, and it's really time we stop giving away free welfare to polluters. It's time to prioritize families and workers living on the frontlines and invest in growing and green economies for all.

**E.G.:** *What can Oregon learn from California's cap and trade program? Were there any missteps we should avoid or models we should replicate?*

**M.R.:** Absolutely. California decided to put a strong cap on greenhouse gas emissions first and essentially decided to go with the cap and trade system. This path didn't really look at the investments side of distributive justice. So, how will revenues be spent? How will we ensure that we're reducing pollution in hotspot communities or in communities that are really plagued by the most pollution? And how will we reinvest in repairing the damage that's been done by the fossil fuel industry?

What I would encourage is that Oregon take a really serious look at not just putting a strong cap on carbon pollution, but in tackling the investment question of distributive justice at the same time.

Some of the pushback to California's carbon cap, AB 32, came from that it didn't address how we were going to ensure local emission reductions and how we were going to invest in frontline communities. It took a lot of organizing work by equity groups, environmental justice groups to fight the Legislature to get that billion dollars I mentioned, whereas here in Oregon, we could get it right the first time.

**E.G.:** *You're promoting carbon pricing and investing across the country. What other states are considering these types of bills right now?*

**M.R.:** New York has a really great bill. The NY Renew coalition is pursuing at least 40 percent of investment of their polluter pay funds into disadvantaged communities, and Washington state has another really strong bill, an opportunity there in HB 1646, where the Alliance for Jobs and Clean Energy are advancing a strong price and invest bill.

**E.G.:** *How do you see Oregon, specifically, elevating marginalized communities with the implementation of a carbon-pricing bill?*

**M.R.:** I've talked a lot about California, but what's great is that what worked in California may or may not work here, and this is an opportunity for Oregon communities to engage in the process of how to say how they want to grow the green economy, how they want to tackle the pollution in their neighborhoods to really empower them and *resource* them to advance solutions to their own problems. There's a lot of genius in communities to figure out what that is for themselves.

**E.G.:** *Did you have any personal experiences*



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MICHELLE ROMERO

Michelle Romero, deputy director of Green For All, speaks to Street Roots before testifying to the Oregon Legislature in support of a measure that would invest carbon market revenue in economically depressed communities.

PHOTOS BY ARKADY BROWN

*that shifted your focus toward environmental justice?*

**M.R.:** Several years ago, I was sitting at home, watching on the local news, the city of Richmond (Calif.) experience an oil and gas explosion from the Chevron oil refinery. I had a friend who lived and grew up there. Her name is Blanca, and I remember calling her and saying, "Blanca, have you seen the news? Are you OK?"

The news was telling people to "shelter in place." What that meant was they were asking residents to run inside of their homes or to find a building where they can close the doors and windows. They were literally telling people to find towels or whatever you could to plug the cracks in the doors because the air right outside their wall wasn't safe to breathe. While that experience sticks in my mind, her response is really what drives me:

She said, "Michelle, that happens all the time. Don't worry; I'm inside. The city has an alarm system that lets us know when things like that happen."

It had become normal for her, and unfortunately, those experiences have become all too normal for low-income people and people of color who have been deprioritized. Their lives have been devalued, and that's not OK. That's what drives me, to figure out solutions so that there are no more Richmonds, no more Flints, no more Standing Rocks, no more Jade Districts – the Jade District (in Southeast Portland near 82nd Avenue and Division Street) would look a whole lot different in my vision for the future.

**E.G.:** *Tell me about the electric vehicle strategy at Green For All. Is this something Oregon could take advantage of?*

**M.R.:** Yeah, we're just now beginning to explore a national strategy for electric vehicles. Volkswagen recently settled a lawsuit where they admitted to installing secret software on many of their vehicles that would help them pass emissions tests while still polluting above the law, and this settlement represents \$20 billion that's going to be allocated to states and cities across the country to decide what to do with it. So there's this distributive justice question about how will that money be spent? And how will we use those funds to tackle the

traffic-related pollution and congestion in disadvantaged communities?

The settlement was just issued recently, and it is going to be a quick timeline; states have until September to announce how they are going to spend that money, and so communities should definitely be calling their legislators and starting to ask those questions.

**E.G.:** *Green For All has a program called Green the Church, where pastors of African-American congregations can sign up to transform their church properties to be more energy efficient. First, why focus on churches, and second, what kind of an impact has this program had on the communities where those churches are located?*

**M.R.:** Green the Church was birthed out of the black church experience by Rev. Dr. Ambrose Carroll, who was a Green For All fellow several years ago, and Rev. Carroll really had this idea for a Green the Church initiative that would harness the power and purpose of the black church to really advance sustainability in church practices and church culture, and bolster the ability of black faith leaders to advocate on environmental issues. And so when he asked Green For All to help incubate his vision and cultivate a plan that would help grow it, and provide a temporary home for the initiative, we gladly agreed, and now Green the Church has grown to have over 400 members across the country participating and is now permanently based out of Carroll Ministries International, Rev. Carroll's organization, where it's being fully led and managed by leaders in the black community.

If there were any Oregon churches that were interested in getting involved in that initiative, check out [greenthechurch.org](http://greenthechurch.org).

**E.G.:** *Is there anything you'd like to add that might be important to Oregon as it considers a carbon-capping bill?*

**M.R.:** The last thing I'll add is at a time when we're seeing the Trump administration gut clean air and water protections for communities and really threaten our progress on climate, it's up to state leaders to step in and do the right thing to fight for families. So we look forward to seeing what Oregon does with this opportunity.