

JUST TRANSITION, from page 4

network of cities would “create a new national policy by the accumulation of our efforts.”

PJET appears to be the only effort in the country to draft a detailed plan that would fund and implement that transition while bypassing formal legislative proceedings. Given the complexities involved, Portland’s initiative could become an important model for the other 40 cities that have made the same climate commitment.

An approach that prioritizes access for low-income communities and communities of color is a significant departure from recent proposals to address climate change and could nudge future proposals in a similar direction.

Last November, Washington voters rejected what would have been the first state carbon tax in the U.S., Initiative 732. The measure went down after conspicuously failing to win support from labor, environmental and social justice organizations, which complained about their exclusion from the drafting process.

Speaking to Think Progress a month ahead of the vote, Becky Kelley of the Washington Environmental Council summed up her position on what was wrong with the proposal: “Climate policy is not environmental policy. It is everything policy,” she told Think Progress. “It is transformational, societal policy that touches economics and social justice and how we move and what we buy and where we live and all of the things.”

One especially controversial element of the initiative would have required the state to cut taxes to offset what was gained in carbon tax revenue – an open effort to make the overall effect revenue neutral, rather than redistributive.

Initiative 732’s primary backer, economist Yoram Bauman, publicly criticized the idea that taxing large corporations to raise public money could be part of the solution to climate change. Instead, Bauman replaced public investments with tax refunds whose value would increase over time with the price of carbon. After heavy criticism, his measure was defeated 40.7 percent to 59.3 percent.

Chris Lowe, of Oregon Physicians for

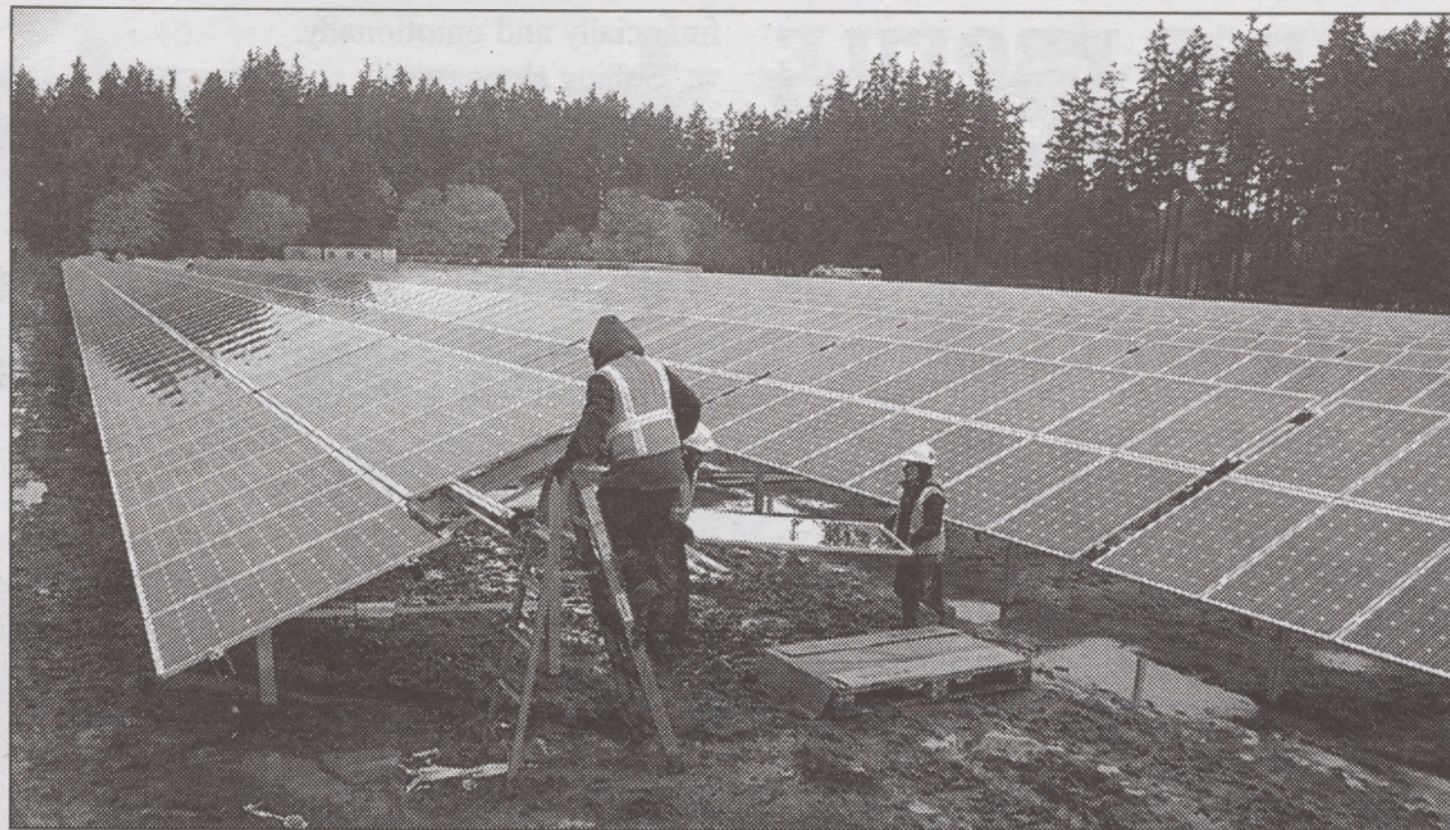


PHOTO BY OREGON DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Workers install a panel in the Baldock Solar Highway project in 2011. The 6,994-panel project, off of Interstate 5 in Clackamas County, produces green energy for operation and maintenance of the state highway system.

Social Responsibility, said that working with the PJET coalition is helping to solve some of the questions over social power that underlay the climate crisis.

“The big ecological crisis question is how do we get the social will to move this? Part of it, I think, has to be getting the more marginalized people engaged,” Lowe said. “The coalition of radicals and liberals who see the ecological crisis isn’t doing it. What are the forces that can be added to that?”

According to one 2014 report from the NAACP, African-Americans in 2010 held just 1.1 percent of energy jobs in the U.S. and gained only 0.01 percent of revenue from energy sector profits. Meanwhile, 68 percent of African-Americans lived within 30 miles of a coal plant, contributing to higher rates of asthma and lung disease in their communities.

By taxing large corporations, funding racial and economic justice and demanding a rapid shift to a safe environment, the PJET coalition satisfies what have become key demands in an increasingly sophisticated environmental justice movement – one that’s far more ethnically diverse and more inclusive of the communities most affected by fossil fuel pollution.

“This idea that we just distribute checks doesn’t really get to the crux of the issue,” said Mateo Nube, a board member of the

Oakland, Calif.-based Movement Generation Justice and Ecology Project.

“An economy that is based on extracting from a finite system faster than the capacity of the system to regenerate will eventually come to an end, either through a collapse or an intentional reorganization. What folks are trying to communicate is that transition is inevitable at this point but justice is not. So it’s upon us to make it a just transition,” Nube said.

According to the Labor Network for Sustainability, the concept of a just transition was put forward as a way to protect workers from losing employment as fossil fuels are replaced by renewable energy. Labor historian Jeremy Brecher suggested the creation of a “superfund for workers” that could adapt government safety nets to specific sectors like coal mining. In 2015, that understanding became the basis for legislation cosponsored by U.S. Sens. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) and Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) called the Clean Energy Worker Just Transition Act.

But the concept of a just transition has become broader. As it’s been adopted by environmental justice organizations, it has also become a rallying cry for the vast social and political changes that will be necessary to decommission fossil fuel energy and the

systems supporting it. Such a transition will have to be “anchored around a redistribution of resources and power,” Nube said.

“I’d say what defines just-transition work by front-line communities is folks who are combining both visionary and oppositional efforts towards fully transforming economies where they live, towards rooting it in democratic governance, and a governance that is truly living in right relationship with the place where folks live,” he said.

Nube said the kind of just-transition law being proposed in Portland – one focused on the social dynamics of empowerment and not only safety nets – has probably never been proposed as a law before.

If implemented, he said, it could help communities across the U.S. catalyze a shift toward climate policies that address both power and inequality.

In Washington state, another new coalition called the Alliance for Jobs and Clean Energy is working on a similar statewide initiative that it says will tax major polluters and raise about \$1 billion a year for reinvestment in community projects. A separate Oregon bill introduced in this year’s legislative session called for the creation of a statewide Just Transition Fund created through a carbon cap-and-trade system. State legislators who are supportive of the bill say they hope to pass it next year – but those prospects are uncertain.

“I’ve been around long enough that I know waiting for the Legislature is never a good reason to not do a good thing,” Hardesty said.

“The NAACP believes that climate change is one of the biggest racial justice issues of our time, and we can’t wait for the next four years or eight years for new leadership to come in. We’ve got to start putting these pieces in place now,” she said.

“I’m absolutely giddy to be able to say: You know what, people of color are going to raise somewhere between \$31 (million) and \$51 million annually, and we’re going to invest it in the people that have not been invested in, in our community,” she said. “And that means houseless people. That means ex-felons. That means people of color. Here’s a great opportunity for Portland to lead again.”

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