

Looking ahead: Building a climate initiative that works for Delaware

Your Turn

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Guest columnists

For years, Delawareans have fought to install air quality monitors that produce reliable data to measure where pollution is worst across the state. This valuable air quality data can help communities who are disproportionately impacted by pollution protect themselves by advocating for needed solutions. Residents of Bear, Delaware, just south of Wilmington, have been exposed to pollution from the Delaware City Refinery and tailpipe pollution from Routes 13 and 40 for decades. With the addition of the DART Container Corporation distribution center, this community faces additional pollution from the steady stream of trucks traveling back and forth — seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Bear residents, who are majority low-income and people of color, have grown increasingly fearful and frustrated as health issues like asthma and cancer risk have increased among their community.

Due to COVID-19, residents are experiencing stress over higher electric bills, juggling childcare and work, and the pre-existing health conditions caused by local pollution that increase their vulnerability to the virus. With the nearest air monitor located miles away on the other side of Wilmington, community groups like the Community Housing & Empowerment Connection and its environmental justice partners have been fighting for an accurate and robust air quality monitoring network in order to improve local health outcomes.

As Delaware faces a significant drop in tax revenue due to the pandemic, the Transportation and Climate Initiative (TCI) can offer needed funding for communities along Routes 13 and 40 and other pollution burdened areas across Delaware, including Route 9, Northeast Wilmington, Belvedere Newport and Sussex County. TCI is a collaboration between eleven northeast and mid-Atlantic governors and the mayor of Washington, D.C., who have been working to develop a regional cap and invest program that would significantly cut tailpipe pollution while building a fair and just zero-emission transportation system. Now, just weeks away from finalizing a multi-state agreement, Gov. John Carney will decide whether to sign the agreement and commit the Diamond State to participate. In 2017, transportation was the largest source of greenhouse gases in Delaware according to the Division of Air Quality. TCI can curb transportation sector emissions by holding polluters accountable. The proposed policy accomplishes this by setting a strict limit on emissions, requiring fuel distributors to purchase allowances for their emissions, and decreasing that ceiling over time. The sale of allowances could generate up to \$100 million in new funding in the first year for Delaware to support an inclusive economic recovery for communities who have suffered the worst from poverty, pollution, and the COVID-19 crisis. However, TCI needs critical safeguards to address decades of disinvestment and environmental injustice experienced by communities like those living



Black smoke is omitted from a stack on the ground of the Delaware City Refinery. JENNIFER CORBETT, THE NEWS JOURNAL

near the Routes 13 and 40 corridors.

To ensure TCI benefits disproportionately impacted communities, the program should amplify the knowledge, capacity, and decision-making power of residents. The program must support robust air quality monitoring networks in Delaware so residents most heavily impacted by pollution have real-time data to advocate for reduced exposure. The program must also require states to adopt policies that directly lead to emission reductions in the neighborhoods with the dirtiest air, since a cap on carbon is only designed to address emissions across the region as a whole. States are also considering dedicating 35% of funds to benefit overburdened and underserved communities, which would mean \$35 million in the first year of the program for communities in Delaware who need it the most. These resources could train and compensate disproportionately impacted community members to analyze air quality data and participate in an equity advisory body to determine where the money goes. Funds can also support solutions for a pollution-free transportation future, such as battery-electric trucks, zero-emission DART buses and school buses, and port electrification.

In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, mass protests over the murder of black lives, and high unemployment rates, eleven TCI states have an opportunity to craft a fair and just program that addresses not only climate change but also economic and racial justice. We are eager to see Delaware join a regional program that fulfills its potential of course-correcting inequality and helping our communities breathe easier in the years to come.

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