

# Equity Advisory Committee Meeting Notes

Wednesday, January 31, 2024 3:00 - 6:30 PM

Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission

110 West Canal Street, Suite 202

Winooski, VT 05404

**Participants:** Anne Nelson Stoner, Sarah Muskin, Melanie Needle, Ann Janda, Eliana Fox (CCRPC); Sophi Veltrop, Jane Lazorchak, Indra Acharya, Kashka Orlov (CAO); Omar Derzi, Lydia Diamond, Bruce Wilson, Zoraya Hightower, Jasim Mudaffar, Elaine Wang, Mona Tolba, Ragab Mohamed, Faried Munarsyah, Jules Wetechi, Urmila Chhetri (EAC Members); Chandra Sunar, Hawa Ismail, Talal Al Samraei, Eli Jones, Basim AlDulaimi, Alli Amrani, Heather Bauman, Ken Nukaya, Hend Rajbo, Mashaer Ebaid, Hakima Laita, Houda Musanovic, Aziz Bakkali, Tasneem Mohamed, Saher Muhamed, Mohamed Hussein, Mohamed Abdullahi, Lachi Pradhan, Amber Pradhan, Bisnu Pradhan, Merida Ntirampeba, BalHazar Batakanwa, Maryam Shabbir Abbasi, Alli Castille.

## 1. Welcome, announcements & agenda

AN called meeting to order at 5:20 once folks settled in, had a chance to connect with one another, received handouts, and had a chance to pray. She informed everyone that food from The People's Kitchen is coming and directed people towards the bathrooms.

## 2. Overview of EAC & welcome to new faces

AN shared that this meeting is growing out of an Equity Advisory Committee and welcomed all the new faces in the room. She pointed out where attendees can find more information about the EAC and encouraged anyone interested in joining to reach out. She reviewed the ground rules for the meeting and shared that Jane and Sophi from the State's Climate Action Office are here to share a brief presentation about the CAO and climate change in Vermont. After the presentation, we will break out into smaller discussion groups. She directed everyone to use the handouts they received to answer questions posed throughout the presentation since we will not have time to hear from everyone.

## 3. Overview of the Vermont Climate Action Office & purpose of today's conversation

Sophi and Jane introduced themselves with the Climate Action Office and shared the goal of the presentation: to provide an overview of climate change in Vermont, the role of the CAO, and to hear from everyone here about how climate change is impacting them and what decision-makers should know when designing programs and policy. Sophi and Jane covered (1) the impacts of climate change in Vermont, (2) contributors to climate change in Vermont, (3) proposed solutions to climate change in Vermont, (4) and questions to get today's discussion going.

## 4. Climate Action Focus Groups

Following the presentation, Anne Nelson broke the room into four different breakout groups, each with a facilitator and interpreter as needed. Anne Nelson & Mona led one group of Arabic speakers, Indra and Sophi another group with Nepali speakers; Jane an English-speaking group, and Sarah an

English speaking group. Each group discussed the remaining questions in the handout.

### **Summary of Feedback Received:**

#### **Reasons for Climate Change**

- Global warming
- High emissions
- Too much waste & litter (“...at the medical center, I see countless amounts of materials and items just thrown to waste including gloves, rags, blankets, and other linens!”)
- Wastewater flowing into Lake Champlain
- Out of balance with the natural world
- Gap between policy makers and climate action (and lack of knowledge about communities)
- Flawed economic system and too much consumption
- Injustice
- Human behavior

#### **Impacts of climate change on non-human natural world:**

- Warmer temperatures
- Less biodiversity (environmental degradation)
- Poor air & water quality: “I can’t swim in the lake in the summer anymore”; “I don’t trust the water we drink.”; Heavy metal pollution in waterways; Polluted Lake Champlain
- Extreme weather & more frequent natural disasters: “The planet is sending messages.”; They are unpredictable.
- Mass extinction
- Erosion
- Droughts & flooding
- No more snowy winters (“Winter, cold and snow feel safe and comfortable”)
- Heatwaves & hot summers
- Wildfires
- Pollution
- Noise pollution from industry (F35s)

#### **Impacts of climate change on humans:**

- **We Know!:** “People know how the impacts of climate change are felt and know how vulnerable we are.”; “We feel it in all aspects of our lives!”; Climate change impacts every aspect of our lives; “Even though the terminology ‘climate change’ is new, when you describe the effects of it, it is nothing new. I am familiar. Even back home, people cut down the trees, wells are drying up, etc.”
- **Fear:** A sense of doom & crisis (“it is scary and out of control”); “Fear that we have broken promises to our children”; Marvin Gaye’s song “Save the Children”; Heat ignites fear: “At refugee camps, people died of heat.”; Fear of insect borne illnesses (“At refugee camps, people died of mosquito-borne illnesses.”)

- **Inequitable Impacts:** Impacts disproportionately affecting marginalized and disadvantages people and communities; “Low income people are the ones suffering from the effects of climate change and we need more help!”; Poor water quality impacting vulnerable communities in VT
- **Sickness:** Sicker communities; difficulty breathing; more disease; “I am worried about insect-borne illnesses because ticks and mosquitoes are coming further and further into areas they didn’t used to be, such as my urban backyard.”
- **Food Insecurity & Struggling Farmers:** BIPOC & New American farmers are struggling (“New American farmers lost all their crops last summer”); “I am concerned about food deserts and food security.”
- **Limited Outdoor Recreation:** “The Irregular weather makes planning outdoor recreation more difficult.”; “Because of climate change, I can no longer do what I want to do in the summer. It is so wet and hot.”; “I wasn’t able to get outside at all this summer”
- **Mental Health Challenges:** We are setting the next generation up for more stress and uncertainty; Children who do not see a future for themselves and struggle with a lack of motivation and mental illness; “it feels like the world is ending.”; “People are having a really hard time.”
- **Economic Downturn:** Our dying winters and wet summers will impact our economy because we will have fewer visitors.
- **Inflation:** Food costs are rising, and it is unsustainable (“We cannot afford healthy food.”); “Heating is way too much here. I am on social security and make \$700 per month. I spend up to \$300 on heat alone. By the time I have paid rent and heating, I have no money left for food.”; “Food is way too expensive.”; If food prices keep rising we will not be able to afford food;
- **Lack of Affordable Housing:** Housing is too expensive; “Almost 1,000 families that are refugees cannot find housing.”; Affordability is pushing poorer people out;
- **Damages from (un)Natural Disasters:** Natural disasters are causing damages that are too expensive to fix; People cannot afford to pay for home repair work after storms; Carpenter bees are causing serious damage to my house.
- **Death:** Extreme disasters are killing people;

**Daily routines: What contributes to climate change and what changes could be made to lessen your footprint?**

- **Recycling & Waste**
- **Travel & Commuting:** bike & walk more, take public transportation, carpool, reduce driving, giving up driving
- **Electricity:** turn the lights off more, reduce energy usage, use technology less
- **Home Heating & AC:**
- **Food:** Eat locally (“depend less on global products”), eat less meat, switch to free range animal products, produce less food waste
- **Plastic Packaging & Materials:** reduce packaging and embedded carbon in clothes and other products, refuse to use plastic take-out containers.
- **Shopping:** Buy more local products and services to support the local economy, buy fewer clothes, less consumption,

**Important Solutions & Strategies (“We need all of them! We need to come at it from all sides!”)**

- **Urgency to Act:** Need to change human behavior; Urgency to act NOW; We acted urgently when COVID hit, why can't we do that with climate change?; Leaders need to have the audacity to take action; "Don't just come to me asking to gather community members. You have lots of feedback, enough to act for the rest of your life. Start acting! If you need to, use the money you use to pay us to lobby or do whatever is the most effective. We need action now!"
- **Action from the Top:** Reduce emissions from the top! We need global leaders to act, national leaders to act, and state leaders to act; Change needs to come from leadership; Need federal support; Address the root problems and stop focusing on the symptoms; This is not about individual choices. It is decision-makers that need to systematize these changes at a macro-level.
- **Funding:** More flexible resilience funding; Community input on investments and funding opportunities.
- **Legal Action:** Mandate the reduction of non-renewables (oil, gas and coal); Ban the use of plastics ("We know how bad it is!"); Ban fossil fuels (& disinvest from fossil fuels); More intense environmental protection laws; Ban deforestation; We need more car regulation—why are we allowing car manufacturers to produce gas guzzling vehicles? Or even EVs that require much larger batteries?;
- **Incompatible Economic System:** Our system is based on profit and not to benefit people and the planet. When are we going to face this?; "We need to design a system that is connected with Pachamama"
- **Dialogue with Impacted Communities (& Build Trust):** More dialogue with impacted and vulnerable communities ("Listen to them. They know best."); More outreach with minority populations who speak different languages; Target outreach based on population; Be transparent about the process and impact; Build trust; Demonstrate; "Give underserved populations the tools to succeed"
- **Care for those Most in Need:** Prioritize care and resources for elderly, people with disabilities, and low-income folks; Focus on saving lives over saving property.
- **More Collaboration & Transparency:** More collaboration between decision-makers (locally, across the country, and internationally). Decisions made anywhere else impact our quality of life. This needs to be a globally coordinated effort; Bring energy and land use planners into the conversation; "No backrooms anymore—we all work together—with our communities."
- **Affordable Renewable Energy;** Affordable home heating and AC options for low- and middle-income Vermonters; The State must invest in wind and solar; State must incentivize programs; Provide A/C; Energy needs to be resilient as we experience more natural disasters.
- **Regulate McNeil:** It is the largest polluter in the state.
- **Greater Energy Efficiency**
- **Climate Friendly Agricultural Practices:** Increase access to locally grown food to increase community resilience; Quality agriculture; Ban the use of pesticides & chemical fertilizers; All food should be healthy; Create a system where unhealthy choices are inaccessible; Support jobs in local food production
- **EV Subsidies:**
- **Increase Tax Credits**
- **Accessible, Reliable, Affordable & Sustainable Public Transportation:** "Vermont has a culture of isolation. We need to change this culture!"; Make sure it is affordable and reliable and broad; Make it work for our rural areas; "Please continue the \$0 bud fare. It helps a lot."; "Keep the bus

free!"; Investing in public transit is equity; The lack of public transportation is forcing people to buy cars; "EVs are not the answer, trains and buses are!"; Public transportation connects people.

- **Design for Walking & Biking:** If you want more people to walk and bike, then build things closer together and make the roads safer; It is not safe to bike over the Winooski Bridge;
- **More Conservation:** protect more forest and wetlands from development; protect the rivers from pollution and flooding; Preserve life and biodiversity in the lake;
- **Reduce Waste:** Trash needs to be picked up at least twice a day in large rental buildings (especially affordable housing).
- **Wastewater Management:** Stop letting wastewater flow into Lake Champlain!
- **Support a Green Workforce:** Just transition to a green workforce; be prepared for the impact of the weather on the tourist industry;
- **Resilient Affordable Housing:** Make it high quality housing to reduce waste in the long-run; Affordable housing protected from flooding, not in the cheaper/low-lying areas; Provide generators if needed.
- **Focus on Public Health:** make insurance more widely available and affordable; Insurance should pay for health problems caused by climate change; Increase tick prevention and Lyme disease education; More comprehensive medical coverage; Create a State-sponsored health fund for health problems stemming from climate change.
- **More Education:** "The community does not have enough information regarding the issue of climate change"; Every student in school should be learning about climate change, its effects, who is responsible, and what needs to be done about it; There is a lack of awareness about mitigation resources or other governmental programs to subsidize mitigation behaviors; Public education/awareness surrounding trash and recycling is important; Educate youth on how to eat locally and healthily; Create materials for a wide range of audiences using multiple communication channels; Share what is working, what solutions are happening to give people hope.
- **Make Landlords Responsible:** Landlords should be responsible and held accountable to making their buildings climate friendly, not renters; There should be strong laws for landlords. They must be held responsible for fixing housing conditions. Inspections must happen. Municipalities need to inspect rental housing and enforce standards ("This is a climate justice issues!").
- **Urban Eco/Agro-Forestry:** In the long run, trees will act to cool our neighborhoods down and absorb CO2 from the atmosphere. In the short term, this can create local jobs that could last year-round; Transform lawns into sites of food production (ideally, cooperative!); Link local farms with local food needs

#### **Additional Concerns:**

- **Affordability:** "The solutions to climate change are not accessible by low to middle income individuals because the cost is too high and they don't have modes to connect with the programs."; Renewable Energy is not affordable; EV's only target upper- and middle-class Americans; Solar power is way too expensive for any of us to afford; "EVs are too expensive and they don't pay off. Even a hybrid is not saving me any money. It was not worth it. Batteries are very expensive."; "Stop bringing middle- and upper-class solutions to working class communities."

- **Complicated System & Programs:** “We’ve been here for 10 years, but we don’t know how the system works, so we don’t know how to change it.”; Programs are too complicated; They must be very simple for people to use them; People don’t know how to navigate complicated systems; We need to make all of this simple;
- **Impracticality of EVs:** EVs in Vermont are not practical. They battery does not last long in the cold and they take longer to charge; “EVs are not the answer, trains and buses are!”
- **Impact of More Production:** EV manufacturing has serious impacts on minerals in the ground; EV battery manufacturing has serious global human rights concerns; “We need new solutions other than EVs.”; “Batteries are horrible for the planet.”
- **Additional Burdens on Low Income Vermonters:** “If you get rid of gas cars or use taxes to disincentivize behavior, it is the poor people who will suffer. We cannot afford EVs. We need to buy used cars and use them for as long as possible.”
- **Vulnerability of Aging Populations:** “I am worried about older folks who are more susceptible to heat and cold impacts and don’t have access to heat/AC nor social support.”
- **Hypocrisy:** “The military industrial complex is a massive polluter and yet why does no one talk about it? If the government really wanted to stop emitting so much CO<sub>2</sub>, they would stop flying F35s or stop selling so many weapons internationally!”; Focus directly on the harms of capitalism. Profit drives everything in this country and harms the well-being of humans and the planet. Be clear about the root causes of climate change!; It is the wealthy people who are causing a disproportionate amount of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Don’t put the burden on the working class!;
- **More Immediate Needs:** It is difficult to think about climate change, or doing anything about it, when we do not have secure housing, jobs, or food on the table. So, maybe start there; We need to tend to people’s everyday needs so they have the capacity to participate in these conversations about our collective future.

### How to share information?

- **Word of Mouth:** “I am able to education my community.”
- **Door-to-Door Outreach:** Boots on the ground
- **Flyers:** Make sure they are in different languages; post at grocery stores throughout the state
- **Social Media**
- **Direct Outreach:** Identify community leaders and influences; “Direct person-to-person communication is best because I cannot read or write.”
- **Focus Groups**
- **School Events**
- **Church Events**
- **State Alert System:** This is a good way to get information out since it goes to everyone’s phones.
- **Provide Translation & Interpretation:** Be mindful that people speak different languages (“We want to show up but most events don’t have interpreters present, and when they do, it feels more like a formality and can be intimidating to speak up!”); Having a paid interpreter who is a part of the community makes a huge difference (“I feel like I can express myself more comfortably and freely and speak up.”).
- **In Simple Language:** Explain things in a way that resonates with their daily lives.

- **Audio & Video:** Lean into audio and video formats for those who cannot read.

#### **Feedback on Event:**

- “This conversation is bringing climate change to my awareness. It is the first time I have had a conversation about it!”
- Small groups like this result in mutual education and we really need that.
- “I am really struck by the format of this event—we need more of this.”
- “Great turnout! Most diverse room I’ve ever been in in Vermont!”
- Printed packets were super helpful, easy to read, and allowed us to collect more feedback.
- Difficulty getting through presentation at beginning.
- Challenge of having so many languages in one room.
- Hold more time to eat and socialize before digging into content.
- “There was some discomfort in the room around interpretation, but this discomfort is good. It forced people to acknowledge this barrier.”
- “It did not feel performative and that was my main concern.”
- Lots of people, space was too small, overstimulating at times.

#### **5. Looking Ahead**

Anne Nelson thanked everyone, encouraged them to come again, and collected all handouts, stipends forms and photo release forms from participants.