

Energy and Equity Go Hand in Hand

*Why we need to join efforts to protect the environment
with efforts to eliminate poverty and racism*

Urgent challenges being addressed in Tompkins County

Extreme income inequality, persistent racism, and increasing climate disruption are undeniable plagues of our time. We are fortunate that many people in Tompkins County are working on these issues. Some are advocates for racial and economic justice, such as creating living-wage jobs, removing barriers to reentry from the prison system, and ensuring affordable housing for all. Many others are involved in initiatives to reduce carbon emissions, such as stopping gas infrastructure development, switching from fossil fuels to renewable sources, and conserving energy in housing, transportation, food, water, and waste.

As social justice and environmental advocates, we are often driven by a sense of urgency about our own particular issues and are not as well informed about each other's efforts. If we are white and middle class, we may tend to see climate change as the most urgent priority. If we are people of color or of low-income, we may tend to see poverty and racism as *the* urgent priority. In addition, persistent historic patterns keep us segregated from each other by place, race and class, perpetuating a gap in our empathy for each other's concerns.

One Underlying Cause: Our Wasteful System

This separation is unnecessary and harms all of our work for our community. Social and economic injustice and extreme climate disruption are outcomes of the same inequitable and wasteful economic system, which treats people, especially people of color and those with limited material resources, and our living environment, as *disposable*. When advocates for environmental protection and champions for the elimination of poverty and racism work together to change the system that is trashing poor people and the planet, we will be able to create a strong, community-oriented local economy that works *for all*.

How are Energy and Equity critically related to each other?

1. Gross inequality and social segregation undermine the **healthy, trusting relationships and community solidarity** essential for creating the changes we need. When clean energy advocates place equity as a high priority, we contribute to a well-connected community that can solve common challenges faster and smarter.
2. **Extreme climate disruption hurts people with limited incomes the most.** Even in our relatively benign region, our colder winters or warmer summers are creating higher energy bills and greater health risks for those of us with less access to resources. Increased flooding can bring even more catastrophic impacts.
3. By creating livable wage work and reducing barriers to employment, **more people can afford healthier and more locally sourced, earth-friendly options.** The increased demand for these options can lower their prices, generate jobs, reduce emissions and crime, and create a self-reinforcing positive effect for all. We'll never get to a healthy community with low carbon emissions if everyone can't come along, so we need to see poverty and racism as huge barriers we must dismantle—together.
4. We need **everyone's voices, ideas and leadership**, included at the outset, to solve our pressing community and environmental problems. Those of us from economically disadvantaged communities have valuable, often

unappreciated, skills of collaboration and resource conservation, as we are used to making-do, sharing, reusing, helping neighbors in need, opening up our lives and homes to others in our community, and taking care of each other's children. We need to be respected as partners and leaders, whose experience and perspectives are essential for shifting towards a more community-oriented economy and culture.

5. Investing in a clean energy future leads to **better paying local jobs**.

- Local businesses working on energy efficiency and renewables are substantially expanding their workforce with living wage jobs, many of them entry level, to meet the growing demand for energy retrofits, and solar, wind, wood pellet, geothermal and heat pump systems. One local solar installer hired over 40 employees last year and is planning on hiring at a similar rate this year. We can create hundreds more good-paying local jobs by boldly reducing our fossil fuel dependency.
- However, for these jobs to provide a living wage for people with barriers to employment, not just for people in the employer's familiar networks, we need to expand appropriate trainings and apprenticeships, and help businesses adopt inclusive hiring policies and systems to support diverse staff.

6. An **energy efficient community fueled by renewable energy** results in **reduced utility bills** for everyone.

- An energy efficient home can save a family hundreds or thousands of dollars a year, leaving everyone with more money for food, housing, transportation, and other costs. There are existing energy programs, for example through TC Action, that specifically serve renters and homeowners with limited incomes. Rural homes can save the most, as they tend to heat with more expensive fuels.
- Green technologies like solar energy or heating with wood and wood pellets, reduce our energy use, reduce the amount of carbon pollution that contributes to climate change, make our homes more comfortable, and save money. We need to build on and go beyond existing rebates and financing options to make sure that those of us with limited incomes have access to these money-saving technologies.

7. Policies that **expand transportation options** and support more **compact, mixed income, mixed use neighborhoods** help reduce transportation distances, emissions and costs; reduce social and economic segregation; and increase access to resources.

- Living near amenities, with options for walking, biking, carpooling, car-sharing, or riding the bus, provides a lifeline for youth, people with disabilities, older adults, and households with limited incomes, who, unlike middle-class, middle-aged people, often don't have access to a reliable car or can't drive. Shorter commutes are directly linked to reducing poverty.
- Almost all of the \$300 million households spend on transportation a year leaves Tompkins County immediately, as neither cars nor fuel are produced locally. With more transportation options available, more people can shift their spending from cars to goods and services that strengthen the local economy.

8. **Reducing waste reduces the number of people who are treated like waste.**

- Our local reuse economy is growing. The Reuse Center has hired over 15 people in the last five years, raising many folks from welfare to living wage standards. Many more have been trained in electronics repair and salvage.
- There are over 40 stores that specialize in selling used items, keeping-tons of resources out of the landfill, providing hundreds of people with sustaining jobs, and helping thousands of people to shop within a budget.

9. **Growing our own food, hunting and fishing, and buying local food** further reduces our emissions, helps families save money, and supports local jobs. For instance, it takes about 100 CSA subscribers to support a full-time local farmer that is helping regenerate the environment.

What We Can Do Differently: 10 Examples

1. Discuss our differences in order to build understanding and empathy. Attend forums and create or participate in conversations about our differences and our common ground. Replace stereotypes with curiosity.
2. Consciously reach out beyond our cultural comfort zone. Ask for a few members of our energy or our equity groups to attend each other's forums, rallies and cultural events to increase understanding, show support, and build relationships.

Clean energy advocates:

3. Educate ourselves about *structural* racism and poverty and how they perpetuate inequality *today* in our own community.
4. If you enjoy the privileges of an identity such as white, male, middle-class, or heterosexual, *choose* to use these advantages to create a thriving, community-oriented economy that works for all.
5. Learn about and support policies and programs, such as the Living Wage campaign and Black Lives Matter, that address systemic injustice.
6. Use an equity-conscious lens when developing programs and plans about energy, food and transportation systems. Ask: What voices are missing and why? Do we have secure job options for those who will lose their work when we dismantle polluting energy sources? Will we require contractors to hire local labor at a living wage and be proactive in hiring and retaining people who have had barriers to employment, including a conviction record?
7. Make sure traditionally underrepresented people are at the table *early on*. Provide dinner & child care for public meetings. Ask people about their experiences. Become enriched by diversity.

Justice advocates:

8. Develop an ecologically conscious lens that sees clean energy and environmental protection as human rights and community health priorities, not elite luxuries. Include this perspective when we try to solve unemployment and poverty issues.
9. Support or create campaigns that join energy *and* equity goals, such as requiring developers seeking tax abatements to practice inclusive hiring *and* use environmentally friendly options, or advocating for institutional divestment from both the fossil fuel and the private prison industries.
10. Promote earth-friendly behavior changes on a personal and organizational level. Recognize we have more to gain, even in the economic short term, from restoring our damaged life support systems. We all benefit from eliminating waste, having clean air in our lungs and clean water to drink and bathe in.

We can no longer treat people or the natural systems upon which we all depend as disposable. Let us find common ground in the civil rights vision of "Beloved Community" and the indigenous wisdom that All Life is Sacred. As justice and environmental advocate Van Jones put it, "We don't have a throwaway planet, and we don't have throwaway children -- it's all precious." It's time to bring our causes together.

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