

PREPARED FOR THE ALLIANCE  
FOR THE GREAT LAKES

# OHIO ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE POLICY FORUM REPORT

May 2021



ALLIANCE *for the*  
GREAT LAKES

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# Executive Summary

Communities of color are disproportionately impacted by environmental challenges. In urban communities, people of color are disproportionately impacted by environmental injustice. These communities have a higher likelihood of having unsafe and/or unaffordable drinking water, clean air, and viable and safe land resources, as well as inadequate and/or unaffordable sources of energy. Social, racial, and economic justice are inseparable from environmental justice. We cannot achieve our vision of a Great Lakes enjoyed by all when systemic racism is allowed to permeate our society unchecked.

When looking at Ohio's political landscape, it's important to situate the state within the broader context of a shifting political climate nationally and growing momentum at the local level. In 2021, with new leadership at the federal level, and with local elected offices up for re-election in municipalities across Ohio, there are a number of opportunities to bring environmental injustice issues to the forefront and to make correcting these injustices a top policy priority.

The state of Ohio will set its biennium budget through the remainder of 2021. This creates an opportunity to develop, renew, and recommit to a policy platform that centers the needs of Ohioans and incorporate them into funding priorities for the next two years. Local elections in Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati, along with municipalities across the state of Ohio, provide opportunities to engage local elected leadership around shared environmental justice commitments. At the same time, the election cycle is an opportunity to renew public discourse on these issues and to build the political will necessary to ensure that environmental justice champions are central to local policy decision-making in Ohio's macro and micro cities.

As we turn toward rebuilding and supporting an equitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the year ahead creates a renewed opportunity to build upon the long-term environmental justice work that has been building across the state and to add to its momentum. This brief lays out policy recommendations in the areas of water, land, air, and energy, with the purpose of moving this policy platform forward across the state of Ohio.



## WATER

- Ban residential water shutoffs due to nonpayment.
- Increase funding for lead service line replacement and grants for homeowners seeking to remove sources of lead from their home water systems.
- Ban partial lead service line replacement.
- Ensure all water utilities and local governments implement 20-year lead service line replacement plans.
- Create a racially and geographically diverse citizens advisory board to weigh in on H2Ohio implementation and other water issues.

## LAND

- Amend the Clean Ohio Fund to allow municipalities and conservation funds to receive state funds for land acquisition and active park creation.
- Fund the Clean Ohio Revitalization Fund: Dedicating the revenue Ohio receives in liquor profits each year would provide over \$40 million per year in funding that is flexible, sustainable, and complementary to existing environmental remediation programs.
- Increase state funding for growing a clean and efficient manufacturing sector, including for the purposes of industrial efficiency, repurposing industrial areas into eco-industrial parks, and growing the local supply chain for the environmentally and socially responsible products of the future.

## AIR

- Invest in and incentivize low- and zero-emission cars, buses, and trucks.
- Impose progressively stringent penalties and fines on industrial businesses responsible for air pollution violations.
- Improve indoor air quality, reduce energy bills, and increase the comfort of homes through reintroduction of state energy efficiency standards, with a special focus on historically redlined, dense, and low-income communities that tend to endure higher energy burdens.

## ENERGY

- Create net metering policies that encourage homeowners and business owners to invest in localized electric generation and/or storage capacity.
- Reinstate the renewable energy portfolio standard (RPS) and energy efficiency resource standard.
- Though home rule inhibits state authority over implementation of local hiring provisions, we encourage state lawmakers to support policies that increase training and set-asides for disadvantaged business enterprises.
- Repeal HB 6 and introduce statewide comprehensive energy policies that provide incentives and allow for the production and development of clean energy and jobs.

As a Great Lakes state, Ohio is “water rich,” yet we don’t all benefit equitably from our water resources. Ohio communities face a number of water challenges that disproportionately impact low-income communities and communities of color.

Failing drinking water and sewer infrastructure poses a threat to both public health and municipal budgets. According to the [2021 American Society of Civil Engineers Infrastructure Report Card](#), Ohio received a D+ grade for drinking water infrastructure and a C-grade for wastewater infrastructure. Ohio is facing a \$30B price tag to make

the necessary upgrades over the next 20 years. It is imperative that the financial burden isn’t placed on communities that are already struggling to pay for

unaffordable water. It is also important to note that there is a clear need for both water affordability interventions and customer assistance programs but that the two are not interchangeable.

Recent water quality issues in Toledo have placed a spotlight on the urgent need to address harmful algal blooms (HABs) in the western basin of Lake Erie. Largely fueled by agricultural pollution, toxic algae has had detrimental effects on water quality, human health, and the economy.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the intrinsic connection between water and public health. It is imperative that we ensure access to safe, clean, affordable water for all, as water directly impacts our health, well-being, economy, and more.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Ban residential water shutoffs due to nonpayment.

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Increase funding for lead service line replacement and grants for homeowners seeking to remove sources of lead from their home water systems.

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Ban partial lead service line replacement.

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Ensure all water utilities and local governments implement 20-year lead service line replacement plans.

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Create a racially and geographically diverse citizens advisory board to weigh in on H2Ohio implementation and other water issues.

The lack of access to public lands and high-quality neighborhood parks in communities of color is a threat to our physical and mental health, and leaves those communities more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

Parks and public land are also economic drivers. In Cleveland alone, the regional park system, **Cleveland Metroparks, generates \$873 million annually in economic activity. The Toledo Metroparks system attracts visitors who spend \$59.5 million annually in the local economy and provides a \$27.5 million benefit** for access to recreational opportunities. But these are regional systems, which in most cases are on the edges of the cities with large regional or downtown-adjacent parks.

Communities with nearby parks can be dramatically cooler than those in so-called “park deserts.” The Trust for Public Land (TPL), a national conservation organization, in a recent analysis of 14,000 cities and towns shows that nationwide, **areas within a 10-minute walk of a park are as much as 6 degrees cooler than areas beyond that range.** And yet, not everyone has equal access to the kinds of parks that lower temperatures and allow for safe recreation. TPL’s data reveals that across the United States, parks serving primarily nonwhite populations are half the size of parks that serve majority white populations and five times more crowded. Even when communities of color have access to a park within a 10-minute walk of their own neighborhoods, the parks are not the same quality as parks in white neighborhoods.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Amend the Clean Ohio Fund to allow municipalities and conservation funds to receive state funds for land acquisition and active park creation.

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Fund the Clean Ohio Revitalization Fund: Dedicating the revenue Ohio receives in liquor profits each year would provide over \$40 million per year in funding that is flexible, sustainable, and complementary to existing environmental remediation programs.

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Increase state funding for growing a clean and efficient manufacturing sector, including for the purposes of industrial efficiency, repurposing industrial areas into eco-industrial parks, and growing the local supply chain for the environmentally and socially responsible products of the future.

Though we have seen improvement since the creation of the Clean Air Act in 1970, air pollution is still a major environmental issue that plagues our country and the state of Ohio. Unhealthy pollutant levels impact climate change, global warming, and deterioration of building materials, and produce adverse health effects. **Unfortunately, higher pollution levels disproportionately impact low-income and minority communities.**

The two most common pollutants formed from the burning of fossil fuels like coal, diesel, gasoline, or natural gas are ground-level ozone (smog) and particulate matter. Although many Midwestern coal-powered plants have closed, fossil fuels are still prevalent in our region. **The transportation sector, for example, is a major source of fossil fuels and air pollution,** including emissions from trucks, buses, and cars.

Communities of color and low-income communities are **more likely to live in close range of freeways,** exposing them to much higher rates of harmful particulates in the air. These communities also have a **higher likelihood of being situated in close proximity to polluting facilities,** further exposing them to toxic chemicals that they breathe in every day. Environment Ohio reports there is no safe level of exposure for these types of pollutants.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has shined a bright light on the particularly devastating impact that environmental issues have had on communities of color. A **recent study** found that higher levels of air pollution in minority communities significantly increase the risk of contracting coronavirus or suffering complications from the virus.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Invest in and incentivize low- and zero-emission cars, buses, and trucks.

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Impose progressively stringent penalties and fines on industrial businesses responsible for air pollution violations.

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Improve indoor air quality, reduce energy bills, and increase the comfort of homes through reintroduction of state energy efficiency standards, with a special focus on historically redlined, dense, and low-income communities that tend to endure higher energy burdens.

Black Americans are more likely to live in proximity to petrochemical plants and other legacy pollution facilities. Our neighborhoods are disproportionately burdened by negative health and environmental externalities associated with our fossil fuel economy.

A just transition from a fossil fuel economy with an emphasis on cleaner energy production could offer many benefits for Ohioans. This includes cleaner air, improved public health outcomes, and more sustainable communities. A transition to a green economy also creates an opportunity

to ensure long-term affordability; to create new good-paying jobs in construction, renewable energy, and efficiency retrofitting; and to build a stronger, more diverse workforce in these fields.

As a result of the passage of Ohio House Bill 6, a nuclear bailout deal for the investor-owned utility First Energy/Energy Harbor, the state effectively repealed the renewable energy portfolio standard and virtually eliminated the energy efficiency resource standard. **Ohio is considered among the most regressive states when it comes to sustainable energy policy.**

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



Create net metering policies that encourage homeowners and business owners to invest in localized electric generation and/or storage capacity.



Reinstate the renewable energy portfolio standard and energy efficiency resource standard.

Though home rule inhibits state authority over implementation of local hiring provisions, we encourage state lawmakers to support policies that increase training and set-asides for disadvantaged business enterprises.



Repeal HB 6 and introduce statewide comprehensive energy policies that provide incentives and allow for the production and development of clean energy and jobs.





# Process and Data Collection

The Alliance for the Great Lakes hosted a one-day virtual conference on November 10, 2020, with approximately 25 participants. This forum, funded by the Cleveland and Gund Foundations, was designed to provide black and brown leaders working in environmentally focused careers with opportunities to network while developing a state-level policy agenda for distribution and consideration by state legislators and the Ohio Governor’s Office.

During this online summit, participants were put into four initial groups:

- Air
- Energy
- Land
- Water

These subject-specific groups gathered together black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) professionals based on issue expertise that covered priority environmental issues throughout Ohio. Each group received policy briefing documents relevant to their area of expertise. During the forum, groups were given one hour for reactions to the policy templates and discussion on policy recommendations.

The policy recommendations in this document were based on robust conversation from these probing questions:

- 1. What’s the biggest roadblock to environmental justice in your field?**
- 2. What are the top issues, and why?**
- 3. What does an environmental justice policy platform look like in Ohio?**



## KEY OBJECTIVES FOR THE OHIO ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FORUM

- 1 Create a state-level environmental justice policy agenda with recommendations for state policy actions.
- 2 Build an environmental justice policy foundation for the statewide network of leaders of color working in environmental careers.
- 3 Create space for networking and collaboration among minority environmental professionals across the state of Ohio.

# Themes, Barriers, and Opportunities

The issue-specific small group conversations covered the complexities of addressing the unique challenges in the air, energy, land, and water spaces.

Though the discussions were different in each group, there were several recurring themes that were highlighted in several conversations.

## KEY THEMES

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### Accountability

Accountability was also discussed as a major roadblock to successful policy implementation. It is imperative that taxpayers receive the assurance that tax dollars are resulting in environmental protection. It's also important that legislators elected to represent constituent interests are fully seeing environmental justice policies through the legislative process.

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### People-centered approach

There was recognition that to achieve environmental policy wins, we must adopt a people-centered approach that focuses on improving local communities' self-reliance, social justice, and participatory decision-making. Authentic community engagement starts at the ideation stage and continues through implementation.

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### Interconnection of issues

There is an intrinsic connection between the environmental, racial, health, social, and economic justice movements. It is almost impossible and is counterproductive to address them separately. Addressing these issues collectively helps to build and influence the diverse coalitions necessary to advance state policies that lead to change.



## BARRIERS

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**Navigating  
in majority  
white spaces**

The traditional conservation movement influencing state policy is majority white and often lacks input from BIPOC-led organizations and professionals. There was a general consensus that increased inclusivity and equitable representation from diverse groups would benefit the environmental movement and the State of Ohio. For smaller groups representing frontline communities, participation in policy discussion may require additional capacity. Convening authorities seeking to authentically build sustainable relationships with these groups must take these issues into consideration and address them appropriately.

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**Funding  
is needed**

Funding remains a major barrier to addressing a number of environmental issues. Notably, more funders are recognizing the importance of investing in addressing the intersection of environmental and racial justice. However, the need outweighs the investment in the public, private, and philanthropic sectors.

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**Political will  
for substantive  
change**

Ohio has a majority conservative state legislature in both chambers and in the governor’s administration. To build the political will to enact policies that lead to substantive change, we must acknowledge how constituents in all parts of the state are impacted by environmental policies. This strategy will include legislator education, discussing the similarities between urban and rural communities, and implementing authentic community engagement strategies.

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**Substandard  
housing**

Water and energy affordability, lead paint, indoor air pollution, energy-inefficient appliances, and outdated water infrastructure are all issues related to substandard housing. There is a need to acknowledge the connection of these issues and address challenges related to unhealthy homes collaboratively.



## OPPORTUNITIES

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**Rural vs. urban**

Many of the issues highlighted in this report impact both urban and rural communities alike. For instance, a 2019 study revealed that the issue of water affordability impacted both urban and rural communities in Ohio. Highlighting these similarities can help to build the political will necessary to pass substantive environmental policies.

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**Highlight public health impacts**

Low-income communities and communities of color are disproportionately impacted by environmental pollution. We also know that these injustices are strongly linked to severe public health consequences. Highlighting public health impacts could help to build support for addressing the core issues.

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**Focus on JEDI**

A comprehensive review of policy solutions is recommended to ensure that justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) are incorporated into the remedies designed to address environmental problems.

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**Education is key**

Community education on the impacts of environmental policies and advocacy opportunities is vital for their long-term growth and success. However, it is equally important that government officials are informed about the implications that policies will have on constituents, the funding needed to thoroughly address environmental injustices, and ways to amplify the community’s voice when advocating the interests of their most marginalized residents.

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**Workforce development**

While there is an appreciation for the value that training programs provide, they cannot be the end goal. Community empowerment is achieved when residents are afforded jobs with livable wages, multiyear contracts, and participatory engagement in economic development decisions. Again, the environmental movement is connected to the economic movement, and it is imperative that community wealth building is considered part of the overall environmental justice relief strategy.



# Conclusion

With new national leadership and a state legislature that has taken recent action on water and energy issues, the climate is primed for policy action on environmental justice. Legislators from both sides of the aisle have the power to address the challenges related to land, air, water, and energy plaguing communities throughout Ohio. A people-centered, multi-issue, diverse coalition can build the power

and influence necessary to pass strong policies with accountability.

The vision for a healthy and sustainable Ohio is possible. It starts with hearing the voices of minority environmental advocates throughout the state and adopting the policy recommendations contained within this report. We welcome opportunities to discuss these issues in greater depth.

