

April 20, 2021

County Executive Marc Elrich
Ms. Adriana Hochberg, Assistant Chief Administrative Officer
Ms. Tiffany Ward, Chief Equity Officer

Dear County Executive Elrich, Ms. Hochberg, and Ms. Ward:

We, the undersigned, write this letter to convey reflections on the Climate Action Plan (CAP) from the majority-minority of this County. Montgomery County and its elected officials can no longer fail to recognize that its residents — specifically among working class communities and persons who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC) — are the present-day descendants of more than 500 years of racial, economic, political, and social oppression that has led to Montgomery County's status as one of the wealthiest in the United States. We demand that our government, in collaboration with residents, exercise good-faith towards the implementation of the County's 2019 Racial Equity and Social Justice Act (RESJ) by ensuring that BIPOC community members and organizers are not seen one-dimensionally as beneficiaries of the CAP, but instead are multidimensionally involved in the CAP, such that equitable decision-making is centered in the development and implementation of the plan.

To ensure the CAP prioritizes equity, we strongly urge that the wisdom, expertise, and lived experience of immigrants, working class communities, and communities of color be uplifted for the co-leadership of approaches for restorative environmental justice. Historical and contemporary evidence shows this group demonstrates irrefutable resilience to the crisis of climate change as well as knowledgeable sensitivity to solutions. Through the active steps listed in this letter, we aim to build a framework for community and government co-creation, investment, and opportunity in which marginalized communities self-create equitable policies that lead to sustainable repair, recovery, and a greener county.

The MORE Network and the Green New Deal Coalition are among several organizations that have reached out to local communities of color to gather commentary and feedback on the CAP. Many within these communities admitted to only recently becoming aware of the County's draft Climate Action Plan and also felt overwhelmed by the Plan's ambitious aims to shape policies, actions, programs, and investments in Montgomery County. The Plan has major impacts on the lives of all County residents, all of whom should be appropriately centered in the development and implementation process. Thus, we emphatically urge the County to make the following changes and improvements:

1. Recognize BIPOC, low-income communities as co-creators of transformational policy and fully support and resource them in this role;
2. Work to enhance BIPOC leadership and lift BIPOC voices to reconstruct the planning process to center racial equity benefits in all GHG-mitigation steps and ensure that CAP

implementation directly addresses the needs of disadvantaged BIPOC and low-income communities. This must include:

- a. Connecting with and investing in community organizations (i.e., MORE Network, Montgomery County Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions (MCFACS), Muslim Voices Coalition, and others) to build capacity to support GHG mitigation strategies and grassroots policy measures
 - i. Working with these groups to increase education, transparency, and communication between residents, communities, businesses and political leaders
 - ii. Expanding engagement and outreach programming to be culturally relevant to all the groups that make up the County's diverse population.
 - b. Hiring of consultants during the implementation phase with extensive experience working with BIPOC and other marginalized communities to develop action strategies and plans that unify the environmental and social justice goals.
3. Center CAP economic actions within job creation, reparations, and direct investment at the community level and in organizations working most closely with BIPOC communities, including:
- a. Commit to economic/educational investment to deal with climate change in ways that will create thousands of high-paying, career jobs for low-income Montgomery County residents both in the local green industry and beyond - jobs that will provide health care and other benefits, training, protection of workers' rights, and full compensation for workers displaced in the process. In addition to jobs, commit to investment in social innovations and community wealth-building initiatives such as worker-owned co-operatives and community land trusts.
 - b. Prioritize investment in natural systems to improve health and wellness (healthcare, land-based sequestration, walkable/bikeable communities) before shifting to high-cost expenditures that are based on trends in the green industry (i.e., electric vehicles, building retrofitting, solar roofs).
 - c. Allocate funding for social programs that improve overall community health (e.g., new affordable public ("social") housing, medical clinics, food access/ security programs, increased public safety/mental health measures such as eliminating School Resource Officers and investing in restorative justice approaches).
 - d. Draw revenues from the sectors—construction, transport, industry—that are most responsible for climate change until GHG reduction goals are met.
4. Connect the CAP and the new General Plan (Thrive 2050), thereby supporting mutually reinforcing racial equity-enhancing measures in both climate action and land use policies.

5. Recognize the tangible goals/outcomes that stem from direct community involvement - (bottom-up investment approach).

We appreciate the steps that Montgomery County's Department of Environmental Protection has taken to draft the CAP, including organizing workshops in which representatives of community-facing organizations reviewed the CAP recommendations, as well as recruiting a group of Resilience Ambassadors that polled parts of the community on its views of CAP-related issues. Yet these steps are simply not enough to meaningfully engage the community in assessing and guiding the CAP. The Working Group process that generated the majority of CAP recommendations included very few BIPOC and low-income community representatives. As a result, the workshops for community representatives held later served more as a validation than a creation exercise. If conditions had allowed BIPOC and working class representatives to participate from the start, the CAP would focus less on practical technologies to reduce emissions, but more on how emission reductions targets can be simultaneously met through job creation, better public health, affordable housing and accessible transport for underserved and marginalized communities

In making these requests, we call for the CAP to further recognize that the communities we advocate for are those disproportionately affected by climate change, despite having contributed immensely to the economic development of this land under an oppressive system. Although the CAP puts forth effort to explain both the nation's and the County's histories of injustice, the centuries-long inequities leveraged against BIPOC individuals/communities must be more directly acknowledged. The seeds of oppression were sown during the era of European colonization, when settlers shattered much of the previous Native Americans communal balance between human beings and the natural world, thereby replacing these values with others more self-serving such as individualistic materialism and industrialization. The Eurocentric myths of inferiority concerning Indigenous "savagery" and the African slave were the first of many negative stereotypes used to reinforce a system of institutional racism designed to subjugate BIPOC people to labor practices in the fields and factories that contributed largely to environmental degradation.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, the commodification of resources towards the profit goals of predominantly wealthy white male landowners and corporations has continued to damage the intimate, complex bonds that all human beings share with each other and with the natural world. Further industrialization and globalization have increased demand for cheap, exploited labor generally from Black, Latinx, and Asian communities, while a need for fossil fuel resources has decimated many Indigenous peoples and lands. As these practices harm the environment, it is often those same exploited peoples who suffer the most from air pollution and other environmental consequences. The forces of systemic racism and capitalism have thus acted in tandem to reinforce inequity in the U.S.

We continue to live with these histories everyday. From forced labor of predominantly working class BIPOC people in today's factories and prisons, to Indigenous land dispossession for oil pipelines or other forms of technology, the most marginalized communities continue to endure

environmentally unsustainable practices despite all the labor they have contributed to this country. The attempted dominion over the world's resources in recent centuries, on the back of racialized exclusion and industrial-capital resource exploitation, has set the stage for rising greenhouse gas emissions and the irreversible climate change that we are now experiencing.

Transformational changes in policy engagement must occur at the community level for us to really slow the rapid pace of environmental degradation and unsustainability. However, in the processes of institutional disenfranchisement, the agency of individuals from these communities to participate in the macro-development of County policies and large-scale business operations that would affect them the most, has been severely minimized. As a result, the lived experiences, priorities, and voices of BIPOC organizations and residents are largely missing from the plan. This translates to a harsh reality in which frontline communities are forced to endure exacerbated negative impacts of climate destabilization and environmental injustice, while also being excluded from a central role in determining the policy measures which govern them as residents of the County. Persisting in this outdated model of policy creation will only perpetuate harms committed by a society that seeks to protect the economic interests of a few at the expense of many.

The Montgomery County Climate Action Plan stands at the crossroads of two crucial issues: the long-deferred call for full racial equity and the climate crisis. We call upon your office to recognize the important, positive role the CAP can play in addressing both emergencies together, and that you will center marginalized communities in doing that as you finalize the CAP. By full engagement of BIPOC, immigrants, working people, labor unions, community-facing organizations, youth, and other marginalized communities, an equitable planning process can emerge that deeply integrates their challenges and perspectives. The draft CAP also presents the first major opportunity for the County to put its RESJ commitment into action. For that reason as well, the CAP must be a bold plan for transformative action in these communities.

We urge the County Executive, the Department of Environmental Protection, and the Chief Equity Officer to work with us and other groups to ensure that during the next 30-60 days, extensive engagement with groups and community organizers provides real opportunities to shape the plan and lay a strong foundation for truly participatory County decision-making going forward.

Sincerely,

The Montgomery County Racial Equity (MORE) Network

Supported by:

ACLU Montgomery County

Asian American Progressive Student Union (AAPSU)

Audubon Naturalist Society

CASA

Cedar Lane Ecosystems Study Group
Cedar Lane Universalist Unitarian Church, Environmental Justice Ministry
Chesapeake Climate Action Network (CCAN)
Coalition for Smarter Growth
Extinction Rebellion Montgomery County
Glen Echo Heights Mobilization
Green Sanctuary Committee, Unitarian-Universalist Church of Silver Spring
IMPACT Silver Spring
MD Poor People's Campaign
Montgomery County Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions (MC-FACS)
Muslim Voices Coalition
Peace Action Montgomery
Potomac Conservancy
Progressive Maryland
Progressive Neighbors
Racial Justice Task Force of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Silver Spring
Showing Up for Racial Justice, Montgomery County (SURJ MoCo)
Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom Silver Spring Chapter
Sunrise Rockville
Sunrise Silver Spring
Takoma Alliance for Local Living Economy (TALLE)
Young People for Progress (YPP)
Youth Activism Project
350 Montgomery

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