

2023-2024 ACSI Members**Amanda Zuniga**
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7 Waters Canoe Family, and
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Portland State University**Juliáe Riva**
Portland General Electric**Noelle Studer-Spevak**
Families for Climate

May 24, 2024

Dear Chair Vega Pederson and Commissioners,

The Advisory Committee for Sustainability and Innovation (ACSI) advises the Board of County Commissioners and the Office of Sustainability on policies and initiatives that enhance equity, environmental justice, environmental stewardship, and inclusive prosperity. We are informed by our charter, which we updated in 2021 to acknowledge our treaty obligations to tribal nations and better align with the County's Environmental Justice Resolution.

We are pleased to submit this annual letter to share recommendations for fostering an equitable, healthy, low-carbon community where every person has what they need to thrive. With this in mind, ACSI recommends that Multnomah County centers community priorities as it pursues regional and federal funding.

CONTEXT

Starting in 2023, ACSI re-organized our subcommittee structure to combine Energy, Climate, and Air Quality in recognition that there is often overlap between these three categories. We continue to have a Transportation Subcommittee as well as a Food and Water Subcommittee. In addition to the re-organization of our subcommittee structure, over the past year, ACSI began to explore the importance of Rights of Nature and its implications for the County.

RIGHTS OF NATURE

Rights of nature means legal recognition that nature is a living entity with rights. These rights reflect the growing recognition that our current legal frameworks are unable to successfully protect and reverse harm to nature because our current system sees nature only as a set of resources to use and exploit.

Over three dozen communities in the U.S. have passed laws protecting the rights of nature; multiple Tribal Nations have passed laws and policies; and five countries on three continents have passed national laws. These rights have protected ecosystems and species, including Indigenous first foods, safety from toxic waste, and the right of rivers to flow. ACSI recommends that the County work on a strategy to develop a rights of nature ordinance in Multnomah County, including developing a foundational understanding of the opportunity.

FOOD AND WATER RECOMMENDATIONS

Localized, Equitable Sourcing of Food

There is a huge cost to moving food, both financially and for the environment, as cars, trucks and trains deliver food to its customers. It is not sustainable to ship food long distance when there is food being grown, produced or catered right in the County and often by Black Indigenous and other People Of Color (BIPOC) individuals who have historically been marginalized or exploited. It is possible to be more equitable and sustainable when sourcing food for Multnomah County, and there is daily opportunity for the County as a consumer to purchase large amounts of food. Such opportunities include food programs such as at jails, shelters, catered meetings, etc.

The Food & Water Subcommittee is excited about the work of the REACH Healthy Food Procurement program, which seeks to enhance nutrition standards and healthy food procurement within the County. In alignment with this work, the Committee supports the recommendation to dedicate a minimum percentage of food service contracts to BIPOC growers and producers with annual percent increase. **The Committee recommends 1) revising County procurement policies to make it easier for small, local food producers - especially BIPOC producers - to become vendors, and 2) developing a countywide policy requiring the county procure at least 10% of its purchased food from BIPOC vendors.**

Addressing Algae Blooms

Lack of climate consciousness has led to the Willamette River being affected by ongoing flare-ups of algae blooms, some of which can be toxic to people and animals. Historically occurring in late Summer, algae blooms are caused when water temperatures rise and water flow slows, or due to high levels of nutrients in rivers from urban runoff. The Ross Island Lagoon, which was created as a result of gravel extraction from the river, blocks the natural flow of the river and stagnates the water trapped within the man-made lagoon. This creates an environment where algae blooms flourish. This issue is a lasting impact of colonization and continues to affect the health and wellbeing of the Indigenous people, plants, and animals that have called this region home since time immemorial. **We recommend the County continue convening key stakeholders to fully resolve issues facing the Ross Island Lagoon, including local Tribes; provide funding for increased water quality monitoring; and provide funding to support the first phase of a design process to re-open channels through the lagoon. We encourage Multnomah County to improve the process for the community to report algae blooms in different areas and to improve the safety alert system by utilizing community information.**

ENERGY, AIR QUALITY, AND CLIMATE RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe that the recommendations listed in this section are important for Multnomah County to continue to advance its efforts to create a just, equitable, livable, resilient, and low carbon community by centering the priorities of frontline communities and advancing sustainability efforts within the County, region, and state.

ENERGY

Continue advocating for an energy transition that centers the resiliency and wellbeing of environmental justice communities

Multnomah County should continue to utilize its advocacy on investments that increase energy systems reliability and resilience, as well as community health and resilience, with a focus on vulnerable communities. The January 2024 winter storm is a reminder of the importance of focusing not only on utility infrastructure but also on programs and policies that ensure that people have access to, and can afford, energy during severe weather events.

Multnomah County should similarly continue advocating to utilities and their regulators for actions that are consistent with the County's just energy transition goals, centering and energy justice in that advocacy. It is especially important that Multnomah County focus its attention on energy poverty, an issue that impacts close to a quarter of community members and that could be exacerbated by increasing rates and increasing need for energy.

AIR QUALITY

Support efforts to create community-owned dashboard on local air quality

We encourage the Commissioners to continue efforts to ensure healthy air quality for County residents, as well as related long-term climate benefits. We suggest a continued focus on improving indoor air quality, an issue that continues to be understudied and under-regulated at the state and community level. **Multnomah County should support and, where possible, partner with the Change is in the Air Program (CAP) and other efforts to collect community-based data on indoor and outdoor air quality.** These efforts can lead to a community-owned dashboard that provides local, reliable data to inform community and individual action. This data dashboard could support regional efforts to reduce pollutants by providing baseline data and longitudinal data for impact assessment. The dashboard could also provide data to identify communities that would benefit from state and federal funding.

Pursue clean air standards

Policies that improve indoor air quality can often also have significant benefits to outdoor air quality. According to National Emissions Inventory data from the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), fossil fuel use in homes and businesses in Oregon release more than 4,000 tons of harmful nitrogen oxide pollution (NOx) into the airshed each year.¹ This level of NOx emissions is equivalent to the emissions from all cement plants and power plants in the state combined. EPA's data in Multnomah County also shows that the use of gas in homes and buildings produced 995 tons of NOx² and 6 tons of PM2.5³, the highest NOx emissions of any county in the State.⁴ The pollution from the continued combustion of fossil fuels in homes and buildings,

¹ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), 2020 National Emissions Inventory, March 2023. Appliance emission estimates include residential & commercial emissions for the gas, oil, & other fuel categories, with commercial emissions adjusted to exclude certain non-appliance sources like pipeline compressor stations. The 2020 National Emissions Inventory is available at <https://awsedap.epa.gov/public/single/?appid=202>

² 601 tons from residential buildings and 394 tons from commercial buildings

³ 3 tons from residential and 3 tons from commercial buildings

⁴ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), 2020 National Emissions Inventory, March 2023.

and associated health impacts, disproportionately affect historically marginalized communities, who are already overburdened by air pollution in Multnomah County.

In light of this data, and the significant air pollution associated with the combustion of "natural" methane gas in homes and buildings in the County, as well as the information included in the Multnomah County Health Department's report on the health impacts of gas appliances, **we recommend the County develop clean air standards, also known as zero-emission appliance standards, for gas appliances in its role as the local public health authority.** In the development of these standards, we strongly encourage the County to work with organized labor, environmental justice organizations, and affordable housing providers in order to ensure that the transition off of polluting gas supports the creation of green jobs, protects clean air, and ensures safe, resilient, affordable housing for all Multnomah County residents.

CLIMATE

Multnomah County should continue to prioritize action on heat pumps because they deliver both climate and air quality benefits, especially as a replacement for gas or wood burning heating elements. Residential and commercial buildings' energy needs accounted for 34% of Oregon's greenhouse gas emissions in 2021, according to the state's Department of Environmental Quality, with space and water heating representing most of an average residential building's energy consumption. Oregon adopted ambitious goals on heat pump installations that should help address those emissions,⁵ yet the cost of reaching them is estimated to be much greater than funds currently slated for heat pump deployment.⁶ As a result, sustained focus at the local level remains crucial.

ACSI recommends that the Board direct the Office of Sustainability and other relevant departments to engage in statewide planning related to Climate Pollution Reduction Grants and other relevant sources of state and federal funding that could support the ambitious heat pump installation goal described above. One specific area that lacks current incentives is the installation of heat pumps in newly constructed housing.

In terms of County level efforts, ACSI applauds the development of the County's Woodburning Exchange. In addition to removing high emissions wood burning equipment, this program works to install clean and energy efficient heat pumps. Significant federal incentives are expected to come online this year to support heat pump installation, so Woodburning Exchange program staff could provide information about incentives and coordinate accessibility for interested community members, and staff from other County programs (e.g. Health staff at Multnomah County Clinics) that interact with the public could promote information. We include more specific recommendations below:

Fully fund permanent positions for change out programs

In the first full year, the program has become an Energy Trust of Oregon Community partner opening up funding for certain households and secured \$600,000 in funding from Earth Advantage, \$300,000 from EPA, with the potential for millions more in funding over the coming years. **Ensuring ongoing staffing is how the County ensures the infrastructure is in place to assist low and moderate income families in making the transition to clean, carbon free energy.**

⁵ In 2023, the Oregon Legislature set a goal to install 500,000 new heat pumps throughout the state by 2030. Oregon is also one of nine states that have pledged to boost heat pumps to 90% of home equipment sales by 2040.

⁶ Reaching Oregon's heat pump deployment goals is estimated to cost \$5 billion, which far exceeds the \$78.9 million of incentives slated to be provided by the Oregon Department of Energy.

Allocate flexible one time only funds to help ensure all participants can be served

The current program utilizes a mix of funds with various parameters and restrictions, and some households will fall outside of those requirements. For example, a home's electrical service may need to be upgraded or the electrical panel may need to be completely replaced. Under these circumstances having a pool of flexible dollars that can be braided with program dollars helps to ensure all eligible project participants are served.

Provide strong directives to pursue potential grants and funding for grant writing support

Prioritize grant opportunities with funding in the Office of Sustainability budget for grant writing support and clear direction to departments to capitalize on available grants. The U.S. Department of Energy Home Energy Rebate Program, and the EPA Climate Pollution Reduction Grant Program are just two examples of potential funding sources that can be used to build climate resilience and reduce fossil fuel pollution in Multnomah County. This is a once in a generation opportunity that the County has an obligation to capitalize on.

TRANSPORTATION RECOMMENDATIONS

The ACSI transportation subcommittee met four times in 2023. Two major themes emerged as areas of focus for the subcommittee: transportation regional megaprojects and if they align with the County's and ACSI's values; and how to encourage more public transit usage, including the nexus to public safety and health. ACSI understands that the County may not have direct decision making power over regional and state transportation decisions. However, the County can influence the direction of the region's transportation future by asking the right questions about the opportunity cost of mega projects and whether the region is investing boldly enough in our public transit system.

While billions of state dollars are poured into megaprojects that pollute and destroy communities, our public transit system is suffering. This has consequences that go beyond just convenience for riders: increasing transit use is necessary for everything from climate to public health to healing economic inequities. **We believe that reducing financial barriers and investing in transit education will increase access to public transportation.** The transportation system we are building is not just for the present – it is a long term investment that will serve future generations. Freeway expansion is not a long term solution.

The County should use its influence to ensure that **we are building the transportation system of tomorrow.**

We look forward to working as a committee to continue our work with the Board and County Staff on implementing these priorities and continuing to provide timely input to the Board and Office of Sustainability and Innovation.

Sincerely,

Members of the ACSI Committee