



Climate Change: Solutions from the National to the Local Level

A conversation with Congressman Paul Tonko and a panel of student activists. Moderated by Professor Anne Ernst, Environmental Studies and Sciences at Skidmore College. March 31, 2021

Remarks from Congressman Paul Tonko

My thanks to the League of Women Voters and Sustainable Saratoga for organizing tonight's event and inviting me to participate.

I know we're all eager to get back to holding this kind of community event in person, so hopefully next time we'll be able to do this with everyone together in the same room. What a thought!

The timing for this event worked out nicely. Earlier today, President Biden released the American Jobs Plan—a major economic recovery proposal to follow up on the American Rescue Plan, which was enacted a few weeks ago.

The American Jobs Plan is the next phase of the President's Build Back Better commitment. It makes massive investments in infrastructure and manufacturing, as well as steps that will make our tax code more fair.

It's clear from today's announcement that President Biden understands reducing climate pollution is not just scientifically necessary, it is also a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to propel our economy forward by investing in programs that put millions of Americans to work—rebuilding our roads, bridges, electric grid, water systems, broadband networks, and buildings.

Today's speech in Pittsburg was a welcome first step in this process.

While there are promising signs of boldness in this proposal, I'm eager to see more details, and I intend to look for ways we can make the Plan even bigger and bolder when it comes to Congress.

To me, Build Back Better means rebuilding our economy for a more competitive future, not the fading dynamics of the past.

America's next generation of global economic leadership will start with supporting new technologies, advanced manufacturing, and resilient infrastructure in every community. And we are building the foundation for all of that with this plan—and I intend to ensure that's all included in the version of it that we advance through Congress.

Taking bold action now will make us safer, fairer and more competitive. That means more jobs and industries growing here in America. And that's important because if we don't grow them here, believe me our competitors abroad will be happy to have them.

President Biden's proposal will spark that new economic age, creating jobs that will modernize our infrastructure, reduce pollution, and enhance U.S. competitiveness, specifically by strengthening domestic manufacturing and associated supply chains.

It will support American workers by ensuring every project that is built with Federal funding will adhere to strong domestic content and prevailing wage requirements.

And it will promote equity and environmental justice with investments that reach into every community, including by ensuring universal access to clean water, clean air, and opportunities to share in clean energy prosperity.

I strongly support President Biden's Justice 40 commitment, which says that at least 40% of the investments we make through these proposals will directly benefit environmental justice communities.

The simple fact when it comes to climate action is that we need to do as much as we can as fast as we can, and I am going to continue to fight to make this plan as ambitious as possible.

Some may say this particular proposal doesn't go far enough, or fast enough. And I agree.

But it is a great start— \$174 billion for electric vehicles, \$52 billion for domestic manufacturing, \$111 billion for water infrastructure, and \$100 billion for the electric grid to name just a few of the key investments.

In other words, this plan is not the last word on America's climate action. It's just the next one.

Our next step from here will be to fine tune, improve, and hopefully expand on the plan in Congress once we see more details from the White House.

I will say here that I am very lucky. I get to serve on three committees in the House that allow me to advance a legislative agenda that can drive federal investments clean energy, innovation, environmental protection, and climate action.

In particular, I have the responsibility and privilege of chairing the Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change.

This Subcommittee has jurisdiction over many of our nation's most important environmental laws, including the Clean Air Act and Safe Drinking Water Act.

Part of my responsibility as Chairman is to draft the most ambitious climate legislation that can be enacted. This work is always a high-wire balancing act.

Passing comprehensive climate legislation will take 218 votes in the House and either 50 or 60 votes in the Senate, depending on the legislative process.

This also means I have to spend a lot of time talking to members and working to understand—and respect—their concerns and sensitivities around different policies.

And then I have to find ways to either persuade them to my way of thinking or work their priorities into a larger bill without losing votes we will need to get to 218.

Building a coalition like this in Congress is not easy. But it is definitely made possible by having vocal advocates— especially young people— holding their elected leaders accountable and demanding we get serious about the climate crisis. So, with this in mind, I want to outline a few provisions from the Committee's CLEAN Future Act, the most comprehensive piece of climate legislation introduced in Congress in over a decade— and perhaps ever.

The CLEAN Future Act shares a lot of qualities with President Biden's American Jobs Plan.

It has some bold and new ideas.

But it isn't necessarily the bill I would write in a vacuum. I'm sure it has a few provisions that some people might not love.

But this is the start of a dialogue—it's the next step in the process, not the final one—and I'm eager to hear your perspective on potential changes that should be

made, which I will take back to the other members working on the bill and our broader committee membership.

I'd like to take a couple of minutes to briefly explain what is the CLEAN Future Act— a nearly one thousand page bill that covers every sector of our economy to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by no later than 2050.

It also includes a science-based interim target to achieve 50% emissions reductions by 2030.

On Earth Day, the President is expected to announce the U.S.'s Nationally Determined Commitment— or N.D.C.— under the Paris Agreement for 2030, and I hope he will aim for at least this 50% benchmark.

The bill seeks to achieve these targets through many policies and federal programs.

This includes a National Clean Electricity Standard— or C.E.S.— which requires electricity suppliers to provide an increasing supply of clean energy to consumers starting in 2023, rising to 80 percent clean energy by 2030 and 100 percent by 2035.

This is aligned with President Biden's plan.

While I still support carbon pricing, an ambitious C.E.S. could be an important part of our goal to decarbonize the electricity sector as quickly as possible.

It includes many investments in clean transportation to reduce emissions – the largest source of greenhouse gas pollution in the U.S – by building the infrastructure for a clean transportation system.

It invests in transportation electrification, including electric vehicles and charging, and updates financing programs for new domestic manufacturing of advanced technologies.

CLEAN Future also includes a bill I've been working on to provide rebates for the installation of EV infrastructure at workplaces, multi-family homes, and publicly accessible location.

CLEAN Future supports a massive investment in energy efficiency and clean energy, including a guarantee for consumers to purchase clean electricity and modernize grid infrastructure to benefit clean resources.

It includes a brand-new Buy Clean Program, similar to the popular “Buy American” program. Buy Clean will steadily reduce emissions from construction materials and products used in federally-funded projects.

This is coupled with a new Climate Star label— similar to Energy Star— and federal procurement requirements to cut emissions from carbon-intensive industries.

Additional investments are available for America’s manufacturers through a provision I authored called the Manufacturing for Our Future Act, which will create a DOE grant program for clean energy technology manufacturing.

If we’re going to deploy a vast number of solar panels, wind turbines, batteries, clean school buses and EVs, we should encourage those things to be built in America by Americans.

The bill would establish and capitalize a \$100 billion National Climate Bank, similar to New York’s Green Bank to help states, cities, communities, and companies transition to a clean economy.

It also has a robust title of environmental justice provisions to empower communities to protect themselves and better participate in the permitting and regulatory process.

The bill invests in Brownfields and Superfund cleanups, and closes loopholes that have been used by frackers to avoid environmental accountability.

Our committee has proposed \$50 billion to invest in our long-neglected water systems. Additionally, there is a \$45 billion program to replace lead service lines.

There is also a robust title on waste and recycling to reduce plastic pollution, block new plastic manufacturing facilities, and support an end-of-life plan for clean energy technologies, such as EV batteries, solar panels, and wind turbines.

And finally, as part of our commitment to leave no neighborhood behind during the energy transition, the bill makes major investments in people and communities that have depended on fossil fuels.

It would create an Office of Energy and Economic Transition in the White House responsible for coordinating programs and activities that support impacted workers and communities.

This is just a high-level overview of the bill.

A more detailed summary of all the provisions can be found on the House Energy & Commerce Committee's website.

But I want to again stress that this is an iterative process. I believe all the members involved in the assembling of this bill are open to changes, and we welcome your input.

The process for considering this package has already begun in the House. We have started to hold hearings on different sections of the package. And now we will have to work to reconcile the bill with the President's plan.

I hope there will be aspects of the proposal that can win bipartisan support, but I will not stand for science deniers and delayers to stop our much-needed progress.

If we intend to lead this nation in ways that avoid the most dangerous and irreversible aspects of climate change, we cannot wait.

Elected officials that continue to deny, delay, or obstruct climate action are out of touch with the American public and the American private sector.

We are going to work very hard to make sure the work of the committee garners the support of the public. We're going to do that by supporting programs that grow jobs and empower workers, protect consumers, and address legacy pollution and historic environmental injustices.

While we are pursuing legislation through regular order for now, we must be prepared to use reconciliation or other procedural tools to enact a bold jobs, infrastructure, and clean energy package.

During my first term in Congress, we enacted the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act— President Obama's 'stimulus' bill.

Thanks to investments made through the Recovery Act in 2009, clean energy is more affordable today than could have been reasonably predicted.

With Build Back Better, we have the opportunity to go far beyond the investments of the Recovery Act to deploy climate solutions at a tremendous scale as quickly as possible.

I am committed to making that happen, and I will continue to use my position in the House to fight for the most ambitious climate bill that can be enacted.

Thank you again for the opportunity to join you tonight. I'm happy to take some questions or comments.