

Will Climate Action Plan carry social equity?

By Sebastian Montes

Advocates call for a seat at the table for underserved communities

Alma Alcantar sees them nearly everywhere as she looks around Grant Hill and Sherman Heights—the ruptured sidewalks, the dilapidated streets, the neglected streetlights.

Why have neighborhoods like Golden Hill flourished while hers languishes, the 42-year-old mother of three mused on a recent afternoon at the decades-old Sherman Heights Community Center, where she was waiting for two of her children to finish after-school programs.

A few blocks away, afternoon rush hour bogged down on state Route 94, a constant reminder of the demarcation between neighborhoods flush with infrastructure spending and those that are not.

“Just look at the difference between Golden Hill and here,” she said. “Walk over the bridge, how pretty it is there. And on this side, it’s horrible.”

Stories like Alcantar’s, say social justice advocates, personify a historical legacy that systematically leaves lower-income, high-minority communities more vulnerable to the ravages of climate change.

“You don’t have to be a planner or an engineer to know that there are places where there’s historic disinvestment,” said Monique Lopez, policy advocate for the Environmental Health Coalition. “It stems from environmental racism, but it also stems from city structures and priorities. People are victims of their built environment.”

Ostensibly, San Diego will try to change that legacy through its Climate Action Plan, the ambitious and sweeping framework for transforming the city’s climate impact by cutting greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2035 and turning exclusively to renewable energy.

The plan could mark a seminal moment for social equity in San Diego, or the moment that institutionalized discrimination is further entrenched into the way San Diego does business.

“We’re at this crossroads where it could be one or the other,” Lopez said. “We’re trying our hardest that it is the social justice pathway, that what the Climate Action Plan does is lead to a just transition instead of just more of the same.”

City leaders enjoyed a six-month honeymoon since the plan’s December release, basking in the glow of international acclaim while deferring questions about its details until an implementation plan could be set forth. That implementation plan came out earlier this month, outlining \$127 million in spending for the coming fiscal year that will help the city reach its climate goals. That includes sewer renovations, new bike lanes, solar panels and sidewalk and road repair.

San Diego City Councilmember David Alvarez convened a working group of business and environmental advocates to help steer the Climate Action Plan to fruition. The group’s first two meetings—in February and May—were dominated by density and how to adapt construction policies to the new climate goals. All but absent so far: discussion about social justice, affordable housing and gentrification.

“Equity should be at the table where everyone else is working,” Lopez said. “Communities of color are on the front lines of climate impacts, they should be on the front lines of investment—but also doing it in a way that protects housing affordability. Things from there get complicated really fast.”

Alvarez—whose district includes Sherman Heights and Barrio Logan—has called for more aggressive efforts to address the city’s ailing infrastructure. He did not respond to requests for comment. Neither did Cody Hooven, the city’s sustainability manager and co-author of the implementation plan.

Kyra Greene, research and policy analyst for the Center on Policy Initiatives says the Climate Action Plan hits the right buzzwords regarding investments in

environmentally burdened, low-income communities. But, so far, the implementation plan calls for the kind of spending the city was already doing—with no meaningfully new ways to spend on infrastructure.

“We’ve *been* planting trees, so saying that we’re going to continue to invest in urban forestry, that’s great, but we’re not really increasing investment and we’re not changing where we’re planting those trees to address social equity issues,” Greene said. “That is a very clear weakness of this implementation plan.”

Meanwhile, a deep rift has emerged around whether the Climate Action Plan is as legally binding as its backers have been touting. Further schism could come once planners and officials get down to brass tacks of identifying the policies that get prioritized and which communities get short shrift on spending. Space at the budget trough, after all, will be limited.

“Everybody is still kumbayaing, because we haven’t gotten to a real implementation plan. What we have is just kind of a budget analysis,” Lopez said. “When we start talking about what we’re going to prioritize, what policies need to get passed in order to redirect the city, what things need to get institutionalized, that’s when we’ll really start to see the divisions among folks.”

The Climate Action Plan boasts that an explosion of green jobs will create a “pathway out of poverty.” But Greene and Lopez aren’t heartened by the scant discussion that crucial topic has so far received. They’re calling for deliberate efforts and safeguards to keep neighborhoods affordable for lower-wage jobs that will support the green economy that the Climate Action Plan calls for.

A harbinger of how that debate might pan out: the city’s record on affordable housing.

“If all we do is focus on the higher-wage jobs and build sexy housing near transit, then absolutely what we’ll see is gentrification and displacement,” Lopez said. “Almost every policy that’s been passed to deal with affordable housing has been underutilized and, frankly, abused by developers. And any time there’s been an effort to look at changing that, the response is, ‘Absolutely not’—just a crushing use of money and power.”

Those thorny conversations about displacement and tenant rights need to go hand in hand with discussions about infrastructure spending, density and developers’ profits, said Lopez and Greene.

“In order for a just transition to take place, not only do our communities need access to those new jobs and the new economy, they also need to be able to afford to live in the city. Because what you’re going to have at the end of the day is a city built only for a few,” Lopez said. “It’ll be a green city, but for who?”

It’s a bitterly familiar story for Alma Alcantar and her neighbors. She sees a glimmer of hope in politicians’ recent promises. But neither can she shake free of her neighborhood’s frustrating history.

“The city talks about spending millions of dollars on roads and sidewalks. I just hope we get a piece of that,” she said. “Because this community has been abandoned for years. *For years.*”