

COMMENTARY

Legislation is one step, but action on climate change must happen now

To stay on track with the goals of the Act on Climate, the governor's team and the General Assembly need to work quickly, advocates say

By Mal Skowron and Sue AnderBois Updated November 4, 2021, 1 hour ago

This week tens of thousands of politicians, activists, corporations, and journalists from around the world are meeting in Glasgow for COP26 — the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference. Included among the attendees are Rhode Island climate champions US Senator Sheldon Whitehouse and state Senator Dawn Euer — sponsor of this year's Act on Climate legislation. Political leaders from nearly 200 countries will hopefully be making concrete plans to achieve not only global net zero climate-warming emissions goals by mid-century, but also for how to adapt to protect communities and natural habitats.

Collectively, we need a big, global vision like this to enable all of us to understand the enormity of the task at hand and our role in it.

However, ultimately, every country, state, and municipality needs to take the necessary actions in the fight to mitigate against and adapt to climate change. Including Rhode Island.

For the last few years, the Climate Crisis Campaign of the Environment Council of Rhode Island has been calling for bold action on climate change. In Rhode Island, the General Assembly passed the Act on Climate legislation this past spring, which legally binds us to 45% emissions reductions by 2030 and full net zero emissions by mid-century. To fulfill this mandate, we will need an approach to integrate climate action and a just transition into all of the state's efforts to improve quality of life for Rhode Islanders. We need policies that improve mobility options to decarbonize transportation, that address the housing crisis and also electrify heating systems, and that create new family-supporting jobs in the clean energy sector as we wean our economy off fossil fuels.

While the adoption of the Act on Climate was an important step, the implementation has lagged. We know what to do, but the governor's team and the General Assembly need to take some big steps fast in order to keep Rhode Island on track.

Immediately upon their return in January, we ask that the General Assembly commit to transitioning our electric grid away from fossil fuels by 2030 by passing the 100% renewable energy standard. We also need to rapidly decarbonize our transportation sector and invest in low-carbon alternatives such as public transit, active mobility, and electric vehicles. These transportation options can be funded through the regional Transportation and Climate Initiative, also up for consideration by the General Assembly.

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And as Rhode Island looks to spend over \$1 billion in ARPA funds and additional large sums in federal infrastructure funding, we need to apply the climate lens — building out clean energy in everything we do. For example, there are proposals on the table now to build thousands of additional housing units and fully renovate our crumbling schools. Yes — let's do that, and do so in a way that is energy efficient, powered entirely by renewable energy, and will save building operators real money in operation and fuel expenses. Ultimately there is no blue economy and no green economy — there is only one economy and we need to build it in a way that addresses and makes us more resilient to the climate crisis.

The global COP26 discussions will also highlight the disparities among countries that are feeling the worst effects of climate change. Countries like Bangladesh and island nations like the Marshall Islands are being literally drowned by rising sea levels while having done the least to cause the crisis. We see these same dynamics playing out in Rhode Island — with frontline communities bearing the brunt of health impacts of burning and transporting fossil fuels. In Providence, the residential neighborhoods surrounding the Port have some of the worst asthma rates in the country, while polluting industries attempt to expand down the street. Global leaders at the UN won't end the Port's legacy of environmental injustice during COP26 — we have to listen to frontline communities and frontline workers on this issue and do the work at home.

We hope COP-26 yields transformative commitments to address climate change on the global scale. But their work in Glasgow is no substitute for the work we must do here in Rhode Island to reap the benefits of a cleaner, resilient, and more equitable energy future.

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