



**Minutes – Friday, May 31, 2024**  
**Video Conference**  
**9 am to 11 am**

**Attending:** Chris Skawski, Bob Howarth, Tom Hirasuna, Sheila Out, Margaret McCasland, Ingrid Zabel, Roxanne Marino, Alice Green, bethany ojalehto mays, Janelle Bourgeois, Marianne Krasny, Dan Lamb, Brian Eden, Ray Burger, Marguerite Wells, Diane Stefani, Dawn Montanye, Cliff Kraft, Hailley Delisle, Gerri Wiley, Elan Shapiro, Kimberly Anderson, Susan Riley, Wayne Bezner-Kerr, Christine O'Malley, David Kay, Dave Bradley, Liz Rowland, Diane Cohen, Peter Bardaglio

**Cornell on Fire** – bethany ojalehto mays

*A former faculty member and cofounder of Cornell on Fire, bethany is a cofounder of Cornell on Fire, a coalition that seeks to hold the university to its stated climate commitments and to respond in a just and comprehensive way to the climate emergency. She shared the recent work Cornell on Fire has been carrying out, including the findings outlined in their Beyond PR Climate Action Plan Report.*

- We're in middle of decisive decade – Elizabeth Kolbert: "...will be consequential in a more or less permanent way. Global CO2 emissions are now so high...that ten more years of the same will be nothing short of cataclysmic. Unless emissions are reduced, and radically, a rise of two degrees Celsius will be pretty much unavoidable by 2030."
- World has failed to reduce emissions despite all pledges to the contrary, and is on track for 3-4C temperature rise by 2100
- Promising examples set by Ithaca Green New Deal and NYS Climate Act – both aspire to deliver on a 1.5 degree pathway
- Cornell should lead way – it led way on Kyoto as first major nongovernmental institution to voluntarily commit to Kyoto Protocol standards for GHG emissions reduction – resulted from student activism

- Sustainability Module for all incoming freshman: Cornell uniquely positioned to operate at speed, scale, and scope needed to confront climate change
- Cornell on Fire believes plan adequate in ambition, scope, & urgency would:
  - 1) Halve current emissions by 2030
  - 2) Get to zero by 2035
  - 3) Cover whole campus economy
  - 4) Use high-confidence, equitable strategies
  - 5) Lead with insights from climate justice communities
- Essential that Cornell deliver on its pledges
- Four areas where more urgent action needed
- Honesty in emissions reporting – no cost win that will set precedent for other elite institutions
  - 1) Actual performance does not meet its projected goals in emissions reductions, even in last three years when campus operations disrupted by Covid
  - 2) Cornell should acknowledge this
  - 3) Reported emissions not full picture
  - 4) Cornell's reported baseline emissions shows it has reduced emissions by 50% from 2008 baseline
  - 5) Reason for drops in emissions twofold:
    - Transition from coal to natural gas
    - Covid-19 disrupted operations
  - 6) We know emissions already rebounding in post-Covid period – did not reflect permanent shift from way Cornell uses energy
- Actual impact from methane emissions enormous – Cornell's reporting should be updated to align with standards of 2019 Climate Law
- Upstream methane emissions should be included and they should be reported on 20-year time horizon – Bob Howarth instrumental in getting these included in Climate Law
- Ithaca and Tompkins County quickly updated their emissions reporting – city completed comprehensive GHG inventories that capture full life cycle of methane and emission from electric grid

- Cornell has not updated its accounting in same way – when Cornell on Fire updated reporting for Cornell, emissions increased by nearly factor of two
- When viewed this way, Cornell has not reduced emissions at all since they began tracking progress in 2008 – and these emissions are still not full picture
- Procurement huge portion of Cornell's overall carbon footprint – Cornell needs plan to address emissions from procurement
- Cornell's current level of consumption is unsustainable – cultural shifts need to start happening on campus
- Cornell reported emissions in 2019 at just over 200K tons of GHG – but when you take into account upstream methane and procurement, actually just under 750K tons
- Not an academic exercise – defines what effective action looks like
- Second area: Current plans won't get Cornell where it needs to go
- Cornell's Climate Action Plan seeks to achieve carbon neutrality by 2036
- Carbon neutrality by 2035.
- But carbon neutrality dangerous trap: "offsetting" emissions inadequate approach
- Cornell's proposed strategies preserve current levels of consumption – we think Cornell should reduce its energy usage
- Renewable electricity not displacing fossil fuel use – also Earth Source Heat has 50/50 chance of success, at best – also several years delayed
- Should not be used as reason to delay action on other fronts
- Cornell relying on carbon sinks & sequestration as major way of offsetting emissions – inherently uncertain and does not address need to reduce emissions
- Depends on land use patterns that could change dramatically – such as wildfire
- These strategies account for only fraction of overall emissions
- Calling on Cornell “to light the fuse that leads to an explosion of ambition in 2025”
- High-confidence, equitable strategies address the root causes of carbon pollution in addition to technological solutions

- Cornell is relying on technological solutions that allow them to swap one thing for another thing and continue to do what it always did
- Cornell needs to accept limits to energy supply and move to a model that matches Cornell's energy use with real-time renewable energy procurement
- Another strategy would be for Cornell to export its power to grid based on GHG emissions rather than profits
- Cornell should stop expanding campus – in last 10 years total square footage has increased 20% in new construction
- New construction largest source of toxicity and building sector largest single source of emissions
- Cornell should go beyond code with deep energy retrofits of existing buildings
- It should also reduce its travel – should not simply offset emissions
- Every decision on campus should be viewed through lens of climate emergency – need to be honest about entire scope of problem
- These changes are radical because there is no non-radical future
- Climate crisis closely linked to excessive consumption of wealthy lifestyle – lifestyle changes necessary for globe's polluter elite
- How will Cornell avoid carbon intensive activities? Facilities, construction, transportation, food& beverage, and research supplies are most intense
- Not yet reported: investments and student travel
- Is it possible to change? Possible because Cornell changed dramatically when Covid struck to address this public health crisis
- Will they do the same for the climate crisis?
- Cornell can commit to full climate accountability for 1.5 degree world -- lack of current commitment hurting our community
- Key issues:
  - 1) Stop echoing Big Oil climate doublespeak – gap between Cornell's rhetoric and action on climate, and it follows Big Oil's playbook
    - Cornell on Fire has just published report Beyond PR Report: Big Oil + Big Red Climate Doublespeak
  - 2) Cornell should stop pretending it's extraterritorial
    - Refusing to report full scope of emissions from methane gas

- Requesting amendments to Ithaca Green Building Code
  - Submitting disinformation in favor of artificial turf fields
  - Refusing to invest its fair share in community
- 3) We need Cornell's full climate accountability
- Lead the way in renouncing Big Oil's doublespeak
  - Take full climate accountability in emissions reporting and action plans
  - Embrace the Ithaca Green Building Code – in fact, go beyond code
  - Maximize climate benefits with organic grass fields
  - Adjust spending priorities
- Later is too late – we're already halfway through decisive decade

## Q&A

- PB: Agreed there is no non-radical future, both on campus and in larger community
- Hopes that Cornell would commit to having one or two of its buildings in the Ithaca 2030 District
- Dave Bradley pointed out in chat that Cornell should look into pumped hydro storage as way to ensure it always has sufficient solar and wind power – addresses issue of intermittency
- Bob Howarth: Good thing that Cornell is being pressed on these issues – thinks Cornell starting to pay attention
- NYS use of natural gas growing faster than any other state in U.S. – almost all of it is fracked gas – ironic given the ban on fracking in NYS
- Taking proper account of emissions associated with use of natural gas involves keeping track of upstream emissions not just emissions associated with onsite consumption
- Also important that accounting carried out using 20-year timeframe, not 100-year timeframe
- Cornell agreed to use 20-year timeframe back in 2015 – used it in public reporting for year or two
- Tompkins County and City of Ithaca adopted 20-year timeframe – used this to leverage the approach into state law

- Discouraging that Cornell has backed away from reporting emissions in this fashion
- Brian Eden: Relatively good relations between environmental groups and Cornell up until proposed construction of North Campus in 2018 – thought they could be more energy efficient
- Hopes things can get back on track with less adversarial relationship
- Peter noted that Cornell sustainability office has asked for time at next meeting to talk about its climate action plan
- No way out but through – which is another way of saying there’s no non-radical future – collaboration absolutely essential to meet challenge of climate emergency

**The Climate Reality Project** – Tom Hirasuna and Diane Stefani

*Diane and Tom, cochairs of the Finger Lakes Chapter of the Climate Reality Project, provided an update on the work of the organization, both nationally and locally. They are both trained Climate Reality Leaders.*

- Local Chapter of Climate Reality Project for Central NY founded in 2020, in middle of pandemic –167 members – first virtual chapter in NY
- Tom took training in 2019 and had to join Hudson River chapter
- Big virtual training in summer 2020 & enough people from CNY that they could start their own chapter, Finger Lakes Greater Region
- Established NYS coalition of local chapters
  - Capital Region
  - Finger Lakes Greater Region
  - Hudson Valley/Catskills
  - Long Island
  - NYC Metro
  - Westchester
  - Western NY
- NYS part of Climate Reality Northeast Region
- Climate Reality has made big effort to reach out beyond U.S. – 10 other international chapters
- Holding virtual trainings and meetings has helped facilitate this expansion
- Four main areas of activities this year:
  - Reducing emissions – first area Climate Reality go involved in
  - Calling out greenwashing
  - Financing just transition

- Strengthening international cooperation on climate
- Al Gore's Inconvenient Truth inspired founding of Climate Reality – sequel came out 11 years later, Truth to Power
- Tom moved into advocacy after he retired and joined Climate Reality Leadership Corps, which started in 2006 with 50 people in Al Gore's barn – now has 50,000 people worldwide
- Tom attended training in Atlanta in 2019 – 1200 people participated – big group from NYS
- Atlanta meeting turning point for Climate Reality – formally introduced climate justice and environmental justice into program
- Training in NYC this past April that Tom attended – 60 mentors and each mentor responsible for 40 people – got to meet Gore in person
- Tom co-leader with Laura Faulk of NYS Coalition – NY has become model for rest of country
- Big effort to get younger people involved – 40% of group in NYC 30 years old or less
- Also 20 to 25% of people from frontline communities
- Diane picked up with discussion about goals of Climate Reality – she did her first training, which was virtual, in 2019 after she retired
- Gave her sense of purpose and opportunity to interact with incredible people
- Getting the word out is challenging – collaboration is key – fundamental mission is to educate others about climate as well as solutions
- Put together number of different presentations
  - Home & auto electrification – what financial incentives are there at state & federal levels?
  - Climate science – based on Al Gore's presentation – developed a model for middle-schoolers
  - Ithaca Green New Deal Scorecard
- Also facilitate several different kinds of discussions
  - The Week – new way to talk about climate change
  - Carbon Crew Project – interactive way to create personal climate plan
  - Climate Action Now – online app – personal & group action
  - Regular book discussions
- Also work on state and federal policy – primarily advocacy for things like Build Back Better/IRA, stopping CO2 fracking
- Most of it virtual but also have days in Albany for in-person lobbying
- As chapter members work on local issues
  - Green New Deal Scorecard
  - Plastics

- Local impact legislation
- Local opportunities and issues
- Collaborate with City of Ithaca, Beyond Plastics, Energy Hubs, Frack Action, Cornell & Binghamton University, TCCPI, and many others

## Q&A

- bethany: To what extent is Al Gore's carbon-intensive lifestyle relevant to his work on environmental justice?
- Diane: I assume he flies to get to the various conferences – what I get from his work is the incredible scope of his experience – he's an incredible resource to be able to learn from
- Tom: Gore leaves on a farm and practices regenerative agriculture – for all the trainings carried out in person by Climate Reality they purchase offsets for travel and lodging
- Peter noted that he's been pushing for the 2030 District annual summits to be virtual, as they were during pandemic
- Tom believes there's a big difference between live meetings and virtual meetings
- Diane pointed out that Climate Reality does both in-person and virtual training sessions – it's definitely tradeoff
- Margaret McCasland: Performance Systems Development in Ithaca hired to go down to Gore's farm to work on reducing its carbon footprint through energy retrofits
- David Kay: Really appreciates this kind of discussion in this kind of group because we're all wrestling with how radical are the changes we can make – everything we do involves tradeoffs of various kinds
- Can't lose sight of importance of collective policy – individual action doesn't have same kind of impact, important as it is
- Bethany: We need to keep in mind that decisions we make as part of developed world have very steep cost for those who live in places like Panama, where she worked with indigenous communities – people there will never fly anywhere as part of Global South but they live with consequences of decisions we make
- We have to shift framework from what's best for us to what's best for everyone
- As a wrap up, Peter asked Brian Eden to provide an update on where the various bills involving state climate and clean energy stood as the legislative session moves into its final days for the year
- Climate Superfund Act is one of bills that Brian has spent most time on this session – effort to hold oil and gas companies responsible for at least some of the climate damage they've inflicted on state



- Also NY HEAT Act, which would eliminate obligation to serve removed from Public Service law
- Third bill is Packaging Reduction Act – really an energy bill due to oil industry push for plastic packaging
- All three of bills have majority of assembly members as sponsors – speaker of house is main obstacle to bringing these bills to floor for vote
- Brian urged people to write speaker to urge him to allow votes on this legislation – also encouraged people to write AM Kelles and Sen. Webb for their strong support of these bills