

# DENVER

## Measure 2A: Getting Climate Change Onto Denver's 2020 Ballot

### Broad Strokes

In November 2020, more than 60 percent of Denver voters approved a groundbreaking climate funding initiative, ballot measure 2A, now known as the Climate Protection Fund. The measure established a sales tax increase that will raise up to \$40 million in annual revenue to fund climate action projects—with half of the money specifically earmarked for the city's most vulnerable communities.

In a way, 2A's success arose out of an earlier attempt to raise funding for climate action. In 2019 a grassroots environmental group called Resilient Denver aimed to fund climate work with a ballot measure that would tax energy use. Opposition from the utility sector and other groups halted the measure's progress. But Mayor Michael Hancock recognized a clear appetite for ambitious climate action; at the same time, his administration was exploring new ways to aggressively confront inequality in the community. Both issues had been central to Hancock's 2019 reelection platform, and the mayor put stock in the idea of addressing both issues in concert. To do so, he established the [Climate Action Task Force](#)—mandated to tackle both emissions and inequality—with the help of the American Cities Climate Challenge.

The group would engage wide swaths of the community to draft climate policy recommendations that would not only mitigate climate change but also address the specific needs of city stakeholders, especially those of underserved communities, along the way. At the heart of the task force's mandate was racial equity, an issue historically neglected by the city.

In early 2020 the task force began its daunting assignment: to draw up the schematics for a future Denver that champions racial equity, thrives in an era of climate change, and leaves nobody behind—by May. Nearly a year later, the establishment of the Climate Protection Fund was a testament to the task

With a mandate to spend 50% of the funds "directly in the community with a strong lens toward equity, race, and social justice," ballot measure 2A creates \$40 million annually that will go towards:

- Green workforce development
- Renewable energy
- Environmental justice
- Sustainable transportation
- Adaptation
- Resilience
- Energy-efficient buildings

force's effectiveness. But it wasn't an easy journey, and there's still a long way to go.

### Task Force Composition and Direction

For the task force to successfully synthesize environmental justice and social justice, both needed to be prioritized throughout the entire planning process. Climate was already baked in: The task force's recommendations would ultimately be implemented by the Office of Climate Action, Sustainability, and Resiliency (CASR), a newly established agency at the helm of Denver's climate response. On the other hand, upholding equity—especially racial equity—required a more intentional approach.

Among the task force's 26 members were advocates from Black, brown, and Indigenous communities—groups historically underserved by the government despite suffering disproportionately from climate change. The rest of the task force included members representing fossil fuel interests, youth groups, religious organizations, and the real estate sector, among others. To calibrate strategies in combating inequality, Kapwa Consulting, a group that guides organizations in centering social justice, began offering insights to the task force in January 2020. During a workshop that month, Kapwa clearly defined equity as “the process of correcting broken systems in order to eliminate disparate outcomes based on one's identity.” The workshop framed the goals of lowering emissions and racial equity as sharing an integral bond—good policy for one should uplift the other. In fact, the individual success of one might depend on the other. For instance, disproportionate rates of asthma in Black and brown communities, a manifestation of social inequality, could be mitigated by policies that drive down emissions and improve air quality.

### The Process

As the task force received a crash course in how to pursue climate action through the lens of equity, it began to put its learnings into practice. The first meeting of the task force was in January 2020. In February and March 2020, the group hosted meetings with the Den-

ver community to solicit input on its eventual recommendations, with an ultimate tally of 38 gatherings and 327 participants. For some sections of the community, empty promises and exclusion from the decision-making process were business as usual. Many had been living with the consequences of climate change for years without meaningful action from local government. “That was the big sticking point, and a lesson learned in our conversations with the community,” says Liz Babcock, CASR's climate action manager, who is familiar with the task force's work. She recalls hearing from residents, “You say that you're doing this work, but you're not investing in it.” Babcock learned that a primary problem for residents in underserved communities was a lack of access to employment opportunities. “A key thing is that people want opportunities,” she says, “not for dead-end, low-wage jobs, but for quality jobs that provide a long-term career path.”

Just as the task force's efforts to court and learn from Denver's communities reached full swing, COVID-19 forced it to pivot. Its meetings continued, with nearly a dozen taking place in spring of 2020, shifting from physical spaces to Zoom and streaming on Facebook Live for the general public. These virtual convenings did have an upside, offering access that a physical meeting location might not have. But to ensure that community perspectives were explicitly included, the task force created five stakeholder groups to inform its work. These consisted of 40 people representing the perspectives of climate justice and equity advocates, members of the workforce, business and industry stakeholders, youth and climate advocates, and those most vulnerable to climate impacts. Health care providers were also recruited to provide additional insights.

Also, from April through May, a website, [denverclimateaction.consider.it](https://denverclimateaction.consider.it), allowed members of the public to comment on how they wanted to see their needs addressed and climate confronted and to provide feedback on Task Force recommendations. According to the city government's statistics, more than 2,400 unique users visited the site, with more than 800 creating accounts required to post. The city [published the findings](#) from the website to further inform the Task Force.

Denver also looked to another Climate Challenge city, Portland, for inspiration. In 2018, residents there [approved a ballot measure](#) to tax big box retailers in the

city and put the revenue in a fund for mitigating climate change—a direct influence on measure 2A.

### Findings

In July 2020, the task force released its plan with consensus among all 26 members—from Conservation Colorado to BP America. Possible ways to raise money included redirecting infrastructure investments and levying new public parking fees. Atop the list of funding ideas was a proposed sales tax increase—\$0.25 on every \$10 spent—which alone would cover almost a quarter of the annual \$200 million that the task force estimated would be needed for Denver to combat climate change. The proposal included language to focus spending on eliminating greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution and supporting vulnerable communities to adapt and build resilience to climate change. The funding would have six allowable use categories, including green workforce development, renewables, environmental justice, sustainable transportation, adaptation and resilience, and energy-efficient buildings. The Climate Protection Fund would also have a mandate to spend 50% of the funds “directly in the community with a strong lens toward equity, race, and social justice.”

When the sales tax proposal reached the City Council, 11 of the 12 members voted to place it on the ballot. That November, measure 2A passed with approval from Denver voters by a nearly two-to-one ratio. Endorsements across communities, industries, and other stakeholders certainly paved the way.

Plenty of track is left to lay, and the most difficult part yet is this: equitably investing \$40 million in annual revenue. A five-year plan for the funding was published on November 3, 2021, one year after the funding was approved. CASR has already established six 20-person committees to help plan the spending, and there’s no shortage of proposed uses for the funds. Developing job training programs, expanding public transportation, installing electric car charging stations, bringing e-bikes to targeted neighborhoods, and covering the full cost of electrification for income-qualified households are just a few under consideration.

### Lessons Learned

Equity led the way to measure 2A’s success, but

the task force’s work wasn’t flawless.

“We probably could have done a better job of integrating equity throughout the conversation,” Babcock notes. Now, after more than a year, she says, “We are seeing that we need to use more quantitative tools along with a qualitative questioning of systems. Who benefits, and who’s burdened?” If those metrics were already in place, it would be easier now, and in the future, to measure the task force’s successes.

Moving forward, Babcock hopes that listening sessions will become a central part of climate policymaking. The input residents were able to provide only reinforced their role as an invaluable resource, especially after years of not having a seat at the decision-making table. Integrating equity also paved the way to success for the Climate Protection Fund. The earlier climate ballot effort showed that broad stakeholder engagement is critical in crafting funding options and that weaving equity into the funding guidelines is both the right approach and the winning approach. In addition, addressing more immediate needs, like access to transportation or jobs, provides buoyancy to ambitious climate policies. They are intersectional.

Yet soliciting input isn’t always easy. “Sometimes this work can feel uncomfortable,” Babcock admits. As an envoy of the government, she finds it important not to take community mistrust personally. Forging those divides comes through a combination of marshaling city resources and opening ears. “We just have to understand and hear the feedback and listen,” she notes. “Open our minds, open our ears to the feedback from the community, and be willing to engage in authentic relationships.”

And the city is starting to take steps to implement those learnings. It has hired a community partnerships administrator and is paying community groups in underserved neighborhoods to host meetings, called “rapid assessments,” to solicit feedback from residents on the types of investments they would like to see. If any city hopes to see success with intersectional climate and equity reform, nurturing city–community bonds is key, Babcock concludes: “Figuring out how you can meet in ways that are not burdensome to them, compensating people for their time, showing up where they are—all those kinds of things can be a way to start building some trust.”