

# LOS ANGELES

## Decarbonization: Community Studies to Build Momentum

### Background

In 2019, Los Angeles released LA's Green New Deal, a climate action plan with the goal of reaching carbon neutrality by 2050. To achieve this, all of the city's building stock will need to reach net-zero emissions in the next 30 years, and most will need extensive retrofits. With such ambitious goals, progress on the actions outlined in the Green New Deal will be challenging, especially regarding building decarbonization, which is a cornerstone of the plan. Much work remains to determine how these laudable goals will be achieved, and how the community will be impacted if they are.

To help close the gap between city ambitions and stakeholder needs related to decarbonization, as well as to build momentum for action, the American Cities Climate Challenge collaborated with Inclusive Economics, Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), Arup, and Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE) to work with the community to identify and amplify concerns and priorities that intersect with the goals of building decarbonization. These collaborations resulted in a suite of reports undertaken with community guidance on issues relevant to low-income and marginalized communities, and through this process provided community-based organizations (CBOs) and advocates with a meaningful role in peer education and advocacy around real solutions related to decarbonization. The studies looked into impacts on tenants, jobs, and housing.

### Job Impacts

For those in the workforce or in labor unions, a primary focus related to implementation of broad electrification measures is mitigating job loss and ensuring that any jobs created are high quality and family sustaining. [Inclusive Economics](#) and their research partner, [LAANE](#), created a report that outlines community concerns and empowers stakeholders with data to articulate their needs as the city pursues building decarbonization goals. The resulting report—**Los Angeles Building Decarbonization:**

Decarbonization is essential to the health of all Angelenos and to the resilience of the city. The legislative progress made by councilmembers Koretz and Raman would not have happened without the groundwork laid by these studies, which have proven crucial for connecting decarbonization with key community priorities.

**Community Concerns, Employment Impacts, and Opportunities** ([full report](#), [summary](#))—provides an inventory of the estimated costs associated with decarbonization and analyzes the employment impacts of various policy and program scenarios.

The report estimates that an effective electrification program has the potential to support up to 18,000 full-time careers for Angelenos over three decades, far outnumbering any jobs lost in the fossil gas sector. But without policy intervention, 85 percent of these jobs will be in “low-road” market sectors (meaning entry-level jobs with low-wages, poor benefits, and limited upward mobility), posing risks for both consumers and workers. To achieve the best outcomes, the new jobs that are created must be accompanied by high labor standards, and electrification incentives must be bound to responsible contractor criteria and thorough quality-assurance processes.

### Tenant Impacts

The majority of Angelenos are renters, and nearly 50 percent of those in LA’s most vulnerable neighborhoods spend at least half of their income on rent and utilities. Delivering the benefits of decarbonization to cost-burdened residents was identified as a critical component of action.

In response to concerns about tenant displacement and housing affordability, [SAJE](#) published a research report with a set of recommendations designed to countervail potential burdens. The report—**Los Angeles Building Decarbonization: Tenant Impact and Recommendations** ([full report](#), [summary](#))—examines the potential consequences for renters and shows how thoughtful policies can help instead of harm. The report found that delivering the benefits equitably to tenants could stem from multiple strategies: limiting property owners from passing the costs of retrofits on to tenants, offering subsidies to affordable housing providers and prohibiting corporate landlords from accessing those subsidies, requiring efficiency upgrades to reduce energy costs, and ensuring that all decarbonization mandates address tenant health and well-being.

These assessments cast into sharp relief the need for a comprehensive and equitable decarbonization strategy, one that includes stakeholder engagement, real-world case studies, legislative and regulatory mandates, and a broad range of public investments and in-

centives that will mitigate costs for tenants, owners, and contractors.

### Housing Impacts

Looking at the scale of investment expected for city-wide decarbonization, residents worry about who will be forced to shoulder the costs, especially when households are already financially strained. COVID-19 plunged many low-income households deeper into financial crisis due to illness, job loss, or death of a primary wage earner. Even before the pandemic, the city was suffering from a massive shortage of affordable housing—in 2019, LA was deemed the third most rent-burdened metro area in the country.

Addressing the twin goals of curbing climate emissions and protecting housing affordability, [Arup](#), with outreach support provided by [Better World Group](#), conducted a housing review and energy analysis. The resulting report—**Los Angeles Affordable Housing Decarbonization Study** ([full report](#), [blog](#))—explored the impact of decarbonization on multifamily buildings, in terms of both retrofit costs and utility bill impacts. Energy modeling simulations across four multifamily building prototypes showed that decarbonization would bring down monthly utility costs for tenants and owners. However, these cost savings are not expected to be enough to recoup the up-front cost of the retrofits, so there is a risk that housing providers could increase rents to make up the difference.

Stakeholder outreach revealed strong support for decarbonization—especially when it results in lower energy bills—and recognition that low-income communities bear the brunt of climate hazards, but concerns remain regarding the risk that building improvements could push out existing tenants. The report emphasized the need to address affordable housing and decarbonization in tandem, lest they end up in conflict.

### Legislative Action Building on Community Engagement

The level of community involvement in the creation of these studies meant that platforms were created where stakeholders could elevate their concerns and help provide potential solutions for the city to act on. The undertaking of these reports also helped the city find avenues to strengthen relationships with the

community and take a more active approach to seeking involvement and feedback. The momentum and support from CBOs and advocates for taking thoughtful action on decarbonization, inspired by the breadth and depth of the advocacy and ambition on this issue, provided a catalyst for two important legislative actions that came forward in late 2021 and early 2022.

A [motion](#) introduced by Councilmember Paul Koretz (CD 5) on December 8, 2021, launched a series of community engagement activities on building decarbonization to collect community feedback and recommendations on meeting the energy and water efficiency goals in LA's Green New Deal. The goal was to ensure adequate outreach to and input from vulnerable and frontline communities as well as a wide range of other stakeholders, from industry to real estate to housing to tenants to workforce. The process was intended to center energy democracy, workers' rights, and tenant protections. Much of the language came directly from community-based organizations (e.g., Leap LA, a coalition of frontline community groups and environmental justice organizers, and RePower LA, a coalition of economic justice and environmental equity advocates), in particular language around housing and [energy justice](#) principles.

Based on outcomes from the stakeholder engagement initiated by Koretz's December motion, Councilmember Nithya Raman (CD 4) introduced a [motion](#) on February 9, 2022, ([press release](#)) calling for all new residential and commercial building construction to be zero carbon emission. The motion was supported by a wide coalition of environmental and social justice organizations and was cosponsored by the City Council president, two Council committee leads, and two Council climate champions (drawing on significant support from the Mayor's Office). The motion calls on LA's Department of Building and Safety to draw on upcoming community engagement with frontline communities, industry leaders, workforce experts, and the housing sector to develop an implementation plan and regulatory framework to be passed by the end of the year.

### Next Steps

This spring, LA's Climate Emergency Mobilization Office (CEMO), which was [previously created](#) by City Council as a result of community advocacy led by the Leap LA coalition, hosted its Climate Equity LA series on building decarbonization, during which the three conducted studies were leveraged for peer education, artic-

ulation of the potential impacts of decarbonization, and identification of the opportunities and resources needed for decarb policies and programs. Researchers and organizers from SAJE, Arup, LAANE, and Inclusive Economics were among the experts leading the community discussion and engagement that will become integrated into the legislative process. Additional engagement across stakeholder groups is being conducted by the LA Department of Building and Safety and the LA Housing Department.

Having the support of the most vulnerable Angelenos, including the community organizations that protect their interests, is essential for a policy plan to succeed. Black, Latino, and low-income communities are disproportionately impacted by the effects of poor air quality, high energy costs, and inefficient buildings. Failing those communities would create additional burdens all over the city, but when these groups have a voice in what is best for their health, that is the best way forward in creating policy that works for the climate and for the people.

Decarbonization is essential to the health of all Angelenos and to the resilience of the city. The legislative progress made by councilmembers Koretz and Raman would not have happened without the groundwork laid by these studies, which have proven crucial for connecting decarbonization with key community priorities. This work has clearly demonstrated the value of working with communities up front to enable peer education and meaningful engagement on climate policy. In doing so, Los Angeles is setting itself up to create a plan that does not simply benefit some at the expense of others, but lifts up everyone.

### CEMO's Community Engagement Climate Equity LA series:

- [Full PDF program for "Part 1: Equitable Building Decarbonization of Buildings and Homes for LA"](#) (agendas for each workshop are on pp. 5-7)
- Link to materials from Climate Equity LA Building Decarb:
  - [Session 1](#) "Why Decarbonize Buildings & Homes in LA?"
  - [Session 2](#) "Energy/Housing Justice & Building Decarbonization"
  - [Session 3](#) "Building Decarbonization & Economic Justice: Green Workforce and a Just Transition"