

***New York is Struggling to Breathe. So
are the Rest of Us: Some More Than
Others***



Where our priorities lie

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's [most recent report](#), published days into the Russian invasion of Ukraine, concludes that nations around the world are still not doing enough to protect

themselves from the threats posed by global warming, warning that climate change might outpace human adaptation.

Just a week later, CERAWeek—an annual energy conference attended by global gas and oil giants—was held in Houston: the Energy Capital of the World, ranked 9th in ozone pollution in the U.S., and where I happen to live and study. While climate issues were expected to feature heavily, focus was instead shifted from transitioning towards clean energy to securing oil and gas supply in a [”patriotic” increase in domestic fossil fuel production](#), despite the U.S. importing [only 3% of its oil](#) and [no gas](#) from Russia.

While climate conditions continue to worsen, non-Russian gas and oil suppliers are exploiting current political instability to justify the need for their services. This unique set of circumstances and ongoing discourse necessitates an evaluation of past and proposed legislation in the field of climate change mitigation, its effects on the affected communities, as well as an outline of potential further action to aid a transition into clean energy.

New York outperforming the rest of the U.S.

The [largest environmental risk factor](#) for human health worldwide is long-term exposure to PM_{2.5}—a class of air pollutants smaller than 2.5 μm in diameter, and closely linked to the combustion of fossil fuels.

New York City is an emblematic example of a city that has reduced its PM_{2.5} emissions drastically through a strict [air pollution control program](#), reaching a 40% decrease over the last two decades. By following federal guidelines to meet the National Ambient Air Quality Standard, the metropolitan area has now reached levels of pollution well below the [national standard](#) (7 µg/m³ compared to 12 µg/m³), yet falling short of the World Health Organization's [safe environment standards](#) of 5 µg/m³.

Though there has been great progress in ameliorating air pollution in NYC, further action is needed to reach a safe level, and most of the U.S. is doing even worse. As new tactics for improving air quality are introduced to New York, other metropolitan areas must learn and act accordingly in order to protect citizens' health.

What are the next steps?

In her 2022 State of the State address, New York State Governor Kathy Hochul committed to two major plans for tackling climate change and pollution: decarbonizing New York's buildings and school buses.

Buildings cause [more than a third](#) of New York's climate pollution, overwhelmingly utilizing fossil fuels for heating, cooling, hot water, etc. In December of 2021, New York became the largest U.S. city to

enact legislation [to end the use of gas heating and stoves](#) in newly built structures. Now, Governor Hochul has set forth a plan for legislation that ensures zero-emission building construction by 2027, and 2 million electrified or electrification-ready homes by 2030, with 800 thousand in the low-income range, recognizing that pollution impacts historically disadvantaged communities disproportionately.

With about [50 thousand](#) school buses on the streets of New York State polluting the communities they service every day, reducing emissions from those vehicles is a direct solution. Electrifying the school buses in NYC alone is expected to be equivalent to [650 thousand](#) passenger vehicles' worth of pollution. Governor Hochul's proposal outlines zero-emission school bus purchases by 2027, with a goal of electrifying all buses by 2035.

The implementation of proposed legislation rarely addresses discrepancies within existing communities, as has proven to be the case with Hochul's carbon-neutral bus initiative. At the beginning of March, activists stood in the heart of Astoria, also known as "Asthma Valley", demanding that the Governor address where exactly funds for the electrified bus fleet are coming from, and which communities will be serviced first.

“Now is the time to make real investments in our communities that have for too long felt left behind”

- Jenny Veloz, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest

It is no coincidence that residents of Astoria are the ones to protest the plan for electrification of buses, just like they protested the continued use of “peaker plants” situated in their neighborhood.

Peaker plants are power plants that only operate during peak hours in order to keep up with high demand. The plants, running on fossil fuels, are dirty and expensive sources of energy: they [disproportionately emit air pollutants](#), contributing to poor air quality, and during peak hours, electricity prices [have almost tripled](#), further exacerbating the financial hardships of low-income households. Four “temporary” peaker plants were built in Asthma Alley in 2001, but they are still fully operational and continue to contribute to increased rates of respiratory illnesses in the neighborhood.

With a multitude of recent studies proving the link between [redlining and modern-day pollution](#), and race and income as factors in [air pollution exposure](#), it’s hard to argue that pollution affects everyone the same. The residents of Asthma Alley suffer hospitalizations from asthma at five times the national average and rates 21 times higher

than other NYC neighborhoods. Pollution disproportionately affects that community to the point where it dictates their lives, and it's only natural for them to recognize injustices within legislation that much more easily.

As we are moving forward and trying to improve life conditions for everyone, we must take the time to think about whose perspectives will give us the most insight into how people are affected by climate change and pollution, and who needs the help most urgently.

As we move forward toward a future with better life conditions for everyone, the perspectives of those most affected by contemporary issues are invaluable. If the residents of Asthma Alley are in support of the [Pollution Justice Act Of 2021](#) and the [Justice in Power Plant Permitting Act](#), maybe this legislation deserves your attention. In the case that you support it too, you must voice your opinion. Reach out to your local legislators and share your views on the topic—whether through a formal meeting, letter, or a phone call—your voice can be the reason somebody is able to breathe tomorrow.