

## **Policy Proposal: Establishment of an Urban Climate Corps in the City of Birmingham**

**To:** Amelia Muller, Civic Design Principal, City of Birmingham Mayor's Office

**From:** Nadia Haq, Mary Gilmore, and Banks Stamp

**Re:** Urban Climate Corps Pilot Program

### **Introduction**

Heavy industry in North Birmingham has “caused significant environmental pollution over time,” according to a recent report from Allen et al. (2019), including additional impact on environmental injustice and economic disparities among residents. As cities across the United States are transitioning their operations to mitigate climate change, it is imperative that Birmingham adapts its procedures as well. Despite the Supreme Court's *Buchanan v. Warley* decision, decades of land use and zoning ordinances have kept North Birmingham racially segregated, with disproportionately less access to healthcare, food, and transportation in majority-Black areas. Additionally, heavy industry around the 35th Avenue Superfund Site has created environmental pollution that continues to affect the health and well-being of individuals in the area (Allen et al., 2019). The federal government and the Jefferson County Department of Health have historically worked with these communities regarding health concerns. Because of this history, we believe now is the time for the City of Birmingham to play a more active role in reducing disparities while also improving the city's overall economic development. The City should implement innovative programs in green infrastructure that not only mitigate environmental pollution and climate change, but also empower communities to stay and work in Birmingham. Such programs would provide the city with the much-needed capacity to enable smart growth strategies. We define green infrastructure as work relating to clean air, clean water, clean soil, urban tree canopy, stormwater infrastructure, lead remediation, sustainable housing construction, and similar capacities that the federal government has outlined as “environmental resilience” in previous grants.

In order to expand Birmingham's workforce, retain talent within the city, and make progress on sustainability initiatives, it is necessary to build capacity for the city to launch more green infrastructure projects and smart growth principles. The Biden-Harris Administration has consistently committed to delivering environmental justice and economic opportunities for those who have historically been neglected and disenfranchised. Specifically, the EPA has already selected 19 organizations to receive over \$3.7 million in grants for job training programs. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act offers a monumental opportunity to fund projects.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Mayor Woodfin's Vision 2025 agenda asserts that the City will renew its commitment to all 99 Birmingham neighborhoods including "creating an Office of Sustainability to spearhead the City's environmental justice, housing remediation and retrofitting, food access and food policy, and green infrastructure planning and green workforce development initiatives" (*Vision 2025: Continuing our progress*, 2021). The City of Birmingham Mayor's Office also aims to reap its full economic potential by investing in Black residents, particularly youth. These initiatives are essential strides towards addressing the gap in environmental justice and health, and supporting an inclusive economy. We call on the City of Birmingham to honor these promises by:

- (1) Establishing an Urban Climate Corps as an environmental health and justice workforce development program that prioritizes BIPOC youth and fosters a student-to-workforce pipeline within green careers in the City of Birmingham. The concept of an Urban Climate Corps pays respect to the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps from President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. As our world endures a climate crisis, it is time that municipalities begin to shift into a new era of public administration that prioritizes climate adaptation and mitigation for its residents through a green workforce.
- (2) Adopting green initiatives that involve expanding carbon storage capacity, reducing urban heat island effects, assessing hazardous waste, installing green infrastructure, and aiding the development of affordable housing and transit within the City of Birmingham.

## **Background Evidence**

Existing municipal policy frameworks can act as a blueprint for Birmingham. Boston Mayor Michelle Wu ran on a proposed Boston Green New Deal and has provided free access to the entire policy proposal with extensive sources and examples of solutions currently implemented in other cities across the United States. The proposed Boston Green New Deal details a plan for their city's own Urban Climate Corps that will deal with "climate-related mitigation and resilience work that also closes employment inequities across neighborhoods and racial lines." Specifically, this group would engage in work "to improve the quality of open space, climate resilience, weatherization of older buildings, zero waste infrastructure such as composting and reuse, installation of solar arrays, and community engagement" (Schlegel, 2020, p. 28).

Additionally, the concept of an Urban Climate Corps has already been put into practice through existing programs across the United States. The University of California, Berkeley operates an AmeriCorps program known as "GrizzlyCorps" that utilizes college graduates for promotion of regenerative agri-food systems, forest resilience, and food waste. GrizzlyCorps members coordinate with conservation organizations as well and work for 11 months in local communities to improve watershed and soil health, increase carbon uptake, improve irrigation, nutrient management, and additional ecological initiatives (Alex, 2021).

Another existing program is the Great Lakes Civilian Conservation Corps. With roots in President Roosevelt's original CCC program, Great Lakes CCC has adapted to tackling climate change through its workforce development efforts. They are currently involved in the Southeast Wisconsin Solar Group Buy program and partner with Eagle Point Solar for panel installations that "save homeowners and businesses up to 35% off standard pricing" (*Welcome To The Great Lakes Community Conservation Corps!, n.d.*). Great Lakes CCC is also a recipient of one of the EPA's FY22 grants.

Birmingham has the opportunity to bring similar programs into the city while also prioritizing residents' seeking job opportunities. A Birmingham version of the Urban Climate Corps could provide an equitable policy solution to communities that have faced environmental injustice. Birmingham City's Urban Climate Corps should target young Birmingham residents ages 16-24 years to provide them with needed job training. Such a program should be guided by a well-informed advisory board to steer budgeting and development (see Appendix B for potential funding opportunities). The Corps will collaborate with existing and new City partners on initiatives to foster healthier and safer communities by improving environmental health.

## Metrics & Evaluation

The Business Education Alliance (BEA) calls for "raising Alabama's labor force participation rate (57%) to the national average (62%) by 2025, working in partnership with business and industry, to use community colleges, workforce investment programs, and nonprofit support services to target special populations currently underrepresented in the workforce" (BEA, 2022, p. 9). An Urban Climate Corps would align with both municipal and state government goals through appropriate measures. The following metrics may be used to determine the impact of the program on workforce development and environmental protection/conservation initiatives.

**Workforce Development:** program enrollment, workforce retention rate, employment rates among the target population (overall and by race), turnover rate within the private sector, and jobs created

**Environmental Protection/Conservation:** number of stormwater maintenance issues, volume of litter entering storm drains, volume/location/frequency of dumping, and current EPA clean air metrics

We propose the following types of evaluations to assess the success of the pilot program. These evaluations will collect and analyze data to determine effectiveness, impact, and costs/benefits.

**Process evaluation:** Comparing original pre-program plans to actual post-program plans that were followed to determine if the policy program has been implemented by the City as intended; will produce more qualitative data;

**Outcome evaluation:** Comparing pre-program plans of intended outcomes to the actual post-program outcomes to measure the program's effectiveness in the target population in achieving the overarching goals; will produce more quantitative data and quantitative data;

**Cost-benefit evaluation:** To determine if the program is logically and financially feasible given its costs to implement and actual benefits achieved; quantitative data

## Implications

The implementation of a program like the Urban Climate Corps in Birmingham would intersect economic, environmental, health, and social impacts through its interactive functionality. The City of Birmingham can increase its employment opportunities for BIPOC youth and worker retention, expand public-private partnerships to garner funding on capital projects, and improve talent retention in our workforce. This program highlights innovations within sustainable housing construction, stormwater infrastructure, urban tree canopy, as well as other environmental resilience efforts. In regard to health, the work being done will lead to the reduction of environmental health hazards and support healthy living and built environment.

As the Mayor's Office has made it a top priority to address the needs of all 99 neighborhoods, the programs like Urban Climate Corps will promote social cohesion, neighborhood interaction, and public support for issues that directly impact residents. We recognize that efforts toward sustainability and smart growth practices require investment, time, and funding; this program would build capacity within the city for future projects geared toward climate adaptation and mitigation efforts. We encourage the city to apply for any grant opportunities that match the project mentioned in this proposal. We are also grateful for the work being done in the Mayor's Office and the City Council. Birmingham has weathered the storm of the Covid-19 pandemic and economic crisis. Now, it is time we shift our attention toward the climate crisis, and galvanize the city behind a municipality that will fight for their future.

## References

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*Vision 2025: Continuing our progress. Woodfin for Mayor. (2021).* Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.randallwoodfin.com/vision2025>

*Welcome To The Great Lakes Community Conservation Corps!* Greatlakesccc.org. (n.d.). Retrieved April 17, 2022, from <https://greatlakesccc.org/>

## **Appendix A - Potential Partners:**

This proposal can also be incorporated into existing structures and organizations, either with or without being a recipient of an EPA/IIJA grant. We have composed a list of potential stakeholders who may be interested in partnering:

1. Division of Youth Services Kids and Jobs Program
  - a. Through City's Department of Youth Services; an annual summer training program for Birmingham children
  - b. Existing programs vary according to age group
2. AmeriCorps VISTA program, City of Birmingham
  - a. City utilizing the existing AmeriCorps VISTA program
3. Foundation for City Parks
4. City of Birmingham Parks and Recreation
5. UAB Sustainability
  - a. Could staff/provide training role in environmental education
  - b. Potential partnership with Birmingham's Department of Transportation on a Ridership program for workers
6. Building Opportunities for Lasting Development (BOLD) Women in Welding Program
  - a. BOLD is a grant funding program by the City of Birmingham's Department of Innovation and Economic Opportunity to any firm, corporation, or other business entity, public or private, for the purpose of promoting the economic development for the City. IEO is requesting proposals for creative, evidence-based approaches to advancing economic resilience and mobility in Birmingham
7. Partnership between Jefferson State Community College, Womens Fund of Greater Birmingham, and City of Birmingham

- a. Provided classroom instruction, hands-on welding, and the knowledge and skills for in-demand career opportunities
  - b. Key players: City of Birmingham's Director of Innovation and Economic Opportunity Josh Carpenter, the program's Deputy Director of Talent Development Rachel Harmon, Jefferson State's Associate Dean of Economic Development Guin Robinson and Jefferson State Career Coach Christine McLain
8. Protecting Good Initiative
- a. Protective Insurance (Protecting Good Initiative; affordable home repairs and renovations to residents)
  - b. launched by Protective Life Corporation (Protective) in collaboration with the City of Birmingham, the State Department of Insurance and Habitat for Humanity to identify ways to be a good neighbor to the Northside Birmingham residents since building the 45,000-seat, multi-purpose Protective Stadium in the heart of their community; a pilot program was introduced in the Fall of 2021 to offer home repairs and renovation to qualified residents

## Appendix B - Potential Grant Opportunities:

### EPA Grants:

- Environmental Justice and Environmental Education grants
  - <https://www.epa.gov/grants/specific-epa-grant-programs>
- Federal grants website
  - <https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/search-grants.html>
- Brownfields Job Training Grants
  - <https://www.epa.gov/brownfields/brownfields-job-training-jt-grants>
  - <https://www.epa.gov/brownfields/applicants-selected-fy22-brownfields-job-training-grants>

### Some cities of interest that are grant recipients for FY22:

- Los Angeles Conservation Corporation, CA
- Pioneer Bay Community Development Corporation (Port St. Joe) Florida
- St. Louis, Missouri
- Rochester, NY
- Great Lakes Community Conservation Corp., Inc. (Milwaukee) Wisconsin