



Opportunities for Climate Action by Regulatory Agencies:

Notes from the Rhode Island Stakeholder Workshop

OVERVIEW

On May 23, 2022 representatives from the Brown University Climate and Development Lab, Synapse Energy Economics, and Climable.org convened a stakeholder workshop at the Stephen Robert Campus Center, Petteruti Lounge in Providence, Rhode Island. This Rhode Island workshop was the third of 12 that will be conducted around New England in 2022. The purpose of the workshop was to crowdsource insights and discuss ideas from stakeholders in Rhode Island—especially those representing environmental justice communities—regarding the climate actions of the utilities, the regulatory structures that the Rhode Island Public Utility Commission has in place to mitigate climate change, and the opportunities and challenges for implementing lasting and equitable climate and energy solutions.

The insights from each workshop are summarized, distributed to all participants, and posted publicly here: <https://climable.org/brown>. In early 2023, a summary report will present a variety of options that state regulatory agencies could pursue to meet climate goals based upon the workshops.

We are incredibly grateful to those who were able to attend and appreciate all the ideas and feedback we received. The following notes are from the Rhode Island workshop and describe key themes that include focus on equity, improve, leadership, focus on implementation, and scale up what is working.

FOCUS ON EQUITY

- Public access to PUC proceedings and other meetings where key decisions are made is necessary. Access can be improved by disseminating information with early enough notice and with reasonable frequency. Holding meetings online and after work hours
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will expand access to people who have day jobs and transportation costs. This is especially important to environmental justice communities who have other commitments.

- When meeting topics and the importance of participation are not understood by the public, it is a barrier to participation. A road show can be held to educate people on key topics. During meetings, using non-technical language will further understanding and increase participation. Interpreters will also allow previously excluded stakeholders to have a voice. Participants should be compensated for their participation. This will also allow for increased access to meetings, as this money may go towards the childcare required for stakeholders to participate.
- To ensure the prioritization of environmental justice communities, someone at the Executive Climate Change Coordinating Council (EC4) should be specifically charged with ensuring that EJ communities have access to meetings and that they are included in processes and decision making. Communication plans should proactively identify stakeholders that are missing from processes and develop engagement methods that are tailored to their needs and backgrounds. Community positions should be added to the EC4.
- More needs to be done to ensure environment and equity are incorporated into PUC decision making. Procedural and structural equity should be goals and outcomes of well-designed programs.

IMPROVE LEADERSHIP

- Decentralized leadership, a lack of interagency coordination and lack of shared understanding is stalling progress. Agencies need to develop a common understanding of what Rhode Island's climate goals are and how to best achieve them. The responsibility of each agency needs to be clearly defined and transparent so that the baton is not continually passed from one agency to the next.
- There needs to be more funding going towards climate leadership and utility regulation. Utility planning and reporting can be disjointed and difficult to understand, even by regulators. In addition, it is much more difficult to participate in a PUC meeting or energy facilities siting board meeting than a hearing on legislation at the statehouse.
- There needs to be leadership personnel with a focus on renewables in Rhode Island.
- There needs to be more funding and staffing for state agencies and the PUC.
- There needs to be proper indicators and ways of measuring progress towards climate goals. These goals cannot be managed if they are not measurable.

- Climate change needs to be incorporated into every policy and action that is enacted.
- There is a lack of accountability in addressing greenhouse gases in the Department of Transportation. In addition, they have opposed the transit master plan. The DOT needs to be at the table with all other state agencies when discussing climate goals and be held to the goals.

FOCUS ON IMPLEMENTATION

- Rhode Island has strong goals for renewables but there are issues with implementation, such as local permitting and zoning requirements.
- Energy storage is essential for relying on renewables. However, local municipalities are denying energy storage projects due to lack of information and NIMBYism.
- The Act on Climate law sets the goals for reducing emissions in Rhode Island that EC4 follows. However, there needs to be more specificity in implementation. In addition, goals cannot be thought of as individual targets, but as a part of a long-term process. It is important to focus on the larger picture rather than how to meet the next target.
- There are barriers to people, particularly low-income, in taking advantage of weatherization programs because they are often renters. Renters have difficulties making changes to their apartments, and landlords have no incentive in going through the process and work of implementing and taking advantage of these programs because it won't reduce costs for them.
- Rhode Island needs to stop subsidizing fossil fuels. Constantly expanding the highway system is subsidizing gas and needs to stop. Planning for the transition away from natural gas needs to begin now.
- People working in the fossil fuel industry cannot be left behind during the transition, and must be trained for new jobs, for example, in renewables.
- Infrastructure for public transportation must be improved without passing on costs to low-income people.

SCALE UP WHAT IS WORKING

- 100% renewables legislation is the top priority in the immediate term.
- RGGI should be expanded to include more sectors, such as transportation.
- The PUC should continue its power sector transformation efforts.