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Article

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Cities Are Stepping Up to Prevent Climate Disaster

In October 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a dire warning. According to their report, which drew on more than 6,000 peer-reviewed scientific articles, the world may have as little as 12 years to correct course and limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Beyond that threshold, every fraction of a degree global temperatures rise will push us closer to long-lasting and irreversible impacts that we may not be able to adapt to.

The warnings are worse than we feared, but they aren't new. The costs of climate change are already being felt throughout the world as sea levels and temperatures continue to rise. Most of the eight billion people who will be impacted by climate change in the next decade live in cities and projections show that by 2050, two-thirds of all people will call cities home. In any discussion about the impacts of climate change or the transformational change needed to combat it, cities must be in the foreground.

New York City, with its 520 miles of coastline and densely populated urban fabric, is especially at risk. In 2012, Superstorm Sandy exposed our vulnerability, flooding tunnels, leveling homes, destroying lives and causing 19 billion dollars in damage in New York City alone. This catastrophe made it clear that we need to fight climate change as if our lives depend on it, because they do.

Instead of leading the massive mobilization scientists say is needed, the federal government in Washington is promoting policies that will increase our dependence on the very fossil fuels that are poisoning our planet.

The Trump administration is imperiling all American lives just to line the pockets of a handful of people whose pockets are already too deep. They are propping up the ailing coal industry and empowering Big Oil in its quest to build new pipelines and drill ever-closer to homes, schools and hospitals. At the same time, the Trump administration has engaged in a systematic campaign to roll back environmental safeguards by dismantling Obama-era limits on power plant emissions, clearing the way for increased offshore drilling, disbanding countless scientific panels, moving to slash pollution-cutting fuel economy standards and much more.

The impacts of these misguided and dangerous policies are not confined to one place, but they are disproportionately harsh on cities. They're fueling problems we already have – air pollution, rising inequality and environmental contamination – and they're threatening the progress we've made to address these problems.

New York City, along with hundreds of other American cities, is taking a stand against the Trump administration's reckless decisions affecting our future. The day after President Trump announced his intent to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio signed an executive order committing to the principles set forth in that agreement, including pursuing measures to limit global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius. To date, 280 other American cities and counties have followed suit.¹ Cities are charging forward with innovative solutions that will touch every sector, transitioning us away from the fossil fuels of the past and creating an economy powered by clean, renew-

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¹ A full list is available at <https://www.wearestillin.com/signatories>.

able energy. In a very real way, the success of the Paris Agreement hinges on the involvement of cities.

Climate change is a holistic problem that demands a holistic solution. At its most fundamental, the challenge is to cut down on the greenhouse gases causing climate change as quickly as possible. To this end, New York City has established the goal of reducing its emissions by 80% by 2050 (“80 x 50”). Other cities have made similar commitments.

With the climate crisis looming, cities are aiming high and taking every action possible to protect the future for the next generation. That includes re-evaluating the current way of doing things to find a better path forward, which means changing our relationships with waste, energy, food, transportation and – crucially – buildings.

When most people think about the pollution that causes climate change, they think of power plants or congested streets and highways. But in New York City, nearly three-quarters of our emissions come from buildings. While these buildings might be best known for creating an iconic skyline, their impact on air quality and the climate is akin to that of factory smokestacks.

The Mayor’s Administration and City Council have already forged a partnership to reduce emissions from buildings by passing laws that require regular energy efficiency audits and working to expand the market for energy efficiency and clean energy. This partnership is on the cusp of setting a new standard for cities around the world with legislation that would mandate dramatic cuts to emissions from buildings by 2050.

Not only would ambitious cuts to building emissions help address climate change, they would also result in a variety of other beneficial outcomes: the creation of new green jobs, improved air quality, lower energy costs for tenants and more comfortable indoor spaces.

While passing legislation to mandate efficiency retrofits would have a huge impact within New York City, its effects could prove even more significant outside of the five boroughs. As the largest city in the United States, New York could serve as an example for other cities looking to contribute to fight against climate change. Establishing a winning formula for greener buildings could trigger a ripple effect that could redefine what building efficiency means in the 21st century.

In addition to reducing building emissions, the city is also taking steps toward other initiatives from building new electric vehicle infrastructure, to take advantage of the falling costs of solar to expand clean energy across the city, to launching a campaign to eliminate Styrofoam, plastics and other petroleum products that are used once and then remain in landfills forever.

Divesting from fossil fuel reserve owners and suing the five largest publicly-traded fossil fuel companies that have contributed most to climate change, also brings the fight straight to the culprits.

In Washington, the Trump administration has doubled down on climate denial and a dangerous agenda that, if left unchallenged, will speed toward unspeakable destruction. Surrendering to a cynical view of the future would be an irreparable mistake.

In New York City, we know that climate change is real and we understand the risks it poses to our city and our way of life. A solution is possible and within reach and therefore it is important to continue to push boundaries and set examples for ambitious and comprehensive climate action. When the federal government lags, it is up to the cities to lead.