

**Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change**  
**Hearing on**  
**“Lessons from Across the Nation: State and Local Action to Combat Climate Change”**  
**April 2, 2019**

**Mayor Stephen Benjamin**  
**The City of Columbia, South Carolina**

**The Honorable John Shimkus (R-IL)**

1. In 2007, the U.S. Conference of Mayors announced a “Mayors Climate Protection Agreement” wherein more than 800 mayors committed to “strive to meet or beat the Kyoto Protocol targets in their own communities.” The cities of Columbia and Carmel both signed that agreement.
  - a. Were your cities able to meet their Kyoto pledges? How did you track them?

**RESPONSE:**

The Kyoto Agreement specifically urged “the federal government and state governments to enact policies and programs to meet or beat the target of reducing global warming pollution levels to 7 percent below 1990 levels by 2012” and it also urged “US Congress to pass bipartisan greenhouse gas reduction legislation.”

When American cities – more than 1,060 throughout our nation, representing nearly 100 million people – committed to reduce their emissions to conform to the Kyoto Protocol targets of bringing greenhouse gas emission 7 percent below 1990 level, these pledges were aspirational and they were based on the premise that we would have strong federal and state partners. Despite federal and state inaction, this local leadership was nevertheless important and timely, as my City and others successfully took concrete actions to reduce carbon emissions where we could.

Mayors did so recognizing that local efforts would only carry our cities partway toward these goals, since Kyoto was about nations, directing national level resources and authorities and powers to reduce emissions. A nation not only has more tools but benefits from an array and diversity of communities, sources and geography of emissions.

Columbia's population grew by 35 percent between 1990 and 2017 compared to US population growth of 26 percent for that same period. An emission reduction to 1990 levels, given available technologies then and less than engaged partners at the state and federal levels, made achieving the Kyoto targets an impossibility. We nevertheless embarked on a course to do what we could to lower our carbon footprint (and save taxpayer dollars) today and in future years.

Most mayors, including myself, understood that it was unlikely our individual cities would achieve these goals absent federal action. We were well aware of our limited revenue-raising options and limited regulatory powers and authorities to achieve these fairly ambitious goals. After all, these targets applied to nations, not individual cities, and it was assumed that individual nations approving the treaty would bring their own revenue, commerce and other constitutionally-granted powers to bear. Yet, we moved forward as mayors of cities and acted – each in our own way – to find those opportunities that reduce city energy use, make city operations more efficient, and advance more renewable energy use in our cities.

Repeating some points from my written testimony, in Columbia, we have taken a number of actions and implemented several policies to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions and to track those reductions. Most notably, in 2009, with assistance from the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant, we conducted an energy audit and implemented several of the audit's recommendations, including upgrading lighting systems, HVAC upgrades on City buildings, and installing solar panels on fire stations. These projects reduced our greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption and saved Columbia taxpayers approximately \$337,000 per year.

In addition, one of my first priorities when I took office was to upgrade and rationalize our regional transit system to increase ridership, including successfully asking our voters to approve a penny tax dedicated to transportation, including transit. I have also built on and accelerated the efforts of my predecessor to improve pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure in Columbia, completing several streetscapes and extending and opening several trails. Combined with thousands of new units of housing in Downtown Columbia and other central Columbia neighborhoods, these efforts have set the stage for truly giving Columbia residents a meaningful option to the car, with the added bonus of a vibrant, lively and beautiful Downtown.

In addition to our climate change prevention efforts, we have been actively addressing mitigation. In the wake of Hurricane Joaquin, it became clear that we had to accelerate our efforts to improve the climate resilience of our stormwater

infrastructure. We bit the bullet and increased stormwater fees to fund a wide array of projects to improve our stormwater system using both gray and green infrastructure. We also issued our first-ever green bond that allowed the City to finance upgrades and improvements to our stormwater system while protecting our environment.

- b. If you did not meet your pledges, why did your efforts fall short with respect to Kyoto? What is different with your current pledges?

**RESPONSE:**

As explained above, we, along with most cities, did not meet these targets. Columbia's population grew by 35 percent between 1990 and 2017 compared to US population growth of was 26 percent for that same period. An emission reduction to 1990 levels, given available technologies then and less than engaged partners at the state and federal levels, made achieving the Kyoto targets an impossibility.

As President of the US Conference of Mayors, I can report that many of my fellow mayors share my frustration with the lack of federal action on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This frustration is not new. My written testimony to the Committee included a 2007 letter – really a plea – to presidential candidates signed by over 100 South Carolina calling for federal leadership on climate change.

The letter was bipartisan and it was signed by mayors from across South Carolina. We were taking action and asking for federal leadership 12 years ago. The letter was a powerful one, worthy of repeated reference, so I will provide an excerpt that was included in my written testimony:

*South Carolina voters will play a central role in determining the next President of the United States. While we recognize that there are many important issues before us, one requires immediate attention: the growing threat of global warming. As South Carolina mayors, it is our duty to add our voice to the growing chorus of scientific, business, and community leaders who say the time to act on global climate change is now.*

*From the wooded foothills of the Upstate, to the fertile soil of the Midlands, to the pristine marshes of the Coast, South Carolina enjoys one of the richest and most diverse natural habitats in the United States. Indeed, the quality of life we enjoy helps explain why South Carolina's population is projected to increase 27 percent by 2025. To meet the challenges of this rapid growth, our communities are quickly learning the value of efficiency*

*and conservation as a means to save both taxpayer dollars and the environment. We are investing at the local level in more efficient municipal buildings, promoting “green fleets” in our public transportation, and educating our constituents in the value of conservation to reduce energy costs and harmful environmental impacts.*

Those words and subsequent ones have fallen on deaf ears. The absence of any federally-recognized or sanctioned emissions tracking systems has frustrated our efforts to track emissions and measure our own performance in our cities and relative to others. For some time, we had hoped that the federal government would act to establish standards for measurement – locally, regionally, statewide and nationally – and such an undertaking would still be helpful to those of us working to reduce carbon emissions.

We have also been frustrated with the lack of federal policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to bolster local government efforts to reduce those emissions. Local governments throughout the country have raised revenue to invest in modernized, climate-friendly infrastructure. We welcomed federal funding for the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant in FY 2009. As noted above, Columbia put its grants to good use, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the City’s energy bill. However, Congress did not heed our calls to continue this program, which an Oak Ridge National Laboratory study found an overwhelming success.

In addition, other federal policies and programs have fallen short, leaving local governments to fill the void despite our limited tax and regulatory power. Since FY 2010, federal funding for programs that could have helped cities reduce greenhouse gas emissions ranging from Weatherization to CDBG to transit fell victim to budget cuts at worst to status quo funding and policies at best.

That said, two years ago, Columbia took the next step, setting a target of powering our community with 100 percent clean, renewable energy by 2035. In addition, we continue to pursue and implement a wide array of policies to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, ranging from improved energy efficiency in City buildings and LED streetlights to improving bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, improving our transit system, and encouraging mixed-use development in the core of Columbia.

On that final item, the Committee’s questions are timely in light of a report from the University of California that maps household carbon footprint by Zip Code<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://coolclimate.org/maps>

That map shows that household carbon footprints are significantly smaller in urban cores than they are in surrounding regions. In the Columbia Metropolitan Area, household carbon footprints are smallest in City of Columbia Zip Codes and in Zip Codes in the close in suburbs just across the Congaree River in Lexington County. It is in those Zip Codes that we have made the most investments in infrastructure and where Columbia gas seen significant growth.

However, we need a strong federal partner. That is why my written testimony outlined a wide array of federal policies and programs that would bolster local government efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. I am pleased that the Committee held a hearing yesterday on the LIFT Act (HR 2741), which would address several of the priorities outlined in my testimony, most notably reauthorization of the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant. My colleague, Piscataway, New Jersey Mayor Brian Wahler, delivered testimony on behalf of the US Conference of Mayors in support of that bill and I hope it moves forward.

In addition to programs outlined in the LIFT Act, which are under the jurisdiction of the Energy and Commerce Committee, my testimony outlined support for many other programs outside the Committee's jurisdiction that I hope Congress will act on, most notably:

- Prioritize transportation funding to help metropolitan areas and local areas invest in low-carbon, ***mode-neutral transportation options via increased funding for the Surface Transportation Block Grant***, including building a ***national charging infrastructure***;
- Increase ***funding for transit***;
- Invest in improved ***intercity passenger rail***;
- Provide additional funding for the ***Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)***, with the additional funding ***targeted to investments in climate resilient infrastructure*** in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods;
- Build on last year's reforms of federal disaster assistance programs to increase ***funding for disaster mitigation***;
- Reinstate ***advanced refunding for municipal bonds***; and
- Provide resources to help local governments ***increase the supply of affordable and workforce housing located in proximity to jobs, education, services, and transit***.

On one of those bullets, improved intercity passenger rail, I would note that Columbia, a City of 133,114 people in a metropolitan area of 837,092, is served by two intercity passenger trains per day, one northbound and the other

southbound. Both serve Columbia in the middle of the night. There is no passenger rail service between Columbia and most neighboring cities, including Charlotte, Charleston, Greenville, Myrtle Beach, Augusta, and Atlanta. None. This situation would boggle the mind of the average citizen of a similar city in most other modern, industrialized nations. Columbia is working hard to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, but we need better efforts in this area and others from our state and local partners.

2. As you know, the Obama Administration's Paris commitment was to impose economy-wide GHG reductions. This means major reductions from not only the power sector—which are happening—but also transportation—cars, trucks, airports, and more, as well as manufacturing, industry, and commercial and residential sources.
  - a. What are you planning to achieve reductions in these areas?

**RESPONSE:**

As outlined above and in my written testimony, two years ago Columbia took the next step, setting a target of powering our community with 100 percent clean, renewable energy by 2035. In addition, we continue to pursue and implement a wide array of policies to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, ranging from improved energy efficiency in City buildings and LED streetlights to improving bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, improving our transit system, and encouraging mixed-use development in the core of Columbia.

As a City served by an investor-owned utility, our ability to move to 100 percent clean, renewable energy outside of City buildings, facilities, and operations is limited. Our electric utility, the choices of individual ratepayers, and state policy will drive decisions about our electric utility's power generation portfolio. However, I would note that several of my fellow mayors in public power cities that own and operate their own electric utility, have met the goal of powering their community with 100 percent renewable energy or are well on their way to doing so. When mayors have the power to act, we do so because that is what our communities expect of us.

- b. And in the absence of specific plans, how do you actually expect to meet your commitments?

**RESPONSE:**

We will continue to pursue and implement a wide array of policies to reduce our

greenhouse gas emissions, ranging from improved energy efficiency in City buildings and LED streetlights to improving bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, improving our transit system, and encouraging mixed-use development in the core of Columbia.

3. We entered into the hearing record a letter from Mayor William Westcott of the City of Rock Falls, Illinois. The city owns and operates its own electrical utility, and participates in the Illinois Municipal Electric Agency, a collection of non-profit public power municipalities within the state. Mayor Westcott outlines the clean energy investments his city has made but he also talks about the critical investments in baseload power in state-of-the art coal fired generation facilities. (the 1.6 GW Prairie State Energy Campus). He warns that if federal or state policies that force premature closure of the coal-fired units, his city would still have to purchase energy but would also be burdened to make payments on the closed facilities.
  - a. Should policies be designed to ensure cities and ratepayers are not burdened with the stranded costs? What is your solution?

**RESPONSE:**

Yes. A transition to clean, renewable energy in a manner that does not adversely harm ratepayers must address stranded costs. Fortunately, the United States is a wealthy country with a strong federal system of government. I am therefore confident that between Congress, FERC, state public utility commission, state legislatures, and other government entities we have the capacity and the ability to develop and implement policies and programs to address stranded costs as we transition away from electricity generated by fossil fuels, particularly coal. Indeed, several states have already enacted such policies and others are considering them.

The reality is that regardless of federal or state policy, the future of coal-fired power plants is limited. Over the past generation, through Republican and Democratic presidential administrations, in “red” states and in “blue” states, coal-fired plants have been increasingly phased out and few new ones have come online. At this point, it is well documented that this transition away from coal has been driven by basic economics rather than any federal or state regulatory policies. Simply put, the drastic decrease in the price of natural gas and, to a much lesser degree, the increasing competitiveness of renewable energy have led to the decline of coal-fired power plants. Indeed, the transition away from coal-fired power plants has happened even in states where state policies *favor* coal generation of electricity.

Looking ahead, the price of renewable energy, most notably wind and solar, has

dropped precipitously over the past generation and is poised to drop even more in the coming years, at the same time that improved technology, such as larger offshore wind turbines and better battery storage, increase their reliability. These reduced costs, combined with the clean air and health benefits of renewable energy, will put even more pressure on coal. It is important that going forward that we all make wiser and more forward looking investments so that we do not add to burden of stranded costs.

4. It is well known that the “Keep It in the Ground” movement and its political allies have successfully blocked the ability to transport American energy from the Marcellus shale to markets where it is in demand. New York’s blocking of pipelines is probably the most prominent example, and it has indirectly led to cities such as Boston being cut off from clean, affordable U.S. natural gas. In fact, the Northeast has been forced to burn old, dirty oil plants for electricity during cold snaps, and they have even been importing Russian Gas into Boston harbor on occasion.
  - a. Do you support expanding energy infrastructure to allow natural gas from Pennsylvania to be delivered to nearby markets in the mid-Atlantic, Northeast, and Southeast?

**RESPONSE:**

As Mayor of a City located hundreds of miles from Pennsylvania, New York, and New England, I do not know enough about these pipeline projects and their costs and benefits to provide an answer to this question. In general, on issues such as this one, I would defer to the people and the elected officials from the impacted states and localities, who are best positioned to make an informed decision about this project.

I also generally oppose any effort by the federal and state governments to preempt local government authority to protect our communities from adverse environmental and health consequences of energy projects. Federal and state preemption of local authority to benefit a specific industry, be it natural gas, telecommunications, or payday lenders, has perverted our system of federalism and all too often robbed communities of the ability to ensure their health, safety, and prosperity.

I would note that New York and Pennsylvania have made very different decisions about extracting natural gas from the Marcellus Shale. Those decisions reflect different state and local priorities. I will leave it to future generations of western Pennsylvanians and western New Yorkers to pass judgement on the merits of their respective state government’s decisions on that matter.