

**Testimony of Keisha Lance Bottoms
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Senate Special Committee on the Climate Crisis

A Blueprint for Success: U.S. Climate Action at the Local Level

July 17, 2019

Good afternoon. My name is Keisha Lance Bottoms and I am the Mayor of Atlanta, Georgia, the cradle of the Civil Rights Movement and the anchor of the 10th largest economy in the United States.

Thank you Chairman Schatz and the members of this committee for inviting me today to testify at this important hearing. I am honored to be here.

While large urban centers are major contributors to climate change, cities such as Atlanta are bearing the full force of our weather-related crisis.

The 2018 United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report advises that we have until 2030 to mount a viable and vigorous defense against climate change, or risk catastrophic consequences.

These effects are already being felt in Atlanta, where the average temperature has risen by nearly two degrees Fahrenheit between 1980 and 2015.

To meet this challenge, the City of Atlanta is committed to a visionary plan for an equitable and resilient future. We call it *Clean Energy Atlanta*, a mitigation strategy and action-oriented plan unanimously adopted by the Atlanta City Council in March 2019.

Clean Energy Atlanta is our city's commitment to transition to 100 percent clean energy by 2035; this includes both municipal operations and citywide efforts to assist our residents.

We feel that this this ambitious goal is critical to help reduce the worst impacts of climate change. We are taking concrete steps as part of this plan to ensure that every Atlantan, no matter their zip code, is protected from the adverse effects of climate change.

The climate crisis may well be the biggest equity challenge of our time.

I am proud that our clean-energy plan puts equity and resilience for all at the heart of its agenda. It is not only a blueprint for change, it is a social contract with the soul of a people's movement.

Our mission to create an affordable, resilient and equitable city for everyone – what we call One Atlanta – depends on our capacity to pump the brakes on climate change.

We must move quickly and resolutely.

Our inland geography is a major factor contributing to unique circumstances in Atlanta. Our city ranks third nationally for increases in the urban heat-island effect (i.e., cities that are warmer than surrounding rural areas, especially at night).

If current trends continue, Georgia is projected to see an increase in “dangerous heat days” from an average of 20 days a year today to more than 90 by 2050.

More than 310,000 Georgia residents are vulnerable to extreme heat, which is deadlier than any other weather-related hazard and causes more deaths on average annually than hurricanes, floods and tornadoes.

Cities such as Atlanta are suffering the most. By 2050, the average summer high temperature in Atlanta is projected to jump 4.1 degrees to 92.6 degrees.

That will lead to shocks such as increased frequency of climate and weather extremes. It will make droughts, as well as extreme wet-weather events, more frequent and longer-lasting.

Hurricanes and sea-level rise in coastal regions of the Southeastern U.S. are likely to create “climate refugees,” who seek rapid resettlement in Atlanta, as happened in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

The number of extreme rainfall events is rising throughout the Southeastern United States. The number of days with three or more inches of rainfall has been historically high over the past 25 years.

Rising temperatures also make it easier for mosquito-borne illnesses such as zika virus, dengue fever, malaria, and West Nile virus to survive, and even thrive, in a warmer Atlanta, creating very real public health concerns.

Due to global warming, Atlanta already has lost 14% of its native tree species, and rising temperatures will continue to damage our tree canopy. The Cucumber-tree Magnolia and five species of oak trees once iconic to our tree line can no longer survive the local climate.

As one of the few major U.S. metropolitan areas not built adjacent to a major body of water, Atlanta is particularly vulnerable to drought.

As part of our \$400 million Water Supply Program, we are converting an abandoned quarry into a new reservoir that will hold 2.4 billion gallons of emergency drinking-water, taking our reserve supply from five days to 30 days or more.

This new reservoir will be surrounded by the city's largest park. Currently under construction, Westside Park will cover 280 acres and join other new park projects on our Westside that will mitigate historic flood problems impacting our most vulnerable communities.

We are also building a new pump station, additional infrastructure that will help us better serve all our residents.

These are proactive decisions driven by the need for equity and the desire to face reality and meet climate change head-on. The cost of doing nothing will be exorbitant.

In late November 2016, "extreme to exceptional" drought covered approximately 62 percent of Georgia. And 48 percent of our state's population – more than 4.6 million people – now live in areas of elevated risk of wildfire.

Droughts in other parts of the country, also have the potential to create food insecurity, considering that a large portion of Atlanta's food supply is brought in from out of state.

While everyone is being impacted by climate change, the sad reality is that our most vulnerable residents are most susceptible to harm. They will pay the steepest price of any inaction. Those communities are hit first and hit the hardest, and they have less ability to react and recover.

Atlanta has the highest income inequality of any city in the U.S., despite our thriving economy and the fact that we are the anchor of the third-largest collection of Fortune 500 companies in the country.

Income inequality is exacerbated by rapid population growth and Atlanta's population has increased over 10 percent in the past eight years. It is expected to grow from our present 500,000 residents to as many as 1.2 million in 2035. (Metro Atlanta has approximately 6 million residents.)

This ongoing disruption of our natural weather pattern is compounded by kitchen-table economic pressures.

“Energy burden” is defined as the percentage of household income needed to pay utility bills: Atlanta has the fourth-highest energy burden in the nation, and the third-highest for low-income households.

Atlanta's median electricity burden is as high as 9.6 percent in some neighborhoods; the national average is three percent.

Median water bills in many of our neighborhoods can exceed five percent of household income, compared to the national average of one percent.

High energy and water burdens limit affordability and the ability for residents to age in place, where they can benefit from economic development in their communities.

A Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation study found that the top reason for taking out a payday loan is to pay a utility bill.

A similar study found that 31% of Americans went without a meal or filling a medication prescription because of the need to pay a utility bill.

Climate change increases the risk that air pollution will worsen. As temperatures increase, warmer air forms ground-level ozone, known as

“bad ozone,” which is a powerful pollutant that contributes to a rise in asthma attacks.

As the mother of four children who suffer from asthma, my family is personally impacted by this crisis, as is our entire community. African-Americans are three times more likely than Caucasians to be hospitalized and die of asthma.

Amid Atlanta’s surging influx of residents, communities are also experiencing high levels of displacement due to rising housing costs, taxes and development.

By investing in energy efficiency programs that reduce low-income residents’ energy bills, we can lower their cost of living and advance housing affordability overall.

Alleviating energy and water burdens in underserved communities is an opportunity to implement equitable solutions that will give traction to City of Atlanta efforts to meet its affordable-housing goals.

Last month, I released Atlanta’s first comprehensive Housing Affordability Action Plan, with the goal of producing or preserving 20,000 affordable homes by 2026 and minimizing involuntary displacement of residents as our city continues to grow. Central to this plan is our effort to reduce energy and water burdens for lower-income residents.

To limit global warming to no more than 1.5°C, as recommended by the IPCC, CO2 emissions need to be reduced by 40% from 2010 levels by 2030.

In response, Atlanta has been working diligently for years to meet this man-made crisis.

Recognizing Atlanta’s ongoing leadership, we were one of the first two cities in the country to be named a recipient of the *Bloomberg Philanthropies American Cities Climate Challenge* grant, a national program supporting leading cities in tackling the climate crisis.

As part of the Climate Challenge, we will expand City policies and programs to ensure more energy-efficient buildings and increase the use of renewable energy.

Our Green Infrastructure Strategic Action Plan is built around equity for all residents, and it engages all City departments, as well as external partners. The equal focus of the plan is to implement sustainable measures to mitigate localized flooding in areas prone to recurring conditions.

Atlanta taxpayers have also voted with their pocketbooks to build out sidewalks and last-mile connectivity to our transit system, which is undergoing a massive expansion.

In 2016, residents approved a half-penny sales tax for a \$2.7 billion expansion of the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) that will provide 61 percent greater access for communities with large minority and low-income populations, increase access to 350,000 jobs and better connect people to 77 medical facilities, 83 grocery stores and 115 schools.

We are also leading by example in our own operations. The City's Guaranteed Energy Savings Performance Contract represents the largest single example of this initiative in the nation, demonstrating Atlanta's continued national leadership in the energy-efficiency arena. The program seeks to maximize energy savings by improving energy, water and sewage efficiencies in city buildings.

The Solar Atlanta initiative program is adding 1.3 megawatts in rooftop solar to up to 24 municipal buildings via a solar energy procurement agreement (SEPA), one of the first applications of third-party financing for solar in Georgia.

These investments are advancing Atlanta's sustainability commitments while saving taxpayers an estimated \$10 million per year.

In the same space, Atlanta continues to be a leader in the national Better Buildings Challenge, a public-private partnership driving the acceleration of cost-effective strategies to improve the efficiency of buildings citywide.

The Atlanta Better Buildings Challenge has already achieved remarkable results. Participants have reduced their energy usage by 20% to date, accounting for more than 100 million square feet of building space across the city and reaching their goal two years ahead of schedule.

These programs have helped reduce our region's dependence on fossil fuels, resulting in cleaner air quality and better public health outcomes.

The climate challenges ahead for Atlanta, and all cities, are formidable. But so are the prospects for job creation, economic development and improved affordability.

With that said, no city can address these issues alone. Partnerships with the federal government are necessary and urgent. The federal government can help in several ways:

It can expand funding for Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and allow states to dedicate a higher percentage of funding through this program by default to weatherization to provide rescuing savings and protect vulnerable populations from rising energy costs;

It can utilize Community Development Block Grants, Community Services Block Grants, and the Economic Development Administration's lending authority to support distributed renewables and workforce development, particularly in low-income neighborhoods;

It should continue and expand successful federal programs, such as the Better Buildings Initiative, that work with cities, states, businesses, and manufacturers to improve energy efficiency and reduce emissions;

It can also leverage existing federal programs from agencies such as FEMA and HUD to make proactive investments in climate resilience across all our communities.

Our analysis shows that investments in clean energy will enhance public health and provide more sustainable employment opportunities, leading

to a more resilient and equitable city, and country, for all.

We believe that the key to our success is to prioritize the equal right of every resident to affordable energy, a clean environment and a healthy future.

Thank you.