



## GREEN NEW DEAL IS NOTHING NEW FOR SOUTH BRONX CLIMATE ACTIVISTS

*By Lauren Costantino. Community gardener and Mill Brook Houses resident Cesar Yoc addresses panelists and residents at The Real Deal environmental forum at The Point on May 18..*

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By Lauren Costantino / May 21, 2019

### **Environmental leaders demand radical action for low-income communities**

South Bronx organizers have been pushing for climate justice and sustainable environmental practices for decades. In the midst of growing public attention to Congress' Green New Deal and new leadership in the New York State Senate, they are more hopeful than ever that their efforts will bear fruit.

At a May 13th forum at The Point CDC called The Real Deal: Community Solutions to Climate & Waste Inequity in the Bronx, organizers from grassroots organizations united with residents to discuss community-led solutions for ongoing threats to the environment. Topics on the table included a bill in the State Senate to invest in renewable energy sources and divest from fossil fuels, and another in the City Council to regulate private waste hauling companies like Sanitation Salvage, a Hunts Point-based hauler that closed last year after its reckless collection practices were found to be responsible for two pedestrian deaths in the Bronx.

Though the issues that concerned the panelists differed in the details, their call to action was the same: elected officials should consult with communities before making critical policy decisions.

"How detrimental is it to create a 'Green New Deal' with someone else feeding solutions?" said Dariella Rodriguez, Director of Community Organizing and Outreach at Soundview's Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice. "As we work on a hyperlocal level, we all see what our direct communities are being impacted by, and we all learn what their ideas and their solutions are."

Rodriguez was joined on the panel by Dior St. Hillaire of Hunts Point's GreenFeen/Green Worker Co-operatives, Fernando Ortiz of The Point CDC, Mychal Johnson of South Bronx Unite, and Sandra Lobo of the Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition. All recounted initiatives their organizations have implemented, such as GreenFeen's Healthy Buildings Initiative, which studies public health data and evaluates the link between asthma-related hospitalizations and deteriorated buildings.

“We know that the Bronx has the worst housing conditions in all of New York City,” said Lobo. “Not only are tenants spending 50 percent of their income on rent, but they’re also spending 50 percent of their income to have roaches and mice and rats. Those things are all asthma triggers.”

Other initiatives discussed included extreme heat preparedness, holistic approaches to environmental health problems, and the South Bronx Community Resiliency Agenda, a comprehensive climate resiliency planning process for Hunts Point.

For Johnson, the area’s alarming asthma rates have long been a reason to demand that government set aside more recreational space for residents.

“Land now is being heavily speculated,” said Johnson, a Mott Haven resident who has seen real estate prices sky rocket in his neighborhood in recent years. “We see 25-story towers about to pop up on our waterfront, while we’re just trying to create green space access.”

GreenFeen, an environmental consulting firm that uses Hip-Hop to teach Bronxites to “rethink trash” and preaches composting and renewable energy, hopes to help make the city’s Zero Waste Initiative a reality by 2030.

“We really want to help people to reevaluate their relationship with waste and recognize that there is no other way,” said Dior.

Ortiz detailed the Climate and Community Protection Act, (S2992/A3876), (CCPA) a bill that has passed the Assembly three times but remains stalled in the State Senate. Some advocates fear that more conservative Democrats are trying to water the bill down. Its backers say that in its current version it can lead to significant green jobs growth while mandating states reinvest 40 percent of public funding for climate and renewable energy initiatives back into poor neighborhoods where polluting industries lead to health problems. In addition, it calls for the state to be 100 percent carbon-free within 30 years.

Advocates are hopeful that the impasse in the State Senate is temporary.

“We remain optimistic that we will see the bill brought to a vote this session,” said Priya Mulgaonkar, Resiliency Planner for the NYC Environmental Justice Alliance, in a statement. “We just need more folks to call their state electeds to show their support for the bill.”

The 40 percent reinvestment component of the bill, Mulgaonkar said, “was developed with communities like Hunts Point in mind – communities that not only host an unfair share of noxious infrastructure, but also who have local community leaders that have big visions for local climate solutions. The 40% mandate would help projects like low-income community solar projects, waterfront resiliency, community preparedness, and energy efficiency,” along with “local economic development and the creation of good, green jobs that would benefit disadvantaged frontline communities.”

Mulgaonkar lauded The Point for “its climate resiliency initiatives,” and “local community solar project that would help reduce energy costs for folks in Hunts Point,” all with very “little support from government.”

State Senators Luis Sepulveda and Alessandra Biaggi, who represent parts of Hunts Point and Longwood, say they support the bill, but neither showed up at the event. In a statement, Sepulveda said that “Communities like the South Bronx and waterfront areas like Hunts Point face a particular set of interconnected climate, economic, and structural justice issues which face increased threats from climate change,” for which the CCPA “will ensure New York’s transition away from fossil fuels by 2050 and shift to clean energy sources.”

The second bill that prompted discussion, the Commercial Waste Zone plan, calls for dividing the city’s commercial private waste collection system into 20 zones across the city, to be managed by a small number of haulers.

Currently, private waste hauling companies face no restrictions about where in the city they can drive to pick up trash. As a result, companies like Sanitation Salvage monopolized the industry, sending out their trucks far and wide. Critics claim that greedy owners took advantage of the lack of regulation, overextending exhausted drivers and garbage workers while worsening traffic and pollution problems. If the new bill passes in the City Council, waste hauling company will have to compete for zones, which will require them to prioritize investing in cleaner, more efficient trucking fleets, while treating their workers more humanely, advocates say.