The Honorable Josh Shapiro

April 25, 2023

Dear Governor Shapiro,

When our Better Path Coalition wrote to you just before you took office in January, we referred to the Climate Countdown Clock we installed in the East Wing with our partners in the Pennsylvania Climate Convergence Network last June. Since its installation, the clock has ticked down to less than seven years to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. On Thursday, when your administration marks its 100th day since taking office, the clock will show that we have less than six years and three months left. Should you run for a second term, the clock will tick down to zero on your watch.

Climate change is unquestionably the greatest crisis we have faced in the course of human history, one that could bring that history to an end. It is also a crisis with a known, available solution. The only thing stopping us from availing ourselves of the solution is lack of political courage.

In our letter, we offered more than 30 recommendations to address the climate crisis directly or indirectly by addressing issues that are harming Pennsylvanians and their communities right now. We have seen little evidence of progress on the issues we raised as your 100th day approaches.

You mentioned Pennsylvania’s Environmental Rights Amendment, Article 1, Section 27, in your budget address as a segue into comments on the Norfolk Southern disaster that occurred a little more than a month before your address. After briefly describing your administration’s response, you focused, as you had since the days immediately following the derailment, on accountability. “Nothing can make up for the damage already done – but what the people of Pennsylvania deserve now is accountability.” Accountability is important, but it is the response of an attorney general, not an emergency manager. Two weeks after the disaster, Beaver County residents felt they had been forgotten.

More than two and a half months have passed since the lives of the people of Darlington Township, Beaver County were upended. Nothing approaching a sense of normal has been achieved. We urge you to hear and swiftly act to address the concerns of residents whose needs have still not been met.

You talked about the need to “protect our communities and safeguard our natural resources before disaster strikes” by reducing greenhouse gas emissions through the use of federal funds to plug abandoned wells. In our letter, we had pointed out that the available funding was not going to make much of a dent in the massive problem of hundreds of thousands of wells in varying states of disrepair across the state, much less the need to keep monitoring and maintaining wells in perpetuity. What we did not know at the time was how poorly the funding would be administered by the DEP. With virtually no oversight by the federal government or your office, we have seen funding allocated to plug nonexistent wells and wells that are not among the most threatening wells in the state.

Acting Secretary Negrin also referred to the Norfolk Southern disaster and abandoned wells in his comments to the House Appropriations Committee on March 23rd. He framed the issues as examples of
his expansive approach to environmental justice that takes into account poor and rural communities. (Low income communities are routinely included in definitions of environmental justice.)

Negrin announced to the committee that he has hired Fernando Treviño to serve as Special Deputy Secretary for Environmental Justice and plans to put environmental justice coordinators in each of the DEP’s regional offices. He added, “I’m going to have two of them that are floaters and target specific communities like the Asian community that really hasn’t been outreached to in a meaningful way around environmental justice.”

Earlier this month, the DEP announced that it would hold a series of town halls in April. The Environmental Justice section of the agency’s site makes no mention of the town halls. The information is available on a little-known page on the site called “Climate Action for Environmental Justice Communities.” The page lists seven town halls, all but one held mid-morning on weekdays, and directs people who cannot attend to visit a page created by Preservation Design Partnership, LLC that contains links to several surveys they can use to voice their opinions instead. According to the agency, the information gathered will be used to develop a Guide to Climate Action for Environmental Justice Communities.

We urge the agency to do a better job of informing the public about opportunities to participate and to hold multiple sessions of events like the town halls at different times of the day to accommodate work schedules.

Earlier this month, the Associated Press reported that a working group you tasked with developing a climate change action plan met in private and that your office will not release the names of the group’s members or notes on what was discussed. We urge you to be transparent about your administration’s work on climate change.

We are in the process of submitting a Right-to-Know request for information pertaining to the meeting, who attended, and what was discussed. We have needed to resort to submitting requests to the Office of Open Records many times in the past. We consider it unfortunate that we must resort to such tactics in hopes of getting important information from our government.

Because climate change is being discussed behind closed doors, it is not possible for us to know if the group is proposing action on any of the recommendations we submitted. Based on your public statements, you have not taken any significant steps on your own to act on them.

We received no response to our letter from you. We also requested meetings with some members of your cabinet, but were similarly ignored. We hope that you will respond to our letter this time and that your response will include specific actions you have taken to address our recommendations.

The Better Path Coalition is an established frontline- and grassroots-led statewide coalition that observed its fifth anniversary this month. One of the few details you released about your climate working group was that the environmental organization, NRDC, is co-leading the effort. NRDC’s operating budget is more than $150 million and its headquarters are in Manhattan. Most of our member organizations are
unfunded groups of volunteers who pay out of their own pockets to do their work. Ignoring our members makes your administration’s statements on environmental justice ring hollow.

You said during your budget address, “Listen, we can’t ignore the science here. We have to be honest and connect the dots between that abandoned well leaking methane into our atmosphere and the impact it has on our people. That methane contributes to rising temperatures and more frequent storms.”

We ask that you lead by example. You are not being honest and connecting the dots with your ongoing support of fossil fuel extraction and the development of blue hydrogen and carbon capture and storage projects that represent nothing more than the next generation of drilling and fracking. Pennsylvania will not be part of the solution to climate change without leaders courageous enough to draw to a close the era of fossil fuel and petrochemical production.

Action on the causes of climate collapse must accelerate now. We cannot wait any longer!

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