

# Organizers In Appalachia Are Building A Green New Deal Blueprint For Themselves



The Green New Deal proposal is one of the only effective, broadly recognized pathways to tackle the climate crisis and address its social and economic consequences. It is technologically possible and economically sustainable. Yet although the Green New Deal project is already under way in some shape or form in various states, it has yet to be scaled up to the national level. In fact, climate policy as a whole has been stalled in Congress, and the Biden administration has so far engaged more in symbolic gestures than in living policy processes.

With time quickly running out to prevent a greenhouse apocalypse, activists need to reorganize and unite efforts to build massive public support and political will for climate action. In this context, much is to be gained by looking at the work of ReImagine Appalachia, which is promoting a Green New Deal blueprint for the Ohio Valley region. This is the focus of the following exclusive interview for *Truthout* with Amanda Woodrum, senior researcher at Policy Matters Ohio and co-director of project ReImagine Appalachia.

Woodrum works at the intersection of energy, equity and the environment with the aim of finding common ground among environmental, labor, racial justice and community leaders to create a powerful grassroots movement with the capacity to assist in the transition toward an ecologically sustainable and equitable future.

*C.J. Polychroniou: It has been three years since Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-*

*New York) and Sen. Edward Markey (D-Massachusetts) introduced a Green New Deal resolution. Progressive Democrats in Congress also introduced the THRIVE Act in April 2021, which is in line with the vision of the Green New Deal. Yet, very little progress has been made so far toward decarbonizing the economy and moving in the direction of a sustainable and equitable future. Is this an accurate assessment of where we are? If so, what are the main obstacles that need to be overcome so we can keep moving forward in the hope of avoiding a greenhouse apocalypse?*

*Amanda Woodrum:* Let my answer be a big verbal hug to you and others who feel like you do. We have made progress, big progress, it just hasn't fully materialized into actual infrastructure quite yet (at least not at the scale we need).

First, I think of [the bipartisan infrastructure package] as a down payment on our climate infrastructure needs. It contains hundreds of billions of dollars for modernizing our electric grid, electrifying our transportation system, including public transportation, upgrading the nation's rail infrastructure, and starting to repair the damage from the last century of extraction industry practices — reclaiming abandoned mine lands, capping orphaned oil and gas wells that spew methane, and remediating brownfields at shuttered coal plants and former steel facilities. The Biden administration is currently working to develop federal policy guidance on these resources designed to ensure the jobs created from these investments are good union jobs and pathways into those union jobs are built for Black workers and other people of color, as well as women and the many other people currently working in low-wage jobs.

Second, we are at a tipping point. Much work needs to be done to make sure the resources from bipartisan infrastructure package are spent the right way. If we are successful in this, it will change the landscape, both physically and mentally.

Even in Appalachia, if these resources are spent wisely, we will see that national climate solutions, if done right, can be good for the economy and the working people it serves. More and more people already understand this, or we wouldn't have gotten this far.

As you know, the Ohio River Valley of Appalachia, also known as coal country, has long been a political stumbling block to national climate and clean energy solutions. No longer. Appalachia is now at the table of the national conversation.

We know what we want and need.

*ReImagine Appalachia is advancing the vision of a 21st century economy for the Ohio Valley. Can you talk about the principles and aims guiding this vision?*

[ReImagine Appalachia](#) is a collection of hundreds of stakeholder groups working across the Ohio River Valley states of Appalachia — Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Kentucky. We came together to create a collective vision of what a 21st century sustainable Appalachia looks like, and to build out the roadmap for how we get from where we are to where we need to go.

It is important to understand that Appalachia is essentially an area of concentrated poverty. The region has been exploited for more than a century by absentee corporations in the extractive industries — exploiting our workers, damaging our lands, and leaving our workers and neighbors sick. With the abundance of natural resources in the lands of coal country, one would think we would be the richest region in the nation. But we are not. We are the poorest. [Too many of the region's counties rank in the bottom 10 percent nationally](#) for their high level of unemployment and poverty, and low family incomes. The region is poor, and it isn't going to lift itself up by its collective bootstrings.

National climate solutions, if Appalachia is at the table, can be an opportunity to secure much needed and deserved resources for the region. Appalachia literally powered the prosperity of the rest of the nation, while the region itself was left in poverty. We believe the region is owed its due share of climate infrastructure resources.

The people of Appalachia want everything everyone else wants — a modern electric grid in Appalachia that doesn't lose power every time it rains hard; [universal, quality broadband affordable to everyone](#) so the kids can use computers without going to the library and parents can work remotely; to [grow clean and efficient manufacturing in the region](#) with equivalent jobs to those found in the coal industry; and, to build out a sustainable transportation network that includes an Appalachian rail corridor. Perhaps more importantly, we want the good union jobs that can come with these investments. These infrastructure investments can put the region's residents to work building the future they want to live in while also laying the foundation for a much more prosperous economy over the long haul.

We must also invest to [repair the damage from the last century of extractive industry practices](#) — reclaiming abandoned mine lands; remediating brownfields, including coal ash ponds and coal slurries; reforesting the region; restoring the wetlands; and supporting sustainable agricultural practices among local farmers rather than Big Ag. This is why the coalition to ReImagine Appalachia is calling to [revive the Civilian Conservation Corps](#), as a carbon farming strategy that involves absorbing excess carbon with natural greenery. One can easily see how many people we could put to work just planting trees. We also think a revived Civilian Conservation Corps, as a public jobs program paying living wages, could be used to create second-chance opportunities for our many residents that were caught up in the “war on drugs” and opioid[crisis], something that hit Appalachia hard.

We call it [a new deal that works for us](#).

*Who are ReImagine Appalachia’s partners, and what is being done to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the Ohio Valley?*

[ReImagine Appalachia](#) is a diverse group of stakeholders — organized labor, racial justice leaders, faith groups, local government officials and environmental organizations, among many others. Folks based in the region working to find common ground and to re-find our common humanity. The last decade or so has been incredibly divisive. Absentee corporations in the extractive industries have helped foment that divide. But the reality is that there is a win-win solution for the 99 percent of us. To find it we must stop to listen to each other. All sides must do this. Environmental leaders must realize that no one will replace their job for an idea. People must be able to put food on the table for their families. And they shouldn’t have to choose between a job and the environment.

But if we work together, we can make sure the climate-friendly jobs of the future are good for workers, communities and the environment. That means making sure most of the jobs we create are good union jobs, we are prioritizing coal industry workers for new opportunities; we are including on-the-job training opportunities on publicly funded infrastructure projects for union apprentice; and we are targeting Black workers, women, other people of color and low-wage workers for these apprenticeships. We can learn a lot about how to do this from [best practices in the national movement to ensure community benefits from big development projects](#). Essentially, public infrastructure resources should come with community and labor standards, or “strings attached.”

*What strategies have you discovered that work best for securing broad consensus around ReImagine Appalachia's policy blueprint for a sustainable future?*

ReImagine Appalachia's success is in part due to the creation of an inspiring, collective vision in the context of the very real possibility of securing federal resources that can actually turn that vision into reality. That vision is a collective vision created by people with deep roots in the states of the Ohio River Valley of Appalachia. Many people in the region have been waiting a long time for something like this to come along.

Nothing we do is done in a vacuum. Every year, we start the year off with a strategy summit that hundreds of stakeholders participate in to help develop our vision and our workplan. Our [initial vision and blueprint](#) was written after culling through 50 pages of notes from a virtual convening of stakeholders. Even then, the draft document was shared widely for even broader input and additional listening sessions were held to secure reactions to the draft.

We continue to dig deeper into every piece of our vision, collectively, with listening sessions and input into various drafts. When many people with different backgrounds, experiences and areas of expertise help to craft a vision, those diverse stakeholders not only help make it better, they learn from each other and ultimately become more dedicated to helping make that vision a reality. To promote wide dialogue, across stakeholder groups, we hold many public events (virtually), and share almost all of them [live on Facebook](#). So, even if you cannot attend the actual event, you can see and learn what happened later and weigh in.

We also have several teams that get together regularly to discuss issues — a labor team, a racial and community justice team (that helped launch the [Black Appalachian Coalition, or BLAC](#)), and a research team. Our 2022 strategy summit led us to believe we need to create a faith table, one dedicated to promoting community dialogue at the local level and visioning sessions, and a manufacturing team.

We are particularly excited about the idea [of redeveloping shuttered coal plants and former steel facilities into environmentally friendly industrial parks, or eco-industrial parks](#). The basic idea of an eco-industrial park is that one company's waste is another company's useful input. Shuttered coal plants have incredible electric grid and transportation infrastructure that can be harnessed to make the

sustainable products of the future. For various reasons, we believe Appalachia could become a hub for battery technology, alternatives to single-use plastics, steel bars for rail, and electric buses and vehicles.

We have so much work to do and so little time! But rest assured, the proverbial train has left the station and we are chugging forward into the new energy economy. We just need to keep hammering away at it, beating the same drum, and singing from the same hymnal. All the metaphors will be needed to keep this train on track.

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