

# Moving the Needle



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From the viral video of the turtle with a plastic straw in their nose, to Greta Thunberg's powerful speeches in front of world leaders, tides are turning in terms of environmental conversation worldwide. Reusable straw trends parallel the increase in climate-change related natural disasters. The atmosphere of environmental conversation is increasingly heated, but what is Georgia doing for the climate crisis?

Interestingly enough, Atlanta has made some strides in terms of climate action within the past few years. Atlanta's last mayor, Kasim Reed, supported the development of a Climate Action Plan for Atlanta. At that time, Georgia had never engaged in a climate initiative so direct and methodical, so this was a relatively radical idea. The Atlanta Climate Action Plan went on to become the first Climate Action Plan in the southeast United States. The plan aimed to reduce greenhouse gases (GHG's) and save energy.

The plan was instigated by an extensive greenhouse gas inventory of Atlanta published in 2013. From there, the team set a goal of 20% reduction in GHG's by 2020 and 40% reduction by 2030 (based on 2009 emissions).

"The Climate Action Plan was adopted unanimously by the city council in September 2015", said Dr. Jairo Garcia, the author of the plan. He is a passionate and knowledgeable expert in urban sustainability who now teaches at Georgia Tech. He was also a leader in the Climate Strike on the Atlanta Capitol this past September.

**"Atlanta has made some huge strides in terms of climate action within the past few years"**

The complete plan is available to the public, and just by scrolling through it, a viewer can see the effort and dedication put into the project. The plan aimed to reduce carbon emissions from seven angles: in commercial/industrial buildings, residential buildings, energy production,

materials management and recycling, water and wastewater management, transportation, and greenhouses/food security.

The Atlanta Climate Action Plan meant business. Professionals worked to quantify the carbon reduction potential of initiatives across these seven sectors. Partners, such as CHaRM and Environment Georgia, came together to offer their solutions. It was not just wishful thinking; it was a thorough and specific plan to reduce Atlanta's emissions.

However, Garcia states that this systematic approach to curb emissions here in Georgia was short-lived. The plan did achieve some reduction since its enactment in 2015, but reached a standstill with the election of Keisha Lance Bottoms in 2017. According to Jairo, "Between 2015 and 2017, we achieved some reduction but not the 20% required by the plan. Unfortunately, nothing has been done since then except for making more plans."

In May 2017, before Bottoms' election in November, the Atlanta City Council directed the Mayor's Office of Resilience to construct a plan towards 100 percent clean energy in the city of Atlanta by 2035. Bottoms essentially scrapped the Atlanta Climate Action Plan to pursue this new project entitled Clean Energy Atlanta, which will reduce emissions by working toward clean and efficient energy systems. This plan will also operate on a cycle where every three years a process report, revisions, and updates will be made. Clean Energy Atlanta is working alongside previous initiatives for emissions reduction throughout Atlanta. These other projects include Alternative Fuel Vehicle Adoption, Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) financing, Atlanta Better Buildings Challenge, Energy Savings Performance Contract, Sustainable Building Ordinance, Clean Energy & Equity, Commercial Buildings Energy & Water Efficiency Ordinance, and Solar Atlanta.

So, the intentions of the Atlanta Climate Action Plan are no longer being tracked. Clean Energy Atlanta seems to lack some sense of direction compared to the Climate Action Plan. For instance, Clean Energy Atlanta lacks carbon reduction projections, collaboration with climate experts, progress reports, and an overall sense of urgency.

To Garcia, Clean Energy Atlanta is a "wishlist".

In his opinion, this initiative focuses on the energy efficiency and economic sides of the issue instead of being direct about climate change in order to not offend those against climate action.

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If Clean Energy Atlanta were to quantify and report their actual carbon reduction, perhaps Garcia and others could be more optimistic about it. This initiative also leaves out the original Climate Action Plan's emphasis on green spaces, food security, and materials management.

The Atlanta Climate Action Plan's efforts are not being tracked, so the city seems to be falling even more behind, and all of the work done by dedicated professionals may be going to waste--at least for now.

The next big stride for climate action in Georgia as a state is the Georgia Drawdown Project. Funded by the Ray C. Anderson Foundation and inspired by Paul Hawken's Project Drawdown, Georgia Drawdown aims to measure and model the most effective and impactful actions that can reduce carbon emissions specifically in Georgia. Paul Hawken's Project Drawdown found these climate solutions for the world, ranging from plant-rich diets to educating women and girls. The Georgia Drawdown Project intends to find which climate solutions are the most applicable to our state in particular. Narrowing down the best climate solutions on the local level is part of the project's goal to push for "drawdown", or carbon neutrality, in Georgia.

The Georgia Drawdown Project recently started in 2019. The team is comprised of professionals from Georgia Tech, Emory, and the University of Georgia. Once the climate solutions are narrowed down and their prices evaluated, these solutions will be offered to stakeholders. These suggestions, or "data-driven guidance" per Cobb, could be ready as soon as May or June 2020.

John Lanier is the Executive Director of the

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Atlanta and Georgia's Efforts Toward Carbon Neutrality

Ray C. Anderson Foundation, the legacy of industrialist-turned-environmentalist Ray C. Anderson. Anderson revolutionized sustainable business as an entrepreneur, dedicated his work to promotion of sustainable business, and left this foundation to Lanier to fund climate work in Georgia. Lanier, Anderson's grandson, is enthusiastic about this legacy and Georgia Drawdown. Lanier highlights the importance of this state-wide project, "[W]e (the Ray C. Anderson Foundation) feel like Georgia is where our network is, it's our home, and it's the right size where we can make a difference. We can show what's possible in Georgia."

**"Atlanta cannot simply rely on the government, corporations, or people to change; we likely need all three to properly address and overcome these issues."**

Dr. Kim Cobb, one of the Georgia Tech leaders with Georgia Drawdown, says the project is "trying to quantify what are the top solutions for reducing our emissions, increasing our natural carbon sinks, and at the same time. . .advancing economic opportunity for Georgia residents as well as equity for Georgians". Cobb, a lively and established professor of Earth and Atmospheric Science at Georgia Tech, emphasized the holistic approach of Georgia Drawdown. She detailed

the importance of the Beyond Carbon section of the plan that illustrates some intersection between the advancement of climate action and improved social and economic opportunity.

For instance, Cobb explored the multiple benefits of further investment in clean energy. Not only would increasing our clean energy and focus on energy efficiency be more eco-friendly, but it could help struggling families. For instance, communities that are more vulnerable to temperature extremes could benefit from increased energy efficiency when heating and cooling their homes. Lower energy costs could mean a world of a difference for these Georgian families. These climate solutions could tackle environmental issues and equity problems simultaneously.

But what can a list of solutions do? The Ray C. Anderson Foundation has no authority to tell people what to do and how to do it, nor do they want to.

Cobb mentions, "We aren't here to be prescriptive." Instead, the team aims to hold up this list of solutions with hope and confidence. Georgia Drawdown is not finding win-lose climate solutions, where economic or personal benefit is lost to environmental initiatives. Rather, the team hopes to compile solutions that are win-win-win, for climate, the economy, and society.

Lanier, Cobb, and Garcia all mentioned this potential short-coming of the project, but their process still plans to tackle this issue. Stakeholders will be encouraged to consider the document's suggestions. This resource will always be available to anyone interested in reducing emissions for

Georgia. Even though these solutions will not be legislated, it is research dedicated to the solutions of climate change, not whether or not it exists. The science of the problem is accepted, so now this work can go to actually fixing it.

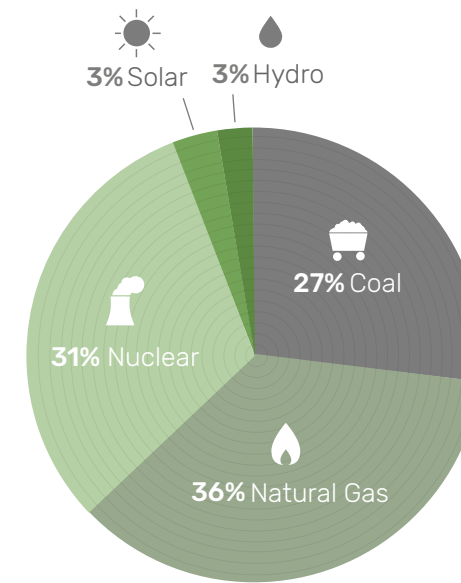
**"Every day we have to be moving the needle, and everyday people have to be reminded about how much this matters."**

However, there are obstacles to sustainability in Georgia. Some of our biggest obstacles include how far behind Atlanta is on climate action (along with many other regions), governments that do not prioritize bold climate action, and a lack of concern or action.

These obstacles unlock enormous possibility for future climate efforts. Dr. Kim Cobb admits worry over our climate issues, but also beams with excitement for our potential as a state, "We have tech industries, corporate headquarters, a major transportation hub system, the airport, the port, vast quantities of sunshine. . .That's the exciting opportunity space that we have." If Georgia can get ahead of the incoming storm of climate change, we can make a world of a difference in our emissions.

Fighting climate change is a holistic effort.

### Atlanta's Energy Sources 2018

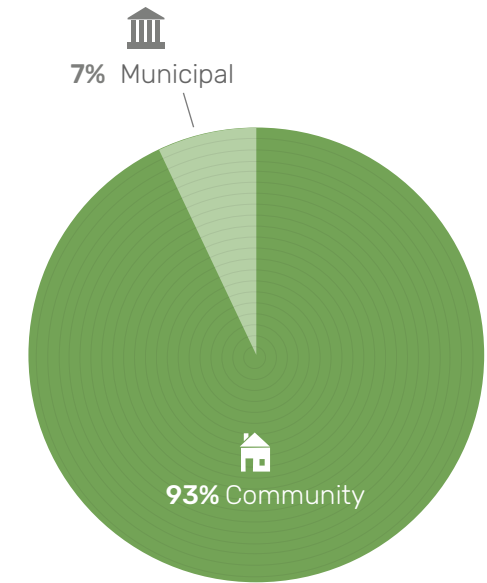


Data from *Clean Energy Atlanta*

Georgia cannot simply rely on the government, corporations, or people to change; we likely need all three to properly address and overcome these issues.

Although we have wonderful projects such as Georgia Drawdown, there is much more work to be done. Citizens can tackle this issue by doing the basics: voting for the world they want with their dollar, reducing their carbon footprint using guides such as Georgia Drawdown, and more. Something more universal, however, is acting politically. Citizens can research candidates and

### Building Electricity Consumption

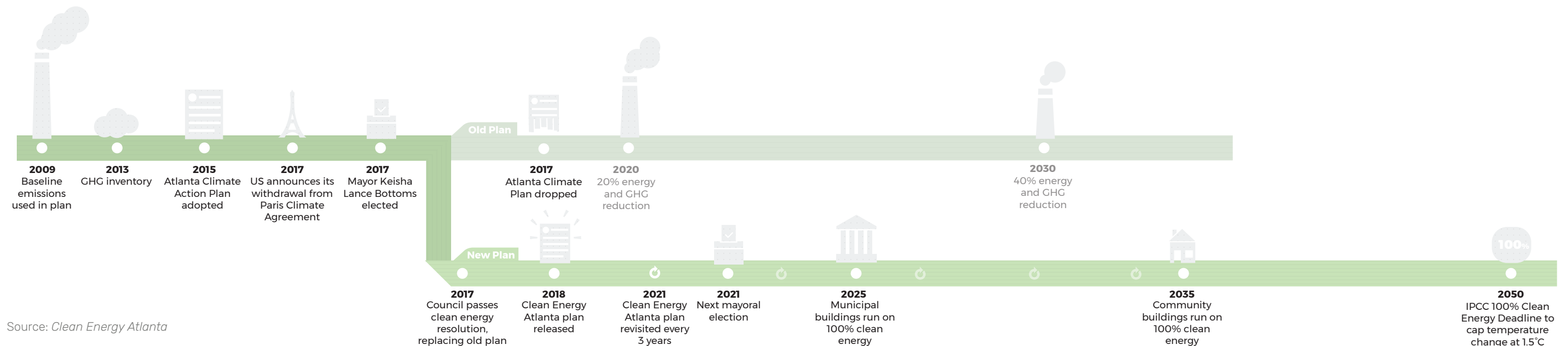


vote to support data-driven policy. In Atlanta, activists can petition for the Atlanta Climate Action Plan to be reenacted or for Clean Energy Atlanta to report its carbon reduction.

Cobb recounted how when she first met Garcia, he mentioned that he rode his bike to work that day. At first, Cobb thought he was crazy, but now both professors ride their bikes to campus daily. On this she said, "All of this is personal stuff that gives meaning to me and helps keep me sane in a warming, burning world." As Cobb reiterated, each of us have a part to play in the

downfall of anthropogenic climate change. Taking personal actions can help to stir change, start conversations, and even offer us comfort among this crisis.

As Dr. Kim Cobb said, "[E]very day we have to be moving the needle, and everyday people have to be reminded about how much this matters, what the stakes are, and what we could do if we come together."



Source: *Clean Energy Atlanta*