Environmental & Climate Action: A People-First Approach for Detroit
Last Updated: April 26, 2028, by Jeremy Orr, Esq.

Introduction

Detroit has made some meaningful progress in advancing environmental protection and climate resilience. Investments in green infrastructure, stronger commitments to water affordability, and major community-driven victories have moved us forward. Yet the challenges facing residents remain urgent. Flooding continues to devastate neighborhoods, lead and industrial pollution still harm families, and the threat of water shutoffs persists.

Mayor Mary Sheffield and the City Council have a real opportunity to shift the city from crisis response to long-term solutions. This moment is about more than new policies; it is about centering the people who have been overlooked for far too long. Detroiters, particularly Black and Brown communities, have carried the weight of pollution, aging infrastructure, and climate impacts for generations. They deserve to be at the center of the city's agenda.

This memo presents a bold and actionable roadmap for city officials to position Detroit as a national leader in environmental protection and climate action.

Putting Environmental Justice and Public Health First

For too long, Detroiters have been expected to live with toxic air, unsafe water, and environmental hazards. That must end now:

- **End Water Shutoffs for Good:** Water is a basic human right. Detroit needs a permanent affordability program with income-based billing and strong protections against privatization.
- **Eliminate Lead and Toxic Pollution:** Accelerate lead service line replacement, strengthen enforcement against corporate polluters, and make cleanup of contaminated sites a public health priority.
- **Improve Air Quality:** Tighten industrial pollution controls, expand air monitoring in frontline neighborhoods, and reduce diesel truck traffic in residential areas.
- **Expand Green Spaces:** Parks, trees, and community gardens should exist in every neighborhood. Green spaces improve air quality, prevent flooding, and reduce heat.

Preparing Detroit for the Climate Crisis

Climate change is not a distant threat. Detroit is already facing record floods, extreme heat, and failing infrastructure. We need a comprehensive, equity-centered plan:

- **Flood Prevention and Stormwater Management:** Upgrade drainage systems, expand green stormwater solutions, and provide grants or resources to help residents protect their homes.

- **Heat Resilience:** Increase tree canopy, add cooling centers, and prioritize heat-resistant infrastructure in the most affected neighborhoods.
- **Detroit Climate Action Plan:** Establish clear, measurable goals for reducing emissions and building community resilience, led by residents from the most impacted areas.
- **Stronger Disaster Response:** Ensure emergency plans prioritize high-risk neighborhoods and that resources reach people before, during, and after disasters.

A Just Transition to a Green Economy

Detroiters deserve reliable, affordable, and clean energy. Power outages, high utility rates, and dependence on fossil fuels continue to harm residents. Energy justice must be at the center of Detroit's recovery:

- **Hold DTE Accountable:** Enforce stricter reliability standards, stop unfair rate hikes, and require real investment in grid resilience.
- **Expand Public Power and Energy Democracy:** Explore municipal or community energy models that put power back in the hands of residents.
- **Invest in Solar and Battery Storage:** Support community solar and battery projects that reduce costs, strengthen resilience, and create jobs.

Building a green economy also means creating opportunity:

- **Expand Clean Energy Job Training:** Prioritize Detroit residents—especially from frontline communities—for good-paying clean energy jobs.
- **Support Community-Owned Renewable Energy:** Help neighborhoods generate and control their own affordable clean power.
- **Shift Away from Polluting Industries:** Attract green manufacturing and electric vehicle production while phasing out industries that harm public health.

Building a Transportation System That Works for Everyone

Detroit's transportation system is outdated and inequitable. Pollution from vehicles harms public health, and unreliable transit limits access to jobs and education. Mayor Sheffield can change that:

- **Make Public Transit Reliable and Affordable:** Expand routes, increase frequency, and provide reduced fares for low-income riders.
- **Prioritize Bike and Pedestrian Safety:** Create protected bike lanes, repair sidewalks, and design safer intersections.
- **Electrify Public Vehicles:** Transition buses, municipal fleets, and school transportation to electric power, starting in neighborhoods most burdened by air pollution.
- **Reduce Truck Traffic in Neighborhoods:** Reroute freight traffic, enforce anti-idling rules, and strengthen zoning to keep diesel trucks away from homes and schools.

Sustainable Development Without Displacement

Detroit's growth must center equity, not gentrification. Development should strengthen communities rather than push them out:

- **Let Communities Lead:** Residents must have a real voice in shaping neighborhood development and zoning decisions.
- **Make Housing Green and Affordable:** Require new housing to meet energy-efficiency standards and remain affordable for working families.
- **Keep Detroiters in Their Homes:** Adopt stronger anti-displacement and tenant protection policies.
- **Support Community Land Ownership:** Invest in community land trusts, cooperatives, and urban farming initiatives that keep land in Detroiters' hands.

Protecting Detroit's Water and the Great Lakes

Detroiters deserve a water system that is transparent, affordable, and accountable to the people. As the lead member of the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA), DWSD must center residents over profits:

- **Make DWSD and GLWA Work for the People:** Establish community representation in decision-making and prioritize affordability in all policies.
- **Strengthen Water Affordability Programs:** Make income-based billing permanent to ensure water access for all households.
- **Increase Transparency and Accountability:** Require GLWA to publish clear, accessible reports on rates, spending, and infrastructure investments.
- **Keep Water Public:** Prevent any attempt to privatize Detroit's water system.

Detroit also plays a critical role in protecting the Great Lakes:

- **Hold Polluters Accountable:** Enforce penalties against companies contaminating the Detroit and Rouge Rivers.
- **Stop Water Diversions:** Protect the Great Lakes Compact and oppose corporate or out-of-state withdrawals that threaten regional sustainability.
- **Lead in Regional Water Justice:** Position Detroit as a leader in equitable, sustainable water management across the Great Lakes region.

Create an Office of Climate, Infrastructure, & Sustainability

Detroit needs a dedicated city office to coordinate its environmental and climate priorities. The current Office of Sustainability operates with limited staff and resources, with reports indicating as few as two to ten employees which makes it difficult to address the scale of challenges facing the city. Expanding this existing office to be an **Office of Climate, Infrastructure, and Sustainability** would grow the city's capacity and ensure accountability across departments. This office should:

- Be led by a Chief of Climate, Infrastructure, and Sustainability.
- Report directly to the Mayor and coordinate with all city departments.
- Develop and implement an updated Detroit's Climate Action and Resilience Plan.
- Lead citywide emissions tracking, energy transition, and resilience projects.
- Oversee community engagement and ensure frontline neighborhoods have a voice in decision-making.
- Leverage federal and state funding to scale up local climate and infrastructure investments.

Conclusion

Detroit has always been a city of fighters. From labor rights to civil rights, Detroiters have led movements that reshaped this country. Environmental justice must continue that legacy. Under the city's new leadership, we have an opportunity to move from crisis management to long-term solutions grounded in equity, transparency, and accountability.

This is about building a Detroit where every resident, no matter their zip code, has clean air, safe water, affordable energy, and a fair chance at opportunity. The Rise Higher Detroit Transition marks the beginning of that work, and the time to act is now.

Immediate Priorities/Quick Wins for the City of Detroit

1. Issue an executive order **declaring climate resilience and environmental justice a top priority** for the City of Detroit

2. **Expand the existing Office of Sustainability to be the Office of Climate, Infrastructure, & Sustainability** run by a Chief Climate Officer who sits in the executive office reports directly to the Mayor and maintains the roles and responsibilities necessary to carry out the Mayor's people-focused environmental agenda.

3. Direct departments with environmental and public health inspection and enforcement authority (BSEED, DWSD, DPD, and Health) to **prioritize inspections and enforcement actions against industrial polluters** (lead, mold, air quality, water) in the most overburdened neighborhoods

4. Direct departments to **formally issue intra-departmental climate and environmental strategies** in their work, plans, and budgets.
5. Establish a **Climate Justice Community Advisory Board**, made up of resident representatives from each City Council District, to offer policy and budget recommendations to guide the Mayor and City Council on climate justice-related programs and decisions. Alternatively, the city might consider revitalizing and expanding the existing Green Taskforce so it can take on more targeted, neighborhood and people-centered environmental priorities.

6. **Pursue membership in C40**, joining a global network of cities committed to bold, collaborative climate action and shared accountability for protecting residents and future generations.

Addendum (as of March 2026)

Data Centers, Public Lands, and Community Benefits

Detroit is starting to get real attention for data center development, especially on large parcels of vacant and city-owned land. But we need to be clear about what's at stake. **Public land in Detroit should not be handed over for projects that don't meaningfully benefit the people who live here**. That land should be used to build community wealth, support resident ownership, and create long-term value for Detroiters.

At the same time, residents are already dealing with high and rising DTE bills, along with unreliable service. Data centers are some of the most energy-intensive facilities you can build. Bringing them into Detroit without strong protections in place risks putting even more pressure on the grid and driving costs up for residents who are already struggling to keep the lights on.

Right now, the guardrails are not there. **The city and state have not put in place clear standards around community benefit, energy use, rate protections, or environmental impact. Until those protections exist, Detroit should not be moving forward with data center proposals.**

If data centers are going to be part of Detroit's future, they need to be shaped on our terms. That means real community benefit, real accountability, and a clear commitment that Detroit residents will not bear the cost of development that does not serve them.

Provide Feedback: I welcome your thoughts, ideas and feedback. Please share your input through this feedback form: https://forms.gle/tjDzZgzPU2G2ocRJ9.