

Ohio Power Siting Board
Case Number: 00608581
Testimony of Cathy Cowan Becker
Chair, Ready for 100, Ohio Sierra Club

Members of the Ohio Power Siting Board,

Thank you for allowing me to testify today on the proposal by Ohio State University to build a combined heat and power plant to be powered by fracked gas on the west side of campus.

My name is Cathy Cowan Becker, and I am chair of the Sierra Club's Ready for 100 campaign in Columbus and in Ohio. Ready for 100 is a campaign to ask cities to commit to transitioning to 100% renewable energy. So far [165 cities, 13 counties, 8 states, DC, and Puerto Rico](#) have all made this commitment. That means 100 million people -- or 1 in 3 in the United States -- live in a jurisdiction that is committed to transitioning to 100% clean energy.

In Ohio, we have four cities that have formally committed to transitioning to 100% renewable energy by passing a resolution in their city councils and integrating the steps for how to get there in their city's climate action plan. Those cities are Cleveland, Cincinnati (city 100), Lakewood, and South Euclid. We also have active campaigns in several cities including Columbus, Dayton, Marietta, Toledo, and Worthington. Two cities -- Bexley and Maple Heights - have mayors who have signed a pledge to pass this commitment in their cities.

As you know, carbon emissions are driving the climate crisis. Over the past few years, one study after another has come out warning us that the window of time to preserve a livable planet is rapidly closing. According to the science -- much of it from Ohio State -- under business as usual scenarios by the end of the century we are looking at:

- Large swaths of the planet becoming unlivable at a time when human populations are at an all-time high
- The collapse of human agriculture and natural food systems due to droughts, floods, fires, and ocean acidification
- Up to 1 billion climate refugees forced to flee their homes -- something civil society cannot withstand
- The extinction of up to 1 million species -- other creatures who evolved and share this small planet with us wiped out.

While it is too late to avoid the effects of the climate crisis altogether, scientists say that by taking swift and decisive action now, we can avoid its worst effects. To do that, we must cut carbon emissions [7.6% every year for the next 10 years](#).

That is a very tall order, but one way it can be done is by working with cities, which are responsible for [70% of carbon emissions](#). If we can get cities to transition to 100% renewable energy, that will take a big bite out of climate change.

For the past three years, the Ready for 100 Columbus campaign has been working with city government to push for energy efficiency, renewable energy, and clean transportation programs that will make a material difference in lowering the city's carbon emissions. We have seen a lot of progress in that time. Among other things, the city of Columbus has:

- Set a goal of 30,000 home energy audits, especially in low-income areas with high energy burdens, and helping residents to make upgrades
- Developed a Residential Property Assessed Clean Energy program to finance clean energy upgrades at homes, similar to the program the city has for commercial buildings
- Passed a transparency ordinance requiring owners of large buildings to disclose their energy use, so the city can better track specific sources of emissions
- Exceeded its goal for adoption of electric vehicles, with plans to set an even higher goal in coming years.

Currently the city of Columbus is putting together its Climate Action Plan, with targets for reducing emissions in multiple sectors including Buildings, Renewables, Vehicle Electrification, Transit, Land Use, Waste, and Finance, with the goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2050.

One of the most important steps for achieving this goal is the city's plan to pursue Community Choice Aggregation for 100% renewable energy. Through aggregation, local governments can use the buying power of many customers in their communities to purchase electricity or natural gas on their behalf. Aggregation is usually used to negotiate for lower prices in energy, but it can also be used to negotiate the source of the energy supply.

During his 2020 State of the City address in February, Columbus Mayor Andrew Ginther announced a plan to pursue Community Choice Aggregation for 100% renewable energy by 2022. Last month Columbus City Council voted to hire a firm to oversee writing initiative language and putting aggregation on the November ballot. This month the city issued a request for utilities to submit proposals on how they would provide 100% renewable energy to the city of Columbus -- the entire city and its almost 1 million residents, not just city operations -- by 2022.

It is hard to overstate what a game-changer Community Choice Aggregation will be for the energy supply, not just in Columbus but across Central Ohio. Worthington has already aggregated for 100% renewable energy through a 2019 ballot initiative that passed by 75%. Now Bexley, Grove City, Dublin, and other suburbs are looking at doing the same.

Even more exciting is the source of the renewable energy to fulfill these aggregation contracts. Rather than simply buying Renewable Energy Certificates, basically carbon offsets, cities in Central Ohio want to use aggregation for 100% renewable energy to leverage financing to build out local renewable energy projects that would create good-paying jobs right here in Ohio.

It's a model that [Cincinnati is successfully using](#) in its aggregation program, through which it committed to buying power from a solar farm under construction in Highland County. Cincinnati had long been aggregated for 100% renewable energy, and until recently had fulfilled its

contract by buying RECs. When Cincinnati committed to buying the power for its aggregation contract from a local solar plant instead, that's what got the banks to okay financing the project.

As Community Choice Aggregation for 100% renewable energy spreads across Ohio, we expect to see significant improvements in the energy mix of our grid. Currently Ohio is the sixth-highest carbon emitting state. By pooling together our customers on the local level, we can create good-paying jobs for Ohioans, clean our air, improve public health -- and help ensure a livable planet for future generations. There is literally no downside to aggregation.

That's why I was so surprised -- and dismayed -- to learn that Ohio State University -- where I recently earned a dual master's degree in public administration and environment and natural resources -- wants to build a plant to be powered by fracked gas in the middle of campus. Not only does the university want to invest millions of dollars in fossil fuel infrastructure -- they have even made a fracked gas plant the centerpiece of their own climate action plan. At a time when the rest of the state is pursuing a clean energy future, this makes absolutely no sense.

Here are some of the specific issues we have with the proposed fracked gas plant at Ohio State University and the university's overall climate action plan:

- 1) The university claims the gas plant will immediately reduce emissions by 35% compared to the current grid in Central Ohio. However, nowhere does the university take into account that the source of energy for all of Central Ohio will be changing very soon, as Community Choice Aggregation for 100% renewable energy takes effect and helps lead to build out of new renewable energy projects to supply energy in our local area. To claim a 35% difference in emissions to the current grid is not relevant when the grid is likely to be completely different by the time this gas plant would be built.
- 2) The plan accounts for the lower emissions of gas burned at the site of the plant, but does not account for emissions from methane that is flared during the fracking process or leaks during the transportation and pipelines of fracked gas. As a greenhouse gas, methane is 84 times more potent than carbon dioxide over 20 years -- and it just so happens the next decade is critical to addressing the climate crisis. The last thing we need to be doing is putting more methane into the atmosphere. In fact, new research is finding that methane emissions from fracking have [wiped out the advantage of gas over coal](#). Add to that the damage to the water, air, and land of the Appalachian regions where fracking takes place, and Ohio State is basically outsourcing its dirty fossil fuel pollution to some of the poorest most disadvantaged areas of the state.
- 3) Most of the rest of the university's claimed reduction in carbon emissions -- a full 55% -- is attributed to the development of "green hydrogen," which the university's climate action plan says will take the place of fracked gas in 10 years. Yet the plan itself admits that current green hydrogen technology is 40 times more expensive than gas, and there is no guarantee this technology will be any more viable in the next decade. In fact, the entire argument is remarkably similar to claims of "clean coal" made over the decades

that have never materialized. Coal plants don't use clean coal technology because it would cost more to install and operate than the profits they make from burning coal. Why would this technology be any different -- and why should we bet more than half the university's carbon emissions on the claim that it is, when the university could be moving forward with clean energy technology that we know is financially viable right now?

- 4) The university has not taken a serious enough look at renewable energy as an option for supplying the energy needed at Ohio State. Renewable energy can be obtained in a number of ways. Although buildout of large-scale solar may not be possible on the Columbus campus, it could be done on the branch campuses where there is more room. The university could also work with local utilities and financing agencies to construct new renewable energy projects in Central Ohio to supply the campus, much as cities are starting to do. Heating could be moved to heat pumps that are used in much of the rest of the world, powered by electricity, as well as an expansion of geothermal which is already in use in some buildings at Ohio State. Additional energy could also be purchased from renewable energy providers as the energy landscape in Ohio changes.
- 5) If allowed to be built, the gas plant would worsen local air pollution, adding 40 tons of fine particulate matter pollution to central Columbus and Franklin County. Long-term exposure to air pollution has been shown to increase the risks of respiratory and cardiovascular disease, as well as COVID-19. The air quality of Franklin County is already badly polluted, receiving a grade of "F" in the American Lung Association's 2019 State of the Air report. All of this would significantly affect the health of 60,000 students who attend Ohio State University, faculty and staff who work there, patients at OSU medical facilities, and people who live and work in the surrounding community.

In sum, the proposal to build a fracked gas plant in the middle of the state's flagship university campus, in the middle of our capital city, during a climate crisis makes no sense -- especially when we have much cleaner, cheaper, and more viable renewable energy alternatives that cities in Central Ohio are already exploring, but that the university has not taken into account.

For all these reasons, we ask that the Ohio Power Siting Board deny the university's proposal to build a fracked gas plant on campus. We also ask that you hold an additional hearing on this matter. This hearing is taking place in the middle of summer, postponed from April, at a time when no students are on campus. Most students, as well as most people who live in the community, have no idea this is being discussed. Further, there have been multiple problems with the OPSB website and reports of difficulties in signing up to attend the hearing today. Please hold an additional hearing on this matter so that those who will be affected most by this proposal have a chance to hear about it and participate. Thank you for your time.

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Summary: Comments Testimony of Cathy Cowan Becker electronically filed by Ms. Mary E Fischer on behalf of Ohio Power Siting Board