Environmental justice advocates blast San Diego for lack of progress on climate plan

At Cesar Chavez Park in Barrio Logan industry abuts a public playground. Environmental justice groups have raised concerns that the city of San Diego isn't prioritizing low-income neighborhoods of color as called for in its Climate Action Plan. (staff / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

By Joshua Emerson Smith

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Environmental justice advocates are calling on Mayor Kevin Faulconer's office to spend more money fighting climate change in low-income neighborhoods.

According to a report released by the San Diego-based Environmental Health Coalition on Monday, the city has spent little on implementing its 2015 Climate Action Plan and failed to track how much of that funding has gone to disadvantaged communities.
The report said that more than half of the $129 million allocated this year for climate change went to programs that likely would have happened regardless of the Climate Action Plan. Programs such as the city’s water recycling program, Pure Water, may help reduce greenhouse gases but they don’t represent new commitments under the climate plan.

“It makes it seem as if the city is making a huge investment in climate when it’s really not,” said Diane Takvorian, executive director of the Environmental Health Coalition. “We don’t know how much is being invested in the communities where the solutions are at.”

Faulconer’s office didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.

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The report calls on the city to advocate for an expanded bus network using zero-emission vehicles within the city’s urban core to address climate changes as well as air pollution.

At the same time, advocates recommended implementing a program that would help low-income neighborhoods get access to solar power, as well as water- and energy-efficiency upgrades.

In many areas of the climate plan the city is behind schedule, but disadvantaged neighborhoods are even further behind, said Carolina Martínez, senior policy advocate with the Environmental Health Coalition.

“We need investments in environmental justice communities, and we need massive transit in the San Diego Region if we really want to address the climate crisis,” she said.

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Martínez said the city currently has about 13 percent tree canopy coverage, compared to the 15 percent coverage called for under the climate plan by 2020. However, in environmental justice communities, that number is even further behind the target, at just 10 percent.

“There’s no record of how much money has gone to our communities,” she said. “It’s really important for the city to track the level of investment.”

The city has repeatedly said its progress on its climate plan is ahead of schedule. However, claimed reductions in greenhouse gases have come almost exclusively from actions taken by the state, such as forcing electric utilities to buy more renewable power and low-carbon standards on fuel, the advocates say.

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The city has also taken credit for a massive reduction in the number of cars and trucks on road, while driving has actually increased dramatically in recent years. The claimed decrease in the number of vehicle miles traveled every year is due to inaccurate projections used in the climate plan.
Faulconer’s team has said they has no plans to change the accounting flaw — which makes it seem as if the city satisfied its ambitious goals to boost transit, biking and walking before the plan was even adopted.

Twitter: @jemersmith

Phone: (619) 293-2234

Email: joshua.smith@sduniontribune.com

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