Opinion: San Diego Can Be a Leader in California’s Transition Off Fossil Fuels

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By Gladys Limón

The 2018 midterm election results saw the vast majority of California’s environmental justice champions re-elected, brought new voices to the state legislature and more progressives to the San Diego City Council. Now that these lawmakers have been sworn in, we must continue this momentum and apply it to the urgent work of addressing climate change and transitioning our economy off fossil fuels.

Californians are united in our commitment to converting the state’s power grid to renewable energy. A strong step in that direction was the passage of Senate Bill 100, which sets a goal of transforming our state’s electricity grid to 100 percent zero-carbon sources by 2045. Many California cities, including San Diego, Del Mar and Chula Vista, have set their city targets at 100 percent renewable by 2035.

SB 100 is one of more than a dozen bills included in the California Environmental Justice Alliance’s 2018 Environmental Justice Legislative Scorecard. The CEJA scorecard assesses how well California’s elected officials supported legislation addressing the cumulative impacts of poverty and pollution.

The CEJA scorecard reveals that a select group of legislators introduce, support and strengthen real solutions, while a much larger group sit on the sidelines or actively resist equity-advancing measures. We were pleased to see that San Diego-area state elected officials in particular show consistent support for environmental policies.

Senate President Pro Tem Toni Atkins — who worked hard for multiple environmental justice bills — and San Diego Assemblymembers Todd Gloria, Lorena Gonzalez-Fletcher, and Shirley Weber (who also scored high in CEJA’s scorecard) were all re-elected.

These representatives, together with local San Diego leaders, are propelling our state forward. In San Diego there is an exciting opportunity — and challenge — to make the San Diego Climate Action Plan part of the solution to advance a just transition from fossil fuels.

Now the real work begins: equitably implementing the transition.
Mayor Kevin Faulconer took a step in the right direction with his Oct. 25 announcement of support of community choice aggregation, a program that allows the city to supply a higher percentage of renewables sooner than what San Diego Gas & Electric would provide. If the administration can follow that by adopting straightforward equity measures in the city’s Climate Action Plan, San Diego can become a leader in the just transition off of fossil fuels.

A recent report by the Environmental Health Coalition,”Start Here, Start Now,” shows how San Diego can provide some immediate steps toward this goal: be transparent about how much climate funding and investment goes to environmental justice communities; increase direct investment proportionate to the population of these communities; and invest more in public transit that serves these low-income communities.

Combining state-supported energy investments with city-led initiatives can transform our toxic hot spots into healthy neighborhoods. The Solar on Multi-Family Affordable Housing program of the California Public Utilities Commission, born of Assembly Bill 693 passed in 2015, is about to launch. This program will invest $1 billion for solar on affordable housing in disadvantaged and low-income communities. San Diego should move decisively to adopt this program.

Over the last five years, National City led the way in transforming a toxic hotspot into a "Green Zones" neighborhood. By using state greenhouse gas reduction funds with local city and non-profit funding to complete the Paradise Creek housing project. In addition to over 200 units of housing it developed a garden, a creek restoration project, and walking and biking paths.

San Diego has a chance to lead California—and California to lead the country—so that we continue to shift our nation away from toxic emissions and toxic politicians to a brighter and a more sustainable future.

Gladys Limón is executive director of the California Environmental Justice Alliance which publishes the annual Environmental Justice Scorecard. CEJA is releasing a new report on Green Zones Across California at www.calgreenzones.org.