



# Community Letter on Charlottesville's Fossil-Fuel Infrastructure

Dear Charlottesville City Manager Chip Boyles and Charlottesville City Council --

As nonprofit and for-profit businesses working in the City of Charlottesville and Albemarle County, we share a common goal to protect the health and vitality of our community against the effects of climate change on our built, social, and natural systems. Our community, our children, and our legacy are dependent on our ability to slash our greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

On July 1, 2019, Charlottesville's City Council set an ambitious target to reduce GHG emissions by 45% by 2030 and reach carbon neutrality by 2050. The City's Climate Action Plan is still under development, however, and until it charts the course for reaching these crucial goals, we must ensure that major City decisions and initiatives will not hinder us from reaching those climate goals by prolonging the City's reliance on fossil fuels. We are writing to raise our concerns with two important issues that bear directly on this concern.

## 1. Improving our Transit System:

Transportation is the leading source of carbon emissions, both in our community and in Virginia as a whole. Tackling climate change requires that we reduce vehicle emissions, and an improved transit system that reduces vehicle miles traveled is essential to that goal. We applaud the leadership of Charlottesville Area Transit (CAT) in moving to a fare-free system and working toward improving reliability and frequency throughout its service area, as these are important components of making transit work better for more people.

Another important component is addressing the air pollution — both carbon and other types — that the transit system generates. We understand that CAT is set to launch a feasibility study to assess the best options for complementing its current fleet with alternative fueled buses. We also understand that part of the basis for this feasibility study is CAT's commendable desire to have a mixed bus fleet (with buses running on at least two different fuel sources) in the short- and mid-term because it will increase the system's reliability and is a necessary stage for any gradual transition to a cleaner technology.

However, the scope of the study has not been made public, and there are a number of crucial elements it must include in order to ensure that this major decision is based on all relevant information. These crucial elements include:

- A comparison of the net benefits of each possible pair of fuel sources for CAT's fleet: compressed natural gas (CNG) buses and diesel buses; CNG buses and battery electric buses (BEBs); diesel buses and BEBs.

- Consideration of how emissions of greenhouse gases and local air pollutants vary under each combination of fuel sources, which should factor in expected reductions from the electrical grid as electricity generation moves to cleaner sources in the coming years.
- Consideration of the rapidly evolving nature of BEB technology and charging infrastructure.
- An assessment of future compatibility with other local transit systems, particularly in light of UVA's plans to convert University Transit Service to 100% Battery Electric Buses over the next 15 years.
- Consideration of Virginia's new [capital assistance program prioritization method](#) for funding transit agencies, which gives higher priority to electric or hybrid technologies.
- Consideration of future policy initiatives to decarbonize transportation, with potential for increased relative fossil-fuel costs due to carbon pricing and future incentives for electrification of transportation.
- Opportunities for public involvement and comment as the study is developed, and this should include input on the study scope before it is finalized.

In addition, we recommend that CAT and/or the Regional Transit Partnership ensure future transparency and stakeholder engagement through the creation of a Community Transit Advisory Council (with a variety of interested parties representing the Charlottesville and Albemarle community, their households, nonprofits, and businesses) that could guide future decision-making.

## **2. The City of Charlottesville's Comprehensive Plan and Natural Gas:**

The City is currently considering its Comprehensive Plan — an important compass for long-term decision-making. Although the Comprehensive Plan has not historically highlighted addressing climate change as a key element, the crisis is now at a point that reducing GHG emissions and improving climate justice through energy equity and transportation equity must be a top priority in Charlottesville's blueprint for the future, and the goals and strategies it includes should be consistent with that priority.

Unfortunately, the [current draft of the Comprehensive Plan](#) includes a goal that points in the opposite direction. Specifically, Goal 11 of chapter "Community Facilities and Services" states that the City should "Improve and maintain the existing gas system within city and county limits, expand the system as needed (...)."

Expanding natural gas infrastructure would move the City decisively away from achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. We recommend the following actions:

- Striking "expand the system as needed" from the proposed language for Goal 11.
- Ensure that the City's Climate Action Plan — the completion of which needs to be prioritized — must identify opportunities to decommission the City's current fossil fuel infrastructure.



Climate touches every aspect of our community — our health, our food, our economic well-being, and the affordability of our homes and businesses. While City leadership has made important commitments to major emissions reductions and carbon neutrality, it is time our infrastructure decisions and Comprehensive Plan goals reflect them.

We appreciate the opportunity to address these important issues. We believe that our City has the creativity, leadership, and community resources that will allow us to align all our planning efforts around mutual goals of creating a more just and sustainable future.

Sincerely,

***Members of the Charlottesville and Albemarle Nonprofit and For-Profit Business Community***

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# Partnering Organizations



**Piedmont Group**

