

Sustainability and the City of Atlanta



CHANDRA FARLEY
Chief Sustainability Officer
City of Atlanta

Just last year, Atlanta's City Council finally codified the Mayor's Office of Sustainability and Resilience for the City of Atlanta. This follows other iterations of sustainability offices including the Office of Resilience that stewarded the City's first 100% clean energy plan in 2017. That plan, Clean Energy Atlanta, was adopted by City Council in 2019 and committed the City of Atlanta to transition to 100% clean energy by 2035. The way we talk about that commitment today is 100% clean energy for 100% of the people. As all of us in this room that have been working on clean energy know when we're meeting goals for sustainability and climate resilience, we are leaving some people behind. That's the reason it is critical that the baseline for sustainability, climate resilience, and clean, renewable energy must have a foundation in environmental justice.

All of us who've been doing this work for a long time understand the once-in-a-generation opportunity that the Biden-Harris administration has delivered with the passing of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. We have the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the Inflation Reduction Act and many new programs, but there are some old programs that just haven't had this level of dollars before.

As the Chief Sustainability Officer, my first focus as an opportunity for federal funding is around the Energy Efficiency Conservation Block Grant Program. Because we have about 200 municipal buildings in the City of Atlanta, we are focusing this funding program on our municipal building stock. Within the Office of Sustainability and Resilience, we set policies, we set priorities, we can set targets and we can set goals. But all that gets

operationalized through our departments. So, I must be in partnership with all of them: Department of Watershed Management, Department of Parks and Recreation, Fire and Rescue, and the Department of Enterprise Asset Management, which manages the majority of our buildings. I'm talking about sustainability, but the focus is on interdepartmental and public-private partnerships and this idea of positive pressure.

I've only been in my Chief Sustainability Officer role for six months, but

I've been a partner to City of Atlanta and other local governments and municipalities across the state and the Southeast for over a decade. Southface Energy Institute, where I worked for eight years, was the technical assistance partner to the City of Atlanta on things like the Better Buildings Challenge, an initiative that came out of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Around the same time, the City's Power to Change Plan had a big focus on residential energy efficiency. Southface had built the Southeast Weatherization Energy Efficiency Training Center. So, we had the City in there along with weatherization crew trainees, residents,

and companies like Mitsubishi and Acuity, with all of these pieces coming together.

Then we went into Resilient Atlanta, which took the City out of just an energy efficiency, technical focus and toward one that centered on equity. The community engagement to build out the Resilient Atlanta Strategy is probably one of the best community-wide, community-full engagement processes that I've ever really been a part of in the city. We covered food, youth

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programming, energy, waste, parks, transportation, and more. It was huge and far-reaching. And then as things moved on, it was time for Clean Energy Atlanta.

Out of about 27 ZIP codes that make up the City of Atlanta, there are six that experience a higher energy burden than the other ZIP codes north of the city – the wealthier ZIP codes – because if you’ve ever looked at a map of Atlanta, it’s pretty stark. About 90% of our Black population is situated in the south part of the city, while most of the job centers are situated in the north of the city. This is a transit equity issue. This is an economic equity issue and an economic development issue because what we know is transportation, air pollution, and electricity are drivers of all of those issues.

How do we make sure that we are addressing this comprehensively, and who benefits? If we are always asking ourselves the question of who benefits and having a real conversation around who’s missing from this table, who’s missing from this room and the conversation, then we’re able to really push forward in making sure our partnerships are as strong as possible – because we have as many voices at the table as possible to help us make the right decision.

This is how we do things like our Solar Atlanta program. Solar Atlanta is the largest municipal solar program in Georgia. Our friends in the City of Savannah are catching up with us, and we are excited about that. But this program has allowed us to install solar on 23 of our facilities and we plan to double that number over the next three to five years.

We continue to move up the ranks with our Top Cities for ENERGY STAR Certified Buildings rating. Just this year, we were number three, and we can’t do that without our commercial facilities going after those goals and reporting their ENERGY STAR scores. We have a commercial building benchmarking ordinance in the city, and one of the things that we will be focused on this year is increasing compliance with that ordinance. What we know is that not only is that helping us meet our climate action and clean energy goals, but that means we’re bringing more people into the industry. We’re building more



awareness about why certain technologies make buildings more efficient. These ordinances are giving us a vehicle to develop various public-private partnerships that advance our goals and increase our quality of life in the city.

One of the things we were able to do this year, along with four other municipalities across the State of Georgia, is intervene at our Public Service Commission’s regulatory proceedings. Georgia is on a three-year cycle, so in 2022, it was our time to have the Integrated Resource Plan proceeding in the first half of the year and then have the rate case in the second half of the year.

It was critically important for the local governments to come together in partnership, to apply this positive pressure at our regulatory commission, and be in direct conversation with our utilities about not only what we needed to help our cities and municipalities meet these 100% clean energy for 100% of the people goals, but to also make sure those things are happening at the same time. The more solar we can put on a Parks and Recreation facility, the more solar we can put on a Department of Watershed Management facility, and the more opportunity we are creating for safe, healthy, connected communities within the City of Atlanta. 