Episode 12 Full: Un(earth)ing Climate Advocacy with the Environmental Advocates of NY

Amanda Sachs

[00:00:00]

**Nina:** Hey, everyone. Welcome back to another installment of Politics under the Microscope. We could not be more excited for you to listen to today's episode as it is the first in our climate change series. We're here today with Amanda Sachs. Amanda's the legislative and climate associate for the Environmental Advocates of New York, a 50-year old nonprofit organization focused on New York state environmental policy.

She handles the memo process for any significant environmental bills that move in the state legislature and works on developing and advocating for climate bills, mostly having to do with electrifying transportation and the state's broader climate plan. She has a background in waste issues, environmental justice policies, and some [00:01:00] organizing and campaign experience.

She's here today to discuss the state's climate plan in development under the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act and EANY's coalition work with electric school buses and green transit. I'm going to turn it over to Ellie now.

**Ellie:** Amanda, can you please tell me, how did you get to where you are now with your expertise in memo writing and working with the Environmental Advocates of New York?

**Amanda:** You know, since I was really little, I wanted to work in the climate field, but I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do. I went with the environmental policy track in my grad program because I figured working with the private sector to reduce emissions could be enormously frustrating because of all the greenwashing. I thought a better path for me would be more of the nonprofit and public sector, and that's where I work now.

**Nina:** We heard Amanda mention greenwashing, but what is it? Greenwashing, also known as green sheen, is the process of conveying a [00:02:00] false impression or providing misleading information about the environmental consciousness of a product service or technology. Companies who are involved in greenwashing may make claims that their products are from recycled materials or have energy saving benefits, which can either not be backed up or may in fact be exaggerated. This term originated in the 1960s when the hotel industry engaged in a blatant example of greenwashing by placing notices in hotel rooms, asking guests to reuse their towels to save the environment when the motivator behind this was really to ensure that laundry costs to be lower for the hotels. The Federal Trade Commission has helped protect customers by enforcing laws, designed to ensure a competitive and fair marketplace, and they offer a few guidelines on how to differentiate between real green products from those that are greenwashed. You can find out more information on our Resources page.

**Amanda:** And we interact with a wide variety of organizations and we work with the state, and in the public sector, especially in New York State, there's a lot of looking out for the public good. So that felt really right to me. I went to grad [00:03:00] school at the New School in New York City, and that's where I started learning memo writing and policy analysis.

Working with the EA, I truly get a front seat to New York State Climate Policy and Environmental Policy and prior to working at EA, I was working on electric vehicle policy expansion in New York City in the Hudson Valley. Prior to that, I spent two years working with the Tishman Environment and Design Center on environmental justice research.

So I still consider myself pretty early in my career and I'm really happy with where I'm at.

**Ellie:** Amazing. So it sounds, it sounds like you knew pretty early on, but in undergrad, what was your major, like what kind of courses did you take?

**Amanda:** I got my bachelor's in political science from SUNY Purchase.

And interestingly enough, I focused a lot on colonization and the history of colonization throughout the world. [00:04:00] And I already had an interest in climate change. I already knew that that was where I was headed, but I wanted an understanding of how we got to this place and a lot of that has to do with extraction of natural resources.

It has to do with war. It has to do with settling on occupied land and demolishing everything in your path. So that gave me a good sense kind of like who are the good guys, who are the bad guys in the situation, who's responsible for climate change. And most of the suffering in the world, and who has been a victim of it.

**Ellie:** I see. So it sounds like your previous education has conferred this pretty holistic perspective on the climate change issue at hand, that all of us as humans on this earth currently face. And so with your work with EA, the Environmental Advocates of New York, could you tell us a little bit about the New York Climate Plan and the Climate Leadership and [00:05:00] Community Protection Act, which you seem to have quite a bit of expertise in?

**Amanda:** Yes, the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act is a law that Environmental Advocates NY and our partners, New York RENEWS, helped pass.

**Nina:** The Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, also known as the Climate Act was signed into law in 2019 as one of the most ambitious climate laws in the world. The law created the Climate Action Council, which is tasked with developing a draft scoping plan that serves as an initial framework for how the state will reduce greenhouse gas emissions, achieve net zero emissions increased renewable energy usage, and ensure climate justice. On December 20th, the council voted to release the draft scoping plan for public comment. January 1st, 2022 marks the beginning of a comment period to receive feedback from the public as the council works to develop and release a final scoping plan by the end of 2022.

**Amanda:** And we also had a hand in the drafting of it, and everything it took to get it across the finish [00:06:00] line. So New York's Climate Law has the nation's strongest greenhouse gas emission reduction requirements.

It requires an 85% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions across sectors of the economy by 2050, 100% zero emissions electricity by 2040 and 70% renewable energy by 2030, just to name a few. And it's not only a climate law, it's a climate justice law and it also has an equity provisions that require by law at least 35% of what is considered climate funding needs to be allocated and invested in what the law refers to as disadvantaged communities and disadvantaged communities is a really important definition in the law.

There's the climate justice working group that worked to develop a really thorough definition and over 45 indicators that have been turned into a map [00:07:00] to show who is in a disadvantaged community and who is not. So that's where the funding will be invested and how we plan to achieve these specific mandates is up to a body called the Climate Action Council.

And they're charged with developing a scoping plan that they've been working on for two years. They've been taking recommendations from these sector-specific advisory panels who are charged with coming up with the recommendations. And since January 1st of this year, the draft plan is released for public comment, which I'd like to go through how folks can participate in that public comment period later on, but first I want everyone to understand that these aren't just benchmark goals. State agencies will have to enforce the final scoping plan directives, and that's why we're encouraging the plan to be as specific as possible with what legislation and regulations need to be passed in order to implement the plan [00:08:00] and reach those goals. And the New York Department of Conservation is naturally really well equipped to enforce the scoping plan, but other state agencies will have to as well. So that'll be something interesting to look out for when the plan's being implemented.

**Ellie:** Gotcha. Thank you so much for that info. I really snagged on this concept of disadvantaged people, disadvantaged persons. And so you said that there were 45 indicators, but could you give us some examples to really help us visualize who these people are and what their circumstances may be and what about them per se makes them disadvantaged.

**Amanda:** Yeah. So, unlike the federal definition, it does include race and ethnicity.

**Ellie:** You mean that the federal definition does not include race and ethnicity?

**Amanda:** Yes. And that was for political purposes. I know. It's, [00:09:00] it's amazing.

**Ellie:** Wow. Okay. So race and ethnicity is one. Could you name just a couple others?

**Amanda:** Income level education. These are the really easy ones, but there's also proximity to certain kinds of polluting facilities, and those communities have cumulative impacts that work on each other that end up causing a lot of health problems.

Okay, so they need decarbonisation faster because when if you're emitting natural gas, for example, at a power plant, there are also these co-pollutants that go with it: nitrogen oxides, particulate matter that caused a lot of lung problems and a laundry list of issues I can't even begin to talk about.

So in regards to New York's Climate Law, there are extremely important public hearings happening on New York's draft scoping [00:10:00] plan that will inform the final plan that I talked about earlier. And if you're a New Yorker, you can give testimony in Syracuse, Buffalo, Brooklyn, the Central Adirondacks during the public hearings happening up until mid-May. And there are also two virtual hearings that you can testify at on May 7th and May 11th, just visit Climate.NY.org.

You can also submit comments of any length on the drop scoping plan until June 10th. And again, you can visit climate.ny.gov to learn more about the draft plan, sign up to give testimony, or submit public comments.

**Ellie:** Excellent. And with this testifying, is it to testify your experience with say, environmental racism or deteriorating environment?

**Amanda:** Yeah, that's more, I would say that could be more toward the climate justice working group public hearings, that will be the comment period is extended until July.[00:11:00] These public hearings are to directly comment on the draft scoping plan that's been issued. And EA has a tool kit that has like summaries of what we found helpful and not helpful in each of the sections of the draft scoping plan.

It's a long document. So we wanted to make it as accessible as possible. That's why we made that toolkit. But testimony is talking about your lived experience with certain issues. So there've been farmers who are talking about, "Hey, I don't want solar and wind developers to buy up property near my farm", or there've been people talking about why is hydrogen proposed as a transportation fuel, isn't it super inefficient and doesn't it create nitrogen oxides of stream? We don't want that. Why don't we just electrify? It's easier. So people are talking about issues that, [00:12:00] they either care about tangentially or affect their lives.

**Ellie:** I see. And then also my second question was really focusing on this idea that this law that has been passed, just to reiterate, isn't just about benchmarks. What I'm noticing about a lot of policy initiatives that are focused on environmental protection are very optimistic.

Like this is a goal and we will try to achieve it. But I think a lot of them seem to lack teeth is what I'm saying. And so could you tell me a little bit about how this law can really be enforced in a robust, meaningful way?

**Amanda:** Well, state agencies are already having to, I mean, they're getting a headstart on making sure that their regulations are aligned with the Climate Act. Some that aren't, we have to do preemptive like public advocacy to [00:13:00] make sure that they are making these considerations because it's just takes a lot of time to make these broad changes. So building codes, for example, advanced building codes and energy efficiency for appliances that will need to be changed to match the draft scoping plan, energy reliance and reliability provisions in existing laws will need to be amended so that it doesn't say natural gas reliability; it says energy at large or refers to the specific energy source.

**Ellie:** It seems like you are involved in a lot of advocacy. And so what did advocating for this specific policy measure look like?

**Amanda:** I was not around during that time period. The law passed in 2019 and I joined in 2020. So what I've heard about that experience was that there was a lot of [00:14:00] lobbying.

There was a lot of grassroots lobbying where you bring constituents in to talk to their representatives. There were rallies, folks were showing up in person, rallies in support of what was called then the CCPA. It took years and years. But it was, it had tons of grassroots input.

Environmental justice leaders were helping to draft. It was a very, participatory process and took a lot of normal New Yorkers to make it happen.

**Ellie:** It seems like the goal for that is for the elected representatives, I'm assuming, to see all of this effort and to realize that there's a lot of support in order for them to, in turn, support the legislation.

**Amanda:** Exactly. So you, then you get co-sponsors, then you get people voting once the bill actually makes it to the floor.

**Ellie:** Gotcha. So it seems like the goal is to convince your [00:15:00] representative to support the bill in turn. So it seems like, it seems like normal people are able to do this.

**Amanda:** Yes. There are so many normal people, a little, some crazy people. But I was resistant to working in advocacy originally because I thought it would feel like screaming into a void. But it really doesn't and my previous efforts have really shown me that advocacy makes a difference. So when I talk to normal New Yorkers that are like, how can I get involved?

And I talk about advocacy, like eyes glaze over, eyes roll. Like, people don't want to hear that. And I didn't want to hear that either, but that's what it is. That's how we make our voices heard. That's how we make a difference.

**Ellie:** So when you see those eyes glaze over, what do you do then?

**Amanda:** I continue talking.

**Ellie:** I love it. Okay. So [00:16:00] can you tell me more about that? Because I think with advocacy, I think a lot of people shy away from it cause it does seem like you're screaming out into a void. It seems like a lot of your energy is not being channeled in a very fruitful pursuit. And so could you tell me, like how do you ensure that your advocacy doesn't feel like you're screaming out into an abyss where someone might hear you?

**Amanda:** That's where strategy comes into play. That's where having people who have a lot of experience in the fields watching, like my boss Connor, who's the Director of Policy and the Executive Director of our organization. Watching us all like have conversations is really, has taught me a lot. The way I think about it- at least a lot of New York legislators do listen if you talk to them and then once you have a relationship with them and you trust each other, which takes a lot of respect and time [00:17:00] and working together, then you're halfway through to really working together on big things. and that's what my work has taught me-- that we can win.

And once you have a few wins under your belt, you start to become more optimistic. When we got the CLC PA passed, even though I wasn't involved in that effort, it showed me that we have a lot of power in this state. And last summer, EA formed a coalition called "Vote YES for Clean Air and Water" that advocated for New Yorkers to vote yes on a ballot measure that would make it a constitutional right to clean air, clean water, and a healthful environment. And what this did was elevate these rights to the level of other constitutional rights, like the right to free speech. And the vague language is purposeful so that we can apply to all sorts of specific issues, but we won 70% of the vote. And in a divided country, like that is unheard of.

**Ellie:** That is totally unheard of.

**Amanda:** [00:18:00] It's insane. So it's a creative process. You need strategy, you need smart people, you need people with new ideas and it's sometimes messy and there's sometimes a lot of steps, but it, it happens.

**Ellie:** So you said that you have a couple of wins under your belt or EA does. Do you have a couple losses?

**Amanda:** Yes. I certainly do.

**Ellie:** Tell me about those. Cause I think it's really important for us to distinguish between successful endeavors and maybe not so successful and what makes those two different.

**Amanda:** Typically when I work really hard on something and dedicate most of my time to it, it becomes a win.

**Ellie:** So it's a function of time and effort.

**Amanda:** Yeah. A lot of political will there, there are outside factors, but the losses I have, aren't too intense. This budget session, we wanted $300,000 to fund electric school buses in the state, and we wanted the [00:19:00] priority to be school districts in disadvantaged communities.

That was a huge loss that we didn't get that direct funding. But what we did get was like a school aid formula that will make it so people get reimbursed, which is not ideal. But it's not like we lost everything that time. And a lot of the losses, like we still hold on to trying to get advanced building codes and energy efficiency standards; that bill passed because if it doesn't pass through session, there's always next session.

**Ellie:** Gotcha. And so that's a great segue actually, because we are very interested in these efforts to make transit and transportation greener. And so could you kind of expound on what the EA is doing to make that a reality?

**Amanda:** Of course. Overall we want to move from combustion transportation to electrified transportation. We want to move wherever possible from [00:20:00] passenger vehicles to public transportation. So making public transportation much more accessible, expanding it to areas that it doesn't go to across the state and overall, this requires at least making EVs around the same cost as conventional passenger vehicles. We need more strategically placed EV charging stations, and we need to focus on EV charging at home and work because that's what's most convenient. So building EV charging into parking lots and multi-family buildings in addition to curbside for when you're going shopping and highways for when you're on a trip.

**Ellie:** Yeah. So with making electric vehicles as affordable as combustion, which I think is, is really the goal and so isn't the Biden administration currently, like didn't, they have some kind of tax credit or some kind of incentive so that if you have an electric vehicle, you are able to claim something?

Am I just making something up?

**Amanda:** No, there are [00:21:00] rebates for electric vehicles that are in the thousands. There's a combination of federal and state incentives that can help reduce the cost. But when you're thinking about not just really wealthy people, when you think about low income people, a tax credit, isn't going to be enough, a rebate isn't going to be enough. One method that I really like that is written out in the draft scoping plan is called the Fee Bait.

It would take money that makes a regular combustion vehicle, probably an already expensive one, just a little bit more expensive. That money will go toward the electric vehicle purchaser. That would be a direct rebate cash in hand for electric vehicle purchases supported by imposing a fee on gas powered vehicles and it could incorporate other policy goals like higher rebates for low-income consumers and exemptions from the fee for lower price [00:22:00] vehicles that are purchased largely by low and middle income consumers. So we can use this information we have on who is able to afford what kind of car and make sure that it's not too disruptive. But that it'll apply to use zero emissions vehicles and paired with affordable financing options, so that's an area that you can get pretty creative.

**Ellie:** Yeah. And I think it's also when you said less disruptive, I think that's a really good idea considering that, you know, if you have like a lower middle class, middle income family that wants to get a Toyota, that's like $30,000, they don't have this fee imposed on them.

**Amanda:** Exactly.

**Ellie:** So with this and for our listeners specifically, what can ordinary people do to partake in the anti-climate change efforts? We already talked about this a little bit, but it seems like a lot of grassroots activity, but how do you really get started? Do you reach out to organizations like yours?

**Amanda:** [00:23:00] Yes, basically, I would say instead of starting from scratch, reaching out to a local Sierra club or 350 group is a great way to start.

**Nina:** 350 is an international environmental organization addressing the climate change crisis with the goal of ending use of fossil fuels and transitioning to renewable energy by building a global grassroots movement. The Sierra Club is an environmental preservation organization that engages in lobbying politicians to promote environmentalist policies. It was started by John Muir who was a Scottish American conservationist and is known as the Father of National Parks.

**Amanda:** I can say with a hundred percent certainty that organizations like mine, the New York RENEWS Coalition, Big G reens, all of our local environmental groups, we could all use your help. There are always ways to plug in and it's a great way to build community too. And I would say also for those people that don't want to [00:24:00] join, like weekly meetings, don't want to be out there tabling at a farmer's market, passing out flyers. Those annoying emails that you get from environmental nonprofits like ours are real. It really does let you send a message directly to the decision maker, whether it's your legislator, the governor, a state agency with one click and we do that so that more people will take a quick action. So you can sign up to be an advocate with us and get updates on New York State Environmental Policy and get those emails that tell you, we need you to take, to just click this and then it'll send the message that we need to send to your legislator. You can edit it, you can make it what you want, but it's just a quick and easy way to, to reach decision-makers. And you can check that out at EANY.org.

**Ellie:** So what you're saying is that EANY is a conduit to the legislator?

**Amanda:** Yep, [00:25:00] absolutely.

**Ellie:** Okay. Cause I think just as a normal ordinary person, I'm a little skeptical of my message reaching the decision-maker cause I think I've tried to reach out to different politicians over the years. And I don't think I'm very successful at it. And so are you saying that these organizations are better at doing it than me on my own?

**Amanda:** I wouldn't say that. I would just say that we've done it so many times. We are professional lobbyists. So we do have the skill and we give our advocates all of the resources and the talking points that they'd need to make a really salient point to the legislators. So it's just about having tools and multiple voices from constituents will almost always make a difference. I guess that is a difference between just one person [00:26:00] reaching out and in a whole group, staring at you on zoom, telling you that you need to do this thing.

**Ellie:** Well, thank you so much for all those resources and we can't wait to share them with our listeners. Thank you so much, Amanda.

Thank you, Ellie. I appreciate it.