

UConnPIRG

Hello, we are members of the UConnPIRG Save the Earth Campaign writing to you to address House Bill No. 6551. We applaud the fact that a bill targeting environmental justice is being raised in the Connecticut General Assembly, it is the central reason why we should fight for environmental change.

As members of UConnPIRG, we advocate environmental justice for all, and extending greenhouse gas reductions and higher air quality to disadvantaged communities is critical to that mission. Far too often, low-income, black, indigenous, and other communities of color are neglected in the fight for environmentally safe living conditions. These communities, despite their small carbon footprint, will be paying the price of climate change. These communities will have the least protection when experiencing significantly higher rates of flooding, storms, and heat. While this bill will effectively alleviate part of this issue, it could be improved by strengthening notices for community involvement and expanding the definition of “environmental justice communities” and “affecting facilities” - too often polluters find loopholes to cause harm in the most underrepresented communities.

At UConn, 61% of students rely on financial aid, 20% of which could be considered low income. As representatives of a larger student body, we feel this bill would play an important role in the lives of Connecticut students. UConn hosts a variety of students from all across the state that are negatively affected by poor air quality.

Due to our longstanding commitment to our communities, environment, and student body, we have analyzed this bill carefully, and have several points that we would like to suggest be considered for this bill. The working group that this bill would establish is to meet no less than annually to review the criteria used to identify disadvantaged communities. Since climate change is rapidly affecting these communities, we would like the committee to meet at least biannually to address new data and findings that may arise. This will ensure that all disadvantaged groups are properly represented in our urgent goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve air quality.

An example of this issue is Winsted, CT. This town currently has double the AQI of the next town in the state, and has a current poverty rate of 21%, which is double that of Connecticut's poverty rate and three times the county's poverty rate of 7.1%. Communities like these must be protected from decisions that would disproportionately harm the air quality in their area. By giving them a representative we will be ensuring that their voices are heard and count just as much as any city in our state.

Connecticut has the opportunity to be a leader for environmental justice by protecting the future of our state and passing a strong bill on environmental air quality. Thank you.