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Tell us about some of the interesting sustainability-focused place-based policies the Connecticut Roundtable on Climate and Jobs has been working on.

The Connecticut Roundtable on Climate and Jobs is a coalition comprising individuals from environmental conservation groups, social justice organizations, religious institutions, and labor unions. Our aim is to facilitate a just and equitable transition to renewable energy.

In Connecticut, we've already had success in passing legislation to help secure a just transition to sustainable energy. The Roundtable wrote and helped enact State Senate Bill 999 in 2021. Previously, only natural gas plants in Connecticut were mandated to pay prevailing wages, run apprenticeship

programs, and provide certain worker benefits. This bill extended these requirements to many types of renewable energy operations, including large-scale solar plants, thereby aiding workers in carbon-reliant industries in transitioning to sustainable-energy jobs.

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Connecticut has many deindustrialized cities dotting its shoreline, but it also has excellent ports and is an ideal location for offshore wind. We are currently involved in efforts to ensure that as much of the manufacturing work for these projects as possible is done in Connecticut. We also want to ensure that the jobs created are union jobs, and that robust apprenticeship programs

are set up in local communities to ensure that local people, particularly those who have historically been locked out of these types of jobs, benefit from the transition to renewables.

The Roundtable is also participating in projects to renovate Connecticut schools, focusing on cities with predominantly underrepresented and low-income populations. The objective is to create “carbon-free healthy schools,” addressing air quality and energy efficiency issues highlighted during the pandemic. In this endeavor, the Roundtable supports community organizations leading these retrofitting projects. Additionally, we want to create apprenticeship programs to ensure that jobs created by the projects go to locals. The idea is to create an education-to-workforce pathway designed to promote opportunities for disadvantaged Connecticut residents.

How did you become interested in sustainability-focused place-based issues?

I came to work on place-based sustainability issues through my teaching career. As a teaching-track faculty member at the University of Connecticut, I sometimes teach classes beyond my comfort zone. This allows me to see links between research and policy that I may not have otherwise. One such class is called Sustainable Cities, in which I frequently encountered “straw-man tradeoffs” between labor interests and environmental goals. I wanted to

demonstrate that advancing equity, labor, and environmental protection doesn’t have to involve such trade-offs. Once my teaching headed in this direction, taking on an advocacy role quickly followed.

As a board member at the Roundtable, I leverage my research background to help dissect complex issues. Currently, we’re addressing the challenge of multiple manufacturing companies looking for similar types of labor, yet reluctant to invest in training. I’ve drawn on older work I did with Nichola Lowe to figure out how we can apply lessons from the biotech industry in North Carolina to offshore wind power projects in Connecticut. I’m also able to use my writing skills to craft op-eds for the Roundtable.

How should states and localities be spending their money to promote sustainable, place-based prosperity?

It’s hard to predict when the big pots of federal money will come, and the rules they will come with. When those pots do appear, states often must scramble to get the money. What I would like to see states do is set up rules for transitioning to sustainable energy before the money is there, under the assumption that federal funding will eventually be provided. We need to figure out ahead of time how to balance the tensions between economic growth, equity, and the environment to ensure that the transition to sustainable energy benefits workers and promotes local prosperity.