NEW YORK STATE | Department of Environmental Conservation

Environmental Justice Report

SUMMER 2026

Permanent Environmental Justice Advisory Group (PEJAG)

On Thursday, June 4, the Permanent Environmental Justice Advisory Group (PEJAG) held its inaugural meeting and began the process of establishing the workflow for the group. The PEJAG is an environmental justice-focused group charged with developing a model Environmental Justice (EJ) policy and reviewing EJ rules, policies, and laws across state government. This group is part of ongoing efforts to enhance fairness and inclusion in statewide environmental decision-making.

Established under Article 48 of the Environmental Conservation Law, the advisory group is tasked with establishing and adopting a model EJ policy to apply generally to all State agencies that engage in activities or operations that may affect the environment, advising State agencies on their responsibilities under 48-109, and reporting out on agency compliance with EJ policies.

The PEJAG comprises 16 members, with appointments made by the governor and the majority and minority leaders of the State Legislature. Members include representatives from community-based organizations that advise or assist minority and low-income communities on environmental matters, representatives of businesses that hold State-issued permits, representatives of state or national organizations promoting environmental conservation, as well as academic researchers, educators, and members of the public.

PEJAG's inaugural meeting presentation

Next steps for the group are to schedule the next meeting and create bylaws.

PEJAG members in the first inaugural meeting via Webex.

Community Spotlight: Open Buffalo

BY MAX ANDERSON AND JAMES GOLDEN

The following article is written by guest authors and does not reflect the position of the New York State (NYS) Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) or the State of New York.

Open Buffalo, a nonprofit whose mission is to advance racial, economic, and ecological justice, recently released findings from a study of soil contamination in Buffalo, which has been deemed "ground zero" for childhood lead poisoning. The East Side Soil Project was funded by a Community Impact Grant (CIG) from the DEC's Office of Environmental Justice (OEJ). The project team sampled 139 properties on Buffalo's East Side, which is home to nearly 80% of the city's Black families. Testing found average soil lead levels to be more than three times higher than the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's level for unrestricted use (200 ppm), such as for gardening and allowing children to play in the area. In fact, there were clusters of homes adjacent to a school that were more than 10 times higher.

The East Side Soil Project was part of Open Buffalo's ongoing efforts to help inform residents regarding existing environmental threats as well as those that are emerging due to climate change. For example, the organization hosts educational events throughout the year to highlight various aspects of ecological justice, culminating each fall with an "Eco Justice Block Party." The block party brings together hundreds of residents from throughout the city to learn about climate change and resiliency in a family-friendly environment with hayrides, bounce houses, a DJ, and free food.

Additionally, Open Buffalo is helping to build the next generation of EJ advocates and leaders through community-based educational programming. Participants of all ages learn about climate change and gain skills to reduce and/or mitigate their carbon footprint—and are encouraged to share these insights with their neighbors. More importantly, participants also serve as community ambassadors, contributing to ongoing advocacy efforts to address the disparate impact of legacy contamination and ongoing climate change on marginalized communities.

Gregory Glover, ecological justice specialist, Open Buffalo, oversees sampling at one of the East Side Soil Project properties.

Members of the Youth Action Level Up Program, led by Devon Patterson (right).

Attendees at the Open Buffalo Eco Justice Block Party.

Open Buffalo's Juneteenth Parade Float

Amidst this work, Open Buffalo has also recently acquired 10 acres of vacant land on the city's East Side, which will serve as the future home of the Urban Ecology Campus. The Eco Campus will offer a combination of indoor and outdoor learning spaces for green workforce and leadership development, small business incubation, and programming to support healing, wellness, and restorative justice. Additionally, Open Buffalo will use a portion of the Eco Campus to test mitigation and remediation strategies for soil contamination that can be replicated elsewhere, including properties from the East Side Soil Project.

For more information about Open Buffalo, visit their website at https://openbuffalo.org. You can also watch a video of Franchelle Parker, executive director of Open Buffalo, discussing the origin of the Open Buffalo Urban Ecology Campus on YouTube.

Eco Collective–Urban Ecology Campus Advisory Group Retreat

EJ Listening Sessions: Utica and Syracuse

DEC continued the EJ listening tour with visits to Utica on Tuesday, April 28, and Syracuse on Wednesday, June 3. These events support the agency's ongoing efforts to promote the State's commitment to building relationships between DEC and community members, better understanding and addressing environmental disparities, and ensuring DEC's programs and initiatives are reaching EJ communities.

On April 28, DEC staff began the day with a visit to The Center, an organization that serves new Americans and refugees. Director Jennifer Boulanger led a tour, which was followed by a student listening session—a short presentation by DEC Environmental Educator Betsy Ukeritis—and a Q&A session. The Q&A included live interpretation in four languages. Afterward, DEC Commissioner Amanda Lefton and OEJ staff visited the Community Foundation of Herkimer and Oneida Counties to celebrate $200,000 awarded through the OEJ Community Impact Grant.

The public listening session, resource fair, and informal and interactive open house with DEC technical experts followed in the evening at the Mohawk Valley Community College Utica campus. There was a formal presentation and brief remarks by DEC leadership at 5 p.m., with opportunities for attendees to provide input throughout the evening.

Kicking off the listening session at The Center with an introduction.

OEJ Director Alanah Keddell-Tuckey presenting on EJ to the students at The Center.

DEC Commissioner Amanda Lefton and Alanah meeting with community members.

DEC Commissioner Amanda Lefton and staff with members of the community and staff of the Community Foundation of Herkimer and Oneida Counties posing with the awarded check from the OEJ Community Impact Grant.

Alanah speaking to the attendees during the listening session.

Breakout group

The June 3 session also began with a resource fair with tables staffed by DEC and local organizations. Partnering with the State University of New York College of Environment Science and Forestry (SUNY ESF) Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, City of Syracuse, Onondaga Environmental Institute (OEI), and community partners, the focus of this session was to help shape the future of the Onondaga Creek watershed by gathering community input and identifying priorities for the long-term health and resilience of the watershed. Following the resource fair, there was a short introduction before breakout sessions for community discussions. The breakout sessions focused on several key topics, including flood resilience, recreation and creek access, housing and neighborhood amenities, water quality and habitat, and shared governance within the watershed. The session closed out by bringing the groups back together to share main points from each group and an optional nature walk or paddle in the nearby park with a local organization.

More EJ listening tour stops will be announced for the remainder of 2026.

Community members visiting tables during the resource fair.

DEC Regional Director Dereth Glance addressing the attendees during the introduction of the listening session.

Breakout group

Breakout group

Breakout group

Breakout group

Breakout group

Reconvening to share main points from each breakout group.

Nature walk

Paddle on the creek

Environmental Justice Siting Law

DEC adopted amendments to State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) regulations that became effective on June 12, 2026. These regulatory changes implement the 2024 Environmental Justice Siting Law, which established rigorous requirements for evaluating the impacts of proposed projects on disadvantaged communities. The revised regulations expand the criteria for determining the significance of a proposed action to include EJ considerations.

The agency also revised the model environmental assessment forms (EAFs) to include questions about proximity to and potential impacts on disadvantaged communities. The amended EAFs also include questions about potential climate and air impacts.

For more information about the revisions, visit https://dec.ny.gov/regulatory/regulations/proposed-emergency-recently-adopted-regulations/state-environmental-quality-review-act-regulatory-revisions.

Snapshots

Here are some events that OEJ staff participated in these past few months!

Grantee Check Presentation | Buffalo and Rochester

On Tuesday, April 21, OEJ's Marilyn Moore participated in two Earth week events to celebrate grant awards for community groups in Buffalo, North Tonawanda, and Rochester. Six nonprofits were awarded more than $1.26 million in funding for OEJ's CIG and were presented with checks by DEC Commissioner Amanda Lefton. The awardees in Buffalo were the North Tonawanda Botanical Garden, Providence Farm Collective, Fillmore Forward, Clean Air Coalition of WNY, and the hosts of the event, Massachusetts Avenue Project. The awardee in Rochester was the Rochester Refugee Resettlement Services (RRRS), which hosted the event at their main office location.

Thank you to the hosts for graciously giving their time, and DEC congratulates all the awardees from this latest round's funding!

Commissioner Amanda Lefton (fifth from the left) presenting a check to the five grant awardees in DEC's Region 9, along with Marilyn (second from the right).

Commissioner Amanda Lefton (center) presenting a check to RRRS in DEC's Region 8, along with Marilyn (second from right).

Earth Fest | Schenectady

On Saturday, April 25, OEJ staff attended the Mohawk-Hudson Earth Fest held in Schenectady's Central Park. The event, organized by Music Haven and The Eight Step, included tree plantings, a city park cleanup, and other beautification efforts. Live music, environmental speakers, and local sustainability-focused organizations were also on-site to participate in the event.

The Schoharie River Center (SRC) was one of the local groups that provided interactive educational activities for attendees. In 2025, SCR received $475,000 for the construction and renovation of a community environmental education center, located in Schenectady's Central Park. SRC's John McKeeby and Tom Carey showed OEJ around the building being renovated while discussing the project's current progress and future plans. This group partners with local schools to provide hands-on experience with scientific equipment and research techniques, and the renovated building in Central Park will help provide those services as well as be a model for sustainable, renewable, and green building practices.

Outreach poster introducing the Schoharie River Center to event attendees.

SRC staff inviting OEJ staff on a tour of the soon-to-be renovated SEEC.

SRC's poster sharing information about their education programs and plans for a renovated Schenectady Environmental Education Center (SEEC).

Urban Farming Fair | Newburgh

The Newburgh community and OEJ Grants Administrator Marilyn Moore didn't let a chilly, rainy day stop the Earth Week celebration at Downing Park Urban Farm on April 25. It was hosted by Newburgh Urban Farm and Food, Inc., which partnered with local nonprofits and sponsors, and attendees enjoyed food, music, local vendors, free seedling giveaways, tours, demos, and raffles. Urban Soils Institute gave residents the ability to do free, on-site soil testing with an XRF (x-ray fluorescence) analyzer, while they grabbed a bite at Perfect Sweets and jammed to tunes. Some of the environmental organizations that attended were Outdoor Promise, Greater Newburgh Parks Conservancy, The Newburgh Food Project, Newburgh Clean Water Project, Quassaick Creek Watershed Alliance, Riverkeeper, and Cornell Cooperative Extension. Other local groups in attendance were the Regional Food Bank, Downing Park Conservancy, The Diva Gardener, and more.

Marilyn posing with the Urban Farming Fair event banner.

Urban Soils Institute staff conducting soil testing with their XRF scanner.

Vendor tents and patrons braving the rainy day.

Energy Equity Collaborative | Troy

On June 10, OEJ attended the Steering Committee meeting for the Energy Equity Collaborative (EEC) at the Center of Gravity in Troy. Led by the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA), the EEC brings representatives from historically marginalized communities together with state policy makers to address systematic inequities and ensure an equitable and affordable transition to a cleaner energy economy. The EEC examines pathways to reducing burdens and increasing benefits to communities often on the front lines of the fight against climate change impacts. These meetings are an opportunity for a meaningful exchange of ideas and strategies that center justice in the decision-making process.

The EEC is part of NYSERDA's focus on promoting initiatives that allow for coordinated engagement around planning and policy development. To learn more about NYSERDA's programs and to learn how you can get involved, please visit https://www.nyserda.ny.gov/All-Programs/Energy-and-Climate-Equity-Strategy.

Climate Summit | Utica

OEJ staff participated as speakers and exhibitors on the second day of the two-day NYS Climate Connection Summit on June 11. Hosted by DEC's Office of Climate Change, in partnership with the NYS Climate Smart Communities program, the summit welcomed over 125 attendees with representatives from 41 different local governments. It also drew numerous NYS agencies and authorities—including several DEC divisions, programs, and offices; NYSERDA; NYS Department of State; NYS Department of Public Service; NYS Office of General Services; and NYS Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services.

This gathering connected local government representatives interested in climate action with experienced planners from across NYS. Participants collaborated on potential future cross-jurisdictional climate action opportunities and attended facilitated sessions that explored community engagement strategies, local government climate projects, funding and technical assistance programs, and cross-sector climate actions. Approximately a quarter of attendees joined OEJ's breakout session that focused on "Encouraging Meaningful Engagement with Disadvantaged Communities."

OEJ's Tiffany Yeung and Alanah Keddell-Tuckey tabling at the exhibitor fair.

OEJ Director Alanah Keddell-Tuckey leading the breakout session: "Encouraging Meaningful Engagement with Disadvantaged Communities."

World Refugee Day | Albany

OEJ and the Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Civil Rights (DICR) participated in the World Refugee Day event held at the Russell Sage Campus in Albany on Saturday, June 20. This annual, family-friendly event was coordinated by the college in partnership with the NYS Department of State's Office for New Americans to honor and support the local refugee community. The event featured food tastings from local and refugee community vendors, live performances, trivia, and information and resources from other organizations within the Capital Region.

Attendees taking outreach materials from the DEC table.

DICR's Language Access Coordinator Chris Andriessen informing attendees about NYS's language resources.

Indian Nation Consultation | Albany

OEJ Grant Administrator Marilyn Moore presented on the Community Impact Grant at a grant consultation for Indigenous Nations on June 26, hosted by DEC's Division of Lands & Forests (DLF) and supported by OEJ and Office of Indian Nation Affairs (OINA) at Five Rivers Environmental Education Center. The purpose of the grant consultation was to introduce Nations and Indigenous-led community groups to grants offered by DEC that fund Indigenous organizations. Nation and Indigenous organization representation from the Haudenosaunee Environmental Task Force, Shinnecock Indian Nation, Unkechaug Nation, and Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe were in attendance, along with DEC staff from OEJ, OINA, and DLF.

Marilyn presenting on the Community Impact Grant to attendees.

Attendees listening to Urban Forester Joshua Del Rio present on grants available through the Community Reforestation (CoRe) program.

PRIDE | Buffalo – Jamestown – Patchogue – Albany – Bethlehem – Depew – Saratoga

DEC showed up at PRIDE events across the state. Parades and festivals and family days, oh my!

Buffalo Pride

Bethlehem Pride Festival

Reinstein Woods Pride event

Saratoga Pride Festival table

Capital Pride Parade

Patchogue Pride Parade

We Can't Do It Without You

Do you have concerns about the environment where you live? Do you want to make your voice heard? Do you want to stay informed about the different environmental issues affecting New York State?

Join Our EJ Listserv

Go to https://dec.ny.gov/news/dec-delivers and sign up to receive regular updates from OEJ. Stay current on the issues that are important to you. As always, you can contact OEJ with any concerns by sending an e-mail to: justice@dec.ny.gov.

Please include:

- Your location/address, city, town, village, or borough
- The environmental concerns you wish to address
- The potential source of pollution, if you know
- How or whether you wish to be contacted

Apply For Funding

Are you a community-based organization looking to fund a project? OEJ offers grants to nonprofit organizations to address environmental harms in low-income and EJ communities. For additional information on OEJ grants and a complete list of previous project awardees, please visit our website:

https://dec.ny.gov/get-involved/environmental-justice/grant-programs.

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