

Chapter 7: Housing and Neighborhood Resiliency

GOAL: Homes and neighborhoods that are zero emission, promote health, and protect residents from extreme weather.

Housing comprises 25% of Erie County’s GHG emissions, primarily from natural gas use for space heating, gas appliances, and electricity use. Therefore, reducing GHG emissions from homes is key to meeting the community’s climate goals. Housing also overlaps other critical issues and County program areas, including those focused on health and poverty. Efforts to electrify homes and reduce fossil fuel use can also help the County government achieve related goals, especially by improving indoor air quality. The County’s electrification efforts need to ensure that residents are safe during power outages, including that residents have access to emergency heating. During this electrification transition, it is important for our electrical grid to be upgraded and made more resilient.

The County government will support efforts to protect vulnerable residents from changes in our climate, through resiliency and efficiency efforts. Resiliency and efficiency can be achieved through better home weatherization projects and encouraging heat pump adoption, which can provide space heating and cooling that protects residents from both extreme heat and extreme cold. Green spaces and trees, and a robust utility grid that is less subject to blackouts, will also be important.

The Erie County government will support development and conservation strategies that curb sprawl and aim to make neighborhoods healthier and more livable, which is a family of strategies sometimes called Smart Growth. These strategies promote dense, mixed-income, walkable neighborhoods developed in coordination with public transit and greatly reduce the County’s carbon footprint while making our community healthier and more equitable.

Finally, there are many opportunities within the Erie County community as we the community transitions our homes to clean energy, but it is a priority for the County to make sure that these initiatives are affordable, especially for low- and moderate-income residents. Current programs in Erie County, such as Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) and Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) are methods to help vulnerable residents withstand the effects of climate change, address energy poverty, and decarbonize housing. The Erie County Low-Income Program for Sustainable Energy (ECLIPSE) is a program currently in development at Erie County that is working in partnership with HEAP and CDBG to reduce energy costs and access to renewable energy for low-income residents, including community solar projects. Erie County is

also a partner of the WNY Clean Energy Hub, which provides local staff to connect residents of all income levels to residential clean energy incentive and technical assistance programs.

DEFINITIONS FOR ACTIONS SPECIFICATIONS
Short-term: By or before 2030
Medium-term: By 2040
Long-term: By 2050
Direct: County government can directly control actions - related to County government operations and infrastructure
Indirect: Regional agencies and municipalities have control and/or County government can support/influence
Support: State or Federal policies and programs

STRATEGY 1: Efficiency

Promote the transition to energy efficient and weatherized buildings to reduce GHG emissions, minimize energy costs, and improve health.

The buildings sector is the largest source of GHG emissions in New York State. Overall, the combustion of fossil fuels in residential buildings was responsible for 11% of statewide GHG emissions in 2019. Energy conservation and weatherization reduce fuel use, make buildings healthier, and can greatly reduce the amount of new clean energy generation that needs to be developed, keeping energy costs in check. Reductions in energy consumption can be achieved through actions including energy tracking, weatherization, and upgrades to energy efficient technology. An initial step to reducing energy consumption in existing buildings is to begin tracking energy use to better understand consumption patterns while identifying opportunities for energy retrofits such as weatherization and energy-efficiency upgrades. Weatherization includes insulating walls and roofs, improving doors and windows, and using air sealing. Energy efficiency upgrades include energy-certified appliances, high-efficiency light bulbs, and heat pump technologies which are further detailed in the Electrification Strategy.

Local governments have tremendous influence on what Erie County’s building stock of the future will look like. Prioritizing energy efficiency and proper weatherization will reduce GHG emissions and energy bills, while improving occupant health and well-being by increasing resilience to extreme temperatures and decreasing exposure to combustion-related indoor air contaminants that can cause respiratory distress. Furthermore, energy-efficient homes reduce the energy burden on disadvantaged communities.

While new construction offers opportunities to utilize modern technologies and design approaches, the majority of the existing buildings in the Western New York region are aging and will need to be retrofitted to achieve full energy efficiency potential. The County’s ECLIPSE program is currently investigating how it can administer clean energy in the region and use the funds brought in from administering the program to invest in energy efficiency upgrades in disadvantaged communities. Additionally, the newly-formed WNY Clean Energy Hub provides local staff to connect residents of all income levels with incentive programs during this transition.

In order to ensure success, the Erie County government will educate homeowners and multi-family building owners on the value of efficiency improvements and look for ways to incentivize energy benchmarking to better understand consumption patterns and accurately identify opportunities for improvements. The County will look for opportunities to work with landlords to support increasing the efficiency of residences throughout the County while assuring that protections are in place for renters to keep rent affordable after being upgraded. Financing weatherization work on homes in disadvantaged neighborhoods will be prioritized as well as developing new, affordable, energy efficient apartment buildings. The County will develop and strengthen its programs to assure that building owners are connected to the resources necessary to make energy-saving and cost-saving retrofits.

ACTION ITEM	HORIZON	SPHERE OF INFLUENCE	LEAD COUNTY ENTITY	PARTNERS
1.1: Engage and alert the public about access to free or low-cost energy assessments offered by New York State.	Ongoing	Direct	DEP	PUSH Buffalo, WNY Clean Energy Hub, HOTCN
1.2: Leverage Community Development Block Grants and other resources available to the County and consumers to increase support for energy efficiency and weatherization improvements.	Ongoing	Direct	DEP	NYSERDA, Weatherization Assistance Program
1.3: Educate homeowners on energy and cost savings from weatherization and upgrades to energy efficient technologies, including heat pumps.	Short-Term	Direct	DEP	PUSH Buffalo, WAP, NYSERDA Clean Energy Hubs, HOTCN
1.4: Work with programs including WAP, HEAP, and Empower to improve resilience and energy efficiency outcomes,	Medium-Term	Direct	DEP	DSS

including creating incentives for homeowners and renters for energy waste reductions.				
1.5: Investigate opportunities to develop a weatherization program through the Erie County ECLIPSE program.	Medium-Term	Direct	DEP	DSS, WAP. PUSH Buffalo, HOTCN
1.6: Support rules for retailers requiring minimum efficiency standards for appliances and equipment that can be sold in the County.	Ongoing	Support	DEP	State initiatives, environmental advocacy groups
1.7: Support local benchmarking and disclosure programs that help renters and home buyers identify energy-efficient properties.	Medium-Term	Direct	DEP	City of Buffalo Rental Registry Program, GIS Department

Infographics/Call-Outs Boxes to Be Added Later:

- Weatherization and energy efficiency upgrades list
- Energy Burden and Housing Burden
- Health and well-being improvements

STRATEGY 2: Electrification & Renewable Energy

Transition buildings to affordable zero-emission energy sources by promoting renewable energy and electrification.

A key strategy to achieve zero-emission buildings is electrification paired with renewable energy sources. Similar to energy transitions in the past such as the transition to natural gas lighting and then electric lighting, as well as the transition from coal to natural gas for building heating, this transition will take decades and must be conducted carefully. Also, like those earlier transitions, this change is supported by a tremendous wave of innovation by engineers and businesses, which is resulting in opportunities to make our homes healthier and more resilient while creating local clean energy jobs. The transition will also require full consideration of costs so that we remain economically competitive as a region while disadvantaged communities are not negatively impacted. It is also important to carefully consider resiliency strategies so that homes and residents are safe during extreme weather events.

In order to encourage a transition to zero-emission buildings, the Erie County government will work to increase access to clean, renewable energy sources County-wide by encouraging the development of neighborhood solar installations, wind, geothermal, and energy storage that prioritizes community ownership and investments at the neighborhood level. Community Choice Aggregation (CCA) is also being investigated by the County, which would allow local governments to provide energy supply services for residents and small businesses. CCA can be an important tool to increase renewable energy uptake while reducing electric costs.

Heating and cooling comprise the largest use of energy by homes, and most of the housing units in Erie County are heated with natural gas. High-efficiency heat pump technologies are now available that work well in cold weather climates and provide affordable electric heating and cooling. The transition to heat pumps will be challenging and take time, but changing to heat pumps is the most effective way to reduce fossil fuel use in our homes. The County will work to advance this transition, but will need to make sure that heat pump programs are implemented so that household costs do not increase, especially for low- and moderate- income residents. Erie County has partnered with the WNY Clean Energy Hub to help guide residents as they transition to heat pumps and other clean energy upgrades.

The County government will advocate for building codes that require the use of clean energy sources for new multi-family buildings built in the County. By advocating for additional funding at the state-level, the County will work to improve the access and utilization of clean energy technologies while addressing the upfront cost of this transition. Erie County is located in a storm-prone area, so the County will advocate that the transition to electrification is done with this understanding. The County will also need to ensure that residents are protected during power outages. It is important to have a back-up plan to ensure residents have heat and power during outages, and for the foreseeable future, backup power may need to be fossil-fuel-based. Also, it is important that electric utilities increase the storm-readiness of the electric distribution system, including by looking for opportunities to move more of the distribution system underground.

Finally, the switch to electrification and clean, renewable energy will improve health, reduce environmental degradation, and create jobs. Continued investment into fossil fuel energy will lock us into infrastructure that cannot be emission-free. Newer technology has made electrification more practical, reliable, and cost-effective, and future technological advancement will make electrification even more affordable and effective. This transition will bring job creation, but requires workforce and local supply chain investments to take greatest advantage of this opportunity, which is further discussed in the Economic & Workforce Development chapter.

ACTION ITEM	HORIZON	SPHERE OF INFLUENCE	LEAD COUNTY ENTITY	PARTNERS
2.1: Create a County-wide Community Choice Aggregation program that utilizes 100% clean energy. Include Opt-Out Community Solar within the CCA program to prioritize disadvantaged community residents as first adopters.	Short-Term	Direct	DEP	NYSERDA
2.2: Encourage responsible community solar project development to make clean, renewable energy more accessible for all without losing our most productive farmland.	Short-Term	Direct	DEP	NYSERDA, Solar developers, Community Based Organizations
2.3: Advocate for expanded state and utility programs to help homeowners and residents electrify new and existing buildings (including appliances) and to install residential renewable energy systems.	Short-Term	Direct	DEP	NYSERDA, utilities
2.4: Look for opportunities for ECLIPSE to subsidize electric heating and cooling technologies and home weatherization, especially for disadvantaged communities.	Short-Term	Direct	DEP	NYSERDA, utilities
2.5: Provide homeowners and landlords access to affordable capital, such as low-interest loans to make the switch to fully electric residential solar systems.	Medium-Term	Indirect	DEP	Private banks and State Green Bank
2.6: Work to assure that energy and housing costs are affordable for the County's low- and moderate-income residents.	Short-Term	Direct	DEP	NYSERDA, WAP, DSS
2.7: Support the wide-spread implementation of heat pumps in homes throughout Erie County.	Short-Term	Direct/ Indirect	DEP	Local municipalities, NYSEDA Energy Hub
2.8: As part of ECLIPSE, investigate creating a land trust to develop neighborhood solar	Medium-Term	Direct	DEP	NY Green Bank, Private banks

installations and energy storage in vacant lots in urban and suburban neighborhoods.				
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Infographics/Call-Outs Boxes to Be Added Later:

- Fossil fuel free PUSH Buffalo program
- Onsite vs. offsite emissions and their health impacts
- ECLIPSE

STRATEGY 3: Resilience

Minimize exposure and build capacity to address climate driven hazards, such as extreme heat, flooding, and wind.

Erie County faces increasing weather impacts from climate change, and the County government’s highest priority is to make sure we protect our residents and their homes from harm. The County’s Department of Environment and Planning conducted the Climate Vulnerability Assessment, which found that extreme heat and extreme storms causing extreme precipitation and wind are key threats related to housing. Low- and moderate-income residents, who may live in uninsulated housing without air conditioning or backup power in neighborhoods with less green space and trees, are more at risk from these climate threats. Because Erie County residents are less accustomed to extreme heat, our community is more vulnerable. The CVA also found that the County has gaps in our capacity to respond to these threats, such as an inadequate number of properly equipped cooling centers.

The County will consider climate adaptation and resilience in future planning and development decisions, informed by the CVA and Erie County Hazard Mitigation Plan.²⁵ By resilience, we refer to our region's capacity to prepare for, respond to, and recover from significant climate-related threats, including more extreme heat, severe storms that cause local flooding and erosion, greater risk of the spread of disease, and longer, more severe allergy seasons. Minimizing exposure includes enacting initiatives that protect residents and County assets from climate impact risks, such as increasing tree canopy and green space along commuting routes, walkways, and bike paths on County roadways. In addition, the County can prioritize green infrastructure that helps improve stormwater management and can help reduce local summer-time temperatures on County-owned lands. Green infrastructure includes natural and manufactured green space to collect stormwater runoff, improve habitat, and provide shade. The County will need to build capacity by enhancing programs, training staff, and building infrastructure to address inequities and improve public health.

A key strategy for minimizing exposure and building capacity is through the development of resilient housing. This involves designing new housing and retrofitting existing housing for energy efficiency, conservation, renewable energy production, and energy storage. This will require increasing the amount of resources that are available for climate-resilient housing development

²⁵ https://www3.erie.gov/dhses/sites/www3.erie.gov.dhses/files/2022-04/hazmit_2022_vol1.pdf

while promoting policy and regulatory standards that incentivize construction of new, healthy, climate-resilient, and affordable housing stock. At the neighborhood level, strategies include implementing more green space, building capacity for renewable energy, and investing in battery back-up systems to ensure critical community services are maintained during disaster events with power outages. Fully integrating EVs into the utility grid will eventually allow the vehicle’s battery to provide energy to homes and businesses during power outages while helping make communities more resilient. Every action the County government, businesses, organizations, and residents take now to protect homes and infrastructure should better prepare us all for the future and protect us against climate impacts and their disproportionate burden on disadvantaged communities. The County’s work also requires actively promoting and facilitating community engagement to ensure everyone has a voice in the decision-making process. The County must encourage collaboration and coordination of resiliency and mitigation planning and implementation with all municipalities within Erie County in order to streamline costs, integrate systems, and maximize impact.

ACTION ITEM	HORIZON	SPHERE OF INFLUENCE	LEAD COUNTY ENTITY	PARTNERS
3.1: Support the development of climate-resilient housing (both new housing and retrofitting existing housing) while preventing the displacement of current residents.	Medium	Indirect	DEP	Housing Organizations, Private Philanthropy, Municipalities, developers, NYS Homes and Community Renewal
3.2: ECLIPSE will investigate creating neighborhood microgrids to increase resilience to disasters while prioritizing the needs of disadvantaged communities throughout the County.	Medium	Indirect	DEP	UB, utilities, Municipalities, developers, neighborhood organizations
3.3: Develop or secure opportunities to support re-treeing, creating green spaces in neighborhoods (including the use of existing vacant lots when possible), and allowing community members to have a say in how green space is used.	Short	Indirect	DEP	BSA, neighborhood organizations, Local municipalities
3.4: Work with local governments to assure that new housing (including public housing) protects residents from climate	Medium	Indirect	DEP	Municipalities, NYS Homes and

change threats, such as flooding and extreme heat.				Community Renewal, Developers
3.5: Expand the Healthy Neighborhoods Program to include climate resilience aspects.	Short	Direct	DEP	ECDOH, Municipalities, private philanthropy, housing organizations, NYS Homes and Community Renewal

Infographics/Call-Outs Boxes to Be Added Later:

- None

STRATEGY 4: Smart Growth

To effectively steer development and growth in a planned and coordinated manner, using Smart Growth principles to curb urban sprawl, such that all communities become more economically stable and prosperous, socially equitable, and environmentally sustainable.

How and where development occurs within Erie County directly affects many facets of our everyday lives from peoples’ homes, schools, taxes, place of employment, commute, health, surrounding natural environment, and economic status now and into the future. All of these facets of life are influenced by how well a community plans and invests in its future. The [Erie-Niagara Framework for Regional Growth \(“Regional Framework”\)](#) has sought to guide such development in an orderly and coherent manner over the past few decades.²⁶ While much progress has been made in mitigating extensive sprawl throughout Western New York, work is still needed on other housing issues such as affordability. The affordability crisis, where residents are paying more than 30% of their gross income for rent or mortgage and utilities, continues to hinder residents locally and nationally. Affordability gaps exacerbate climate mitigation efforts by constraining the ability of disadvantaged communities to make needed improvements that adapt to climate change and increase resiliency in the face of climate change impacts.

In seeking to address issues such as housing affordability, the Erie County government plays a unique role in that it has an overarching influence over forty-two municipalities located within its boundaries. While the County is not able to directly control all development, it can guide and shape the direction of how the Western New York region grows through investments in infrastructure and housing, the General Municipal Law §239-M/Integrated Review Process, training opportunities, and Municipal Planning Department support.

²⁶ <https://www4.erie.gov/regionalframework/framework-regional-growth-final-plan>

Erie County will continue to focus on creating more compact, walkable, and vibrant neighborhoods in the region’s urban and developing areas. The County will encourage new housing development in areas that have existing infrastructure, transit systems, employment, and amenities, while taking into consideration both affordable and market-rate housing options. Existing programs within the County that provide housing rehabilitation assistance will continue to be prioritized, while also seeking out additional funds for climate resilience and mitigation measures, such as weatherization and electrification. Also, most importantly, the County will continue to take the lead in addressing climate change for our region via the action items contained within this section and the broader Plan.

ACTION ITEM	HORIZON	SPHERE OF INFLUENCE	LEAD COUNTY ENTITY	PARTNERS
4.1: Direct investment and new housing development to areas served by existing utility infrastructure and also near public transportation, employment, and community services. Discourage sewer and water extensions in rural and/or developing areas, as per the Regional Framework.	All	Direct/ Indirect/ Support	DEP; DSM	NFTA, GBNRTC, NYSHCR; Local Municipalities; HUD Grant Programs
4.2: Expand support for municipal comprehensive plan updates. Encourage increased densities and compact design, “live where you work” concepts, affordable housing, mixed-use development, multi-family housing, and migrant farmworker housing.	Short/ Medium	Direct/ Indirect	DEP	Municipalities, NYS CFA; HUD CDBG Grant, NYSDOS
4.3: Work with local governments on obtaining and implementing smart growth planning and climate-mitigating grants, especially the County’s small municipalities with limited capacities.	Short/ Medium/ Long	Direct	DEP; ECS	NYSDOS DRI Grants, UBRI, NYSERDA
4.4: Fund additional Community Development Block Grant Smart Growth Projects.	Short	Direct	DEP	NYS CFA; HUD CDBG Grant

4.5: Consider expanding the County Housing Rehab Program to include climate resiliency improvements.	Short/ Medium	Direct	DEP	HUD CDBG & HOME Grants; NYSERDA
4.6: Explore the creation of a Regional Planning Board, which would help coordinate smart growth initiatives throughout the County.	Medium	Direct	DEP	Niagara County, local governments, UBRI
4.7: Update the Regional Framework .	Short	Direct	DEP	Niagara County, UBRI, GBNRTC

Infographics/Call-Outs Boxes to Be Added Later:

- 10 Principles of Smart Growth
- Housing affordability
- County Housing Rehab Program

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