

Erie County CLIMATE ACTION

Annual Update - Review of 2024 Progress



Reddy Bikes at Rath Building

Key Takeaways

Erie County is a leader in New York State in advancing climate action, including receiving the **highest level of recognition in both the New York State Climate Smart Communities and Clean Energy Communities programs**. To further its climate program, in 2019 the County adopted an internal operations climate plan¹ and in 2024 adopted a community climate plan.² The former was led by the Erie County Green Team and includes climate pollution reduction targets for its internal operations. **Over the past five years, this climate action work has also had financial benefits including \$6 million in cost savings, \$1.2 million in awards, \$1 million in rebates, and \$30.5 million in grants.**

In 2024, progress was made implementing actions identified in Erie County's climate plans across a broad range of projects. This report gives an overview of some key initiatives and includes the most recent greenhouse gas (GHG) inventory of Erie County's government operations, which is used to track progress in achieving its internal operations climate action goals. This inventory shows an increase from last year and the need for more action.

It is important to note that efforts in Washington, DC to eliminate funding for climate change initiatives creates the real possibility that critical project resources will be withdrawn.

¹Erie County Climate Action and Sustainability Plan, www.erie.gov/casp

²Erie County Community Climate Action Plan, www.erie.gov/ccap

2023 Greenhouse Gas Inventory for Internal Operations

The 2023 GHG inventory for the County’s internal operations shows a 33.0% reduction in GHG emissions compared to the 2005 baseline, an increase of about 1.8% versus 2022 (Figure 1). This mostly reflects an increase in natural gas use, which is weather-normalized in the inventory but still fluctuates from year to year. Solid waste and employee commute-related emissions also increased reflecting reduced remote work by County employees. The 2023 GHG inventory is the most recent because of electric utility data availability.



The County set a goal of 50% greenhouse gas reduction by 2025. In 2024, the County completed a large Energy Performance Contract that included transitioning the Board of Elections Building from an inefficient boiler-operated system to an air source heat pump system, which will provide significant GHG and cost savings. Fleet electrification is also a key strategy to reduce emissions, especially now that electric vehicle (EV) cost and improved EV capabilities make them a feasible alternative. To this end, the County is conducting a Fleet Electrification Study that kicked off in early 2025. However, given the timeframes involved, it appears unlikely that the 2025 50% reduction goal will be achieved, especially as NYS has had major delays in implementing the Clean Energy Standard and deploying renewable energy to the grid.

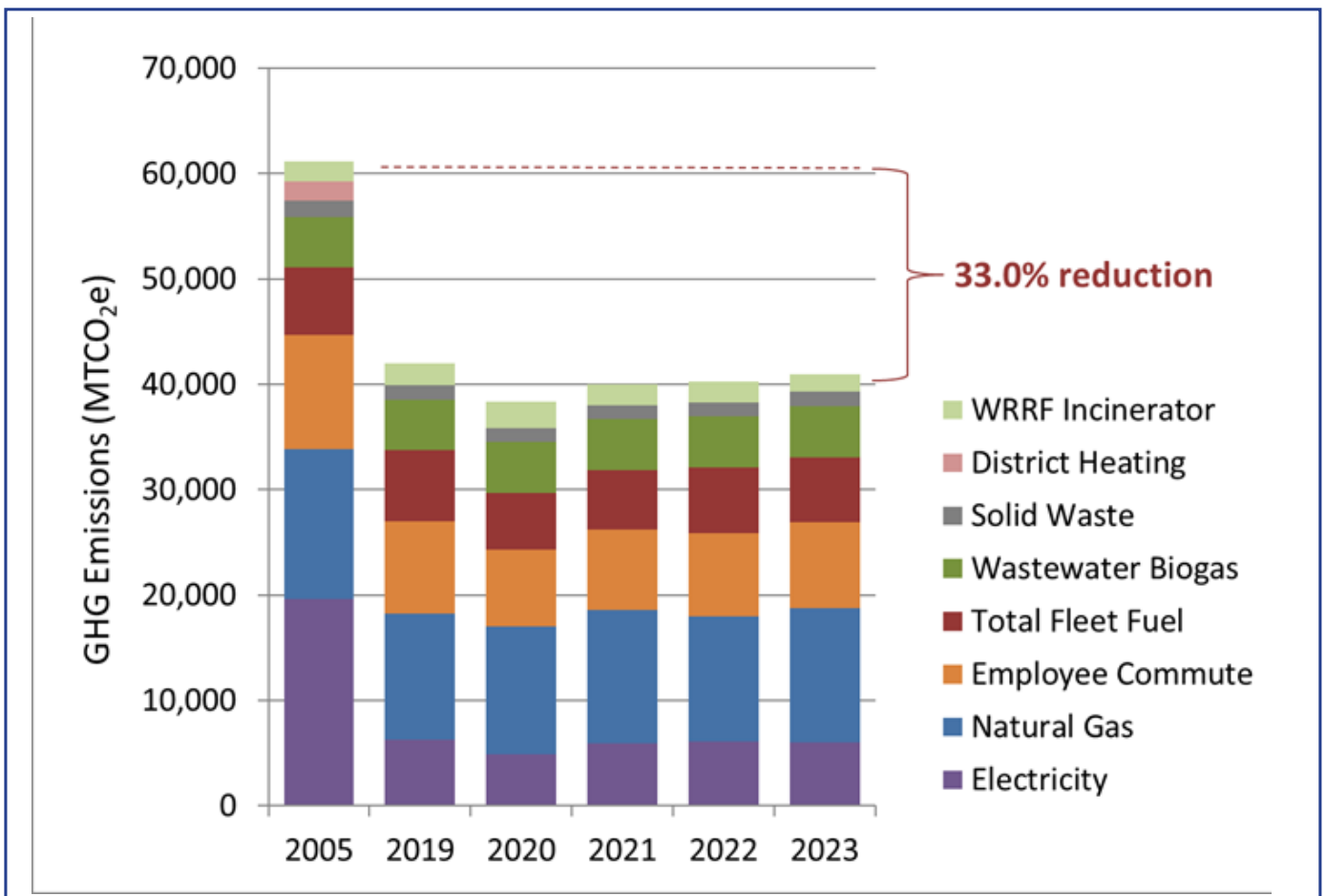


Figure 1. Erie County 2023 Internal Operations GHG Emissions by Source

*Emissions are reported as metric tons carbon dioxide equivalent emissions (MTCO₂e).
WRRF refers to Wastewater Resource Recovery Facility.



Level 3 EV Charger at Akron Falls Park

SUMMARY OF CLIMATE ACTION INITIATIVES

Transportation

- In 2024, the Core Green Team approved the Department of Public Works (DPW) using Climate Action Funds for a Fleet Electrification Study. Emissions from fleet fuel consumption represent 15% of the County's GHG inventory. This study will chart a path for the County to replace internal combustion engine vehicles with much lower lifecycle emission EVs. The study includes evaluating feasibility for EV usage for County departments and assessing building electrical capacity for EV charging infrastructure at County buildings. The study will result in a plan for the transition of the fleet as practicable considering vehicle usage and ease of installing vehicle charging. DPW hired a consultant to support this effort in the fall of 2024 and the project kicked off in early 2025.
- Emissions from employee commuting represent about 20% of the County's GHG inventory. The Green Team has worked on several commute initiatives, led by its Commuter Coalition.
 - With support from both the Climate Action Fund and Labor-Management Healthcare Fund, improved racks were installed in the Rath Building bike storage room and a new Reddy Bikeshare bicycle rack was placed outside the Rath Building. Staff were provided with a free membership to Reddy Bikeshare and a free bike helmet upon signing up. These initiatives support healthy, active commuting by employees and reduce vehicle trips and climate pollution.
 - Erie County employees are now able to pay for public transportation using pre-tax dollars. This service is now more streamlined and can be accessed through our payroll service.
- The County has established EV charging for the public at County Parks. Every major park has at least one Level 2 charging station. In 2024, Erie County's first high speed Level 3 charger was constructed at Akron Falls Park. This was paid for through an award from the New York State Energy Research & Development Authority (NYSERDA) Clean Energy Communities program and a grant from the NYS Department of Transportation.

Climate Action Fund

The County first established a Climate Action Fund in the 2020 budget, which reinvests half of the cost savings achieved through energy conservation and waste reduction projects to fund additional sustainability initiatives.

The fund is overseen by the Core Green Team, the steering committee of the Erie County Green Team, which includes representatives from the Departments of Public Works, Environment & Planning, Parks, Recreation & Forestry, Social Services, the Divisions of Purchasing and Budget, and the Executive Office.

The fund is utilized to implement action items identified in the County's climate plans. Whenever possible, the fund is used to leverage additional funding through grants and rebates.

Buildings & Energy/Housing & Neighborhood Resiliency

- Using Energy Performance Contracts, the County has reduced its GHG emissions by over 3,600 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions. In 2024, the County completed a \$5 million retrofit of the Board of Elections building on Eagle Street. The upgrades include new windows and replacement of the old steam boilers with an air source heat pump heating and cooling system. In addition to reducing climate pollution, the project provides a needed update to aging mechanical systems, which makes the building healthier and more comfortable for staff and visitors.
- To date, four of seven propane heating systems in Parks, Recreation & Forestry (Parks) buildings have been replaced with a geothermal system or air-source heat pumps. Propane heating is more expensive than natural gas, making it especially cost-effective to convert to electrified heating using heat pump solutions.




Erie County Leadership Across New York State

Clean Energy Communities - In 2024, Erie County became the first large community to achieve 5-star status in the New York State Energy Research & Development Authority's Clean Energy Communities program, resulting in almost \$1 million in grant awards.

Climate Smart Communities - Erie County has been recognized by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Climate Smart Communities program as Silver Certified, currently the highest level of the program.

State-Wide Stewardship - Erie County helped to establish, and continues to serve on the leadership, of the New York State Association of Counties Climate Action Committee. The Department of Environment and Planning also facilitates a monthly call of Sustainability Managers across the State to learn about the successes and challenges other government agencies are facing, as well as share our own experiences and resources as we all aim to reduce climate pollution.

- Erie County has two solar arrays totaling 2.5 MW. New systems are being planned on buildings in downtown Buffalo (Rath Building and Central Library) and the Botanical Gardens. However, the number of sites may be reduced depending on changes to federal incentives.*
- In 2024, the Erie County Low Income Program for Sustainable Energy (ECLIPSE) completed its feasibility study and hired a community solar services contractor to implement a program that will lower energy burden and improve access to renewable energy for low- and moderate-income residents. The program, which is currently rolling out, provides about a 10% electric utility bill discount to low-income households in Erie County through access to off-site renewable energy.
- Erie County is part of a multi-state coalition, called the Industrial Heartland Coalition, that applied for and was awarded federal funding to install solar panels on the roofs of low-income households. Should the program remain in effect, it will bring \$15 million to Erie County for this purpose.*
- Through its work as a subcontractor to NYSERDA's WNY Clean Energy Hub, the Erie County Department of Environment & Planning (DEP) conducts outreach to low- and moderate-income communities regarding energy conservation programs, such as Empower+.



Climate Action Funds in Action
 The Erie County Correctional Facility requires 24 hour, slow-speed patrols of the perimeter, a task that has proven problematic for traditional combustion engine vehicles. In a typical year, the Sheriff's Office cycles through as many as five vehicles due to engine burnout. To address this issue, two electric SUVs were purchased through the Climate Action Fund. This pilot project allows one vehicle to patrol while the other charges, which is a promising solution to the engine burnout issue and will also result in significant reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.

**Federal funding that may be at risk*

Waste Management/ Consumption & Waste

- The New York State Pollution Prevention Institute conducted a feasibility study to reduce waste associated with Erie County's Nutrition Programs, including Home Delivered Meals and dining sites. The study evaluated and recommended changes that will reduce waste and save money. Senior Services will use the study to inform their next RFP for these meal delivery services, as well as suggest changes at various dining sites.
- In 2024 Erie County was awarded a \$2.375 million grant from the US Department of Energy to help improve domestic battery recycling systems. The five-year Battery Education and Recycling (BEAR) Program will create a public outreach campaign about the safe handling of rechargeable batteries and establish a collection system to collect batteries, keeping batteries out of municipal waste streams. The project also will supply fire stations with resources to help fight lithium-ion battery fires.*
- Erie County was awarded a NYS grant to expand composting in the region by working with municipalities on organic waste management plans. This project will commence in 2025.

Economic & Workforce Development

- In September 2024, Erie County, the WNY Sustainable Business Roundtable, the Buffalo Purchasing Initiative, and the Buffalo State Small Business Development Center hosted the Climate Actions for Small Businesses Summit. The Summit included presentations on the tangible benefits of business sustainability, tabling by partners, and a tool-kit of programs and incentives.
- ErieNet broadband infrastructure will bring connectivity throughout all municipalities in Erie County, reducing vehicle use to health appointments, employment, and education, while reducing the digital divide across the County. The network will continue to be constructed through 2025, with anticipated completion in 2026.

Nature-based Solutions

- In 2024, the Departments of Environment & Planning and Parks worked on an update to the Forest Management Plan for the forestry lots owned by the County. The update of this plan includes public and stakeholder engagement; Forest Lot stand delineations and diagnosis; ecological assessments; asset inventory; trails and recreation mapping; and recommendations and silviculture prescriptions. In addition to traditional forestry management, the Plan will also recommend actions to address climate change.
- In 2024, the County kicked off the US Forest Service funded Community Forestry Partnership Project.* The project is a partnership with the Parks Department and the Sheriff's Office, as well as five sub-awardees (Cornell Cooperative Extension of Erie County, Black Rock Riverside Alliance, Buffalo Freedom Gardens, Town of Tonawanda, and Monarch of Infinite Possibilities). This \$5.2 million project involves:

- The creation of a salvage nursery by the Parks Department with coordinated training and workforce development with the Erie County Correctional Facility.
 - The development of a county-wide forestry plan that assesses the tree canopy and municipal needs, benchmarks against best management practices, and outlines a plan to share services and pursue grant funding.
 - Job training opportunities through Cornell Cooperative Extension of Erie County.
 - Community outreach through Cornell Cooperative Extension of Erie County and the Monarch of Infinite Possibilities.
 - Three large community tree planting projects with Black Rock Riverside Alliance, Buffalo Freedom Gardens, and the Town of Tonawanda.
- Erie County has also been awarded a grant from US Environmental Protection Agency to coordinate a habitat improvement project at Tift Nature Preserve. This project will install a water-level control pump and associated infrastructure, convert a 5-acre stand of cattail into a diverse assemblage of native marsh species, construct a turtle nesting beach, and remove 21.7 acres of invasive common buckthorn.*



*Federal funding that may be at risk

Tift Nature Preserve/Bridgeport

Agriculture & Food

- In 2024, the Erie County Department of Environment & Planning worked to update the current Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan (2012). The updated Plan will address climate resiliency in the agricultural sector and will include goals, policies, and recommended actions to ensure climate resilience. Development of the updated Plan should be completed in 2025.
- In 2024, the Agribusiness Park SEQR* was completed. Design of the road commenced in 2024. The Project will work to localize Erie County's food supply, through the attraction of food processors.
- The Food Policy Council, supported by both the Erie County Department of Environment & Planning and the Department of Health, began development of a local procurement guide for local governments, large-scale agencies, and farmers. The guide will outline how large purchasers can prioritize local farmers and how local farmers can navigate institutional procurement procedures.



WNY Farm Show, Hamburg NY /WYRK



Tornado, Eden, New York

Climate Resilience

Erie County was awarded a grant from NYS Department of Environmental Conservation to develop a locally informed Extreme Temperature Plan. This project will build upon the extreme heat analysis in the County's Climate Vulnerability Assessment. The project, which has had some delays at the state level, will kickoff in 2025 and will create a plan for mitigating the effects of, and responding to, extreme temperature events. This project will also build upon current programs to check on and provide aid to the most vulnerable County residents during an emergency.

* State Environmental Quality Review



In 2025, the County will continue prioritizing actions from its climate plans including:

- DEP’s Environmental Division will roll out the ECLIPSE program, work with municipalities on expanding composting, and begin work on the Extreme Temperature Plan;
- DEP’s Planning Division will complete updates to the Forestry Management Plan with the Parks Department, will also complete updates to the Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan, and will continue work on the Agribusiness Park and ErieNet;
- DPW will oversee the Fleet Electrification Plan, begin a green roof and solar energy project for the Central Library, and install rooftop solar on the Rath County Building and on an administrative building at the Buffalo and Erie County Botanical Gardens.

The County will also continue to develop and diversify our existing grant and other funding sources for actions identified in its climate plans.

However, it is clear that federal funding for programs relating to climate action, environmental justice, equity, and public health are at risk. A reduction in such funding will adversely impact Erie County’s ability to remain resilient as we face the impacts of a changing climate.

Conclusion

Our mission is urgent and clear: to unite as a community in reducing climate pollution, driving Erie County’s economic growth, creating high-quality jobs in the clean energy sector, and safeguarding our residents—especially the most vulnerable—from the escalating impacts of climate change. Headlines remind us every day that the effects of climate change are intensifying, and the road ahead demands relentless commitment and action.

Thanks to the unwavering dedication of community members, the bold leadership of County Executive Mark Poloncarz, the Erie County Legislature’s steadfast support, and the tireless efforts of County staff across multiple departments, we have made meaningful strides in this vital work. Together, we are building a stronger, more resilient future for Erie County.



Economic Benefits

Erie County has made major strides in reducing climate pollution through transitioning to clean energy, replacing combustion engine vehicles with electric and hybrid-electric vehicles in the fleet, and receiving grants to further implement climate actions. Over the past five years, this work has helped the Erie County realize:

- **\$6 million in cost savings**
- **\$1.2 million in awards**
- **\$1 million in rebates**
- **\$30.5 million in grants***

**Approximately \$23.5 million in grants were received through federally funded programs and may be at risk*