Albany’s Climate Mandates Put New York Communities at Risk

Last month, the Clarence Town Board passed a resolution supporting New York State Senate Bill 8481 and Assembly Bill 8996 — legislation that would give local governments the ability to opt out of the mandates and benchmarks imposed by the state’s Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (Climate Act).

When the Climate Act was adopted in 2019, its goals for carbon neutrality may have sounded admirable, but they were also unrealistic, unattainable, and lacking in basic planning. Albany seemed more interested in keeping pace with California than in crafting a strategy that considered who would pay for it — and how.

Beginning in January, all new homes in New York must be heated by electricity instead of natural gas. By 2030, even existing gas appliances that need replacement, including furnaces, must be converted to electric. These changes will come with massive costs — not only to homeowners and builders, but to everyone who relies on an already overburdened power grid.

At my annual meeting with representatives from New York State Electric & Gas, I was told plainly that the existing grid cannot handle the demands of the Climate Act. Expanding and upgrading the system will take years, and consumers will foot the bill through higher monthly power charges. To make matters worse, much of our local money will go toward modernizing the aging downstate grid, not Western New York’s.

This shortage of capacity is already affecting growth. Utilities are rejecting applications for residential and commercial EV charging stations, and in some areas, limiting new home construction altogether. Meanwhile, state leaders continue to talk about “affordable housing” — a vision that doesn’t square with $1,000-a-month power bills.

Despite the state’s push for electrification, Albany has shut down two clean coal power plants in our region, further reducing local generation. Many people assume Western New York runs on Niagara Falls power, but the reality is that most of that electricity is sent to New York City. Our power now comes largely from out-of-state and Canadian natural gas plants — which explains the higher distribution fees we all see on our bills.

If the electricity reaching our homes is already generated by natural gas, wouldn’t it make more sense — and be more efficient — to allow gas appliances in our homes and businesses?

Even Albany appears to be recognizing the flaws in its plan. The Governor has recently expressed interest in converting a shuttered coal plant into a small nuclear facility — a far cleaner and safer technology than in decades past. In the short term, I believe the Tonawanda plant should be restarted using liquefied natural gas, the cleanest fossil fuel available.

Even leaders like Bill Gates now acknowledge that while climate change is serious, the timeline for “zero emissions” must be realistic. Global progress won’t be achieved by bankrupting New Yorkers while countries like China continue to build new coal plants every month.

It’s time for state leadership to pause and reevaluate the Climate Act. Local governments and residents deserve the flexibility to pursue responsible, affordable energy solutions that match our infrastructure, economy, and common sense.

We need access to low-cost natural gas to heat our homes, power our generators, and keep Western New York’s communities safe and strong — until our electric technology can truly meet our needs.