

## Climate Mitigation, Land Conservation, and Environmental Justice

### An Open Letter from Together Colorado's Climate Justice Committee

March 2023

#### About Together Colorado

Together Colorado is a multi-faith, multi-racial non-partisan community organization comprised of more than 200 congregations, schools, clergy and faith leaders in contact with nearly 10,000 people across the state. Together Colorado's mission is rooted in the sacred traditions of its members, working together to move from fear to liberation, from violence to life, from isolation to beloved community, so that our thoughts, words and actions place human dignity and care for creation at the center of public life. Climate justice, environmental justice, housing for all, and creating whole communities are key areas of focus for Together Colorado.

#### Brief Background for This Letter

Members of Together Colorado have organized the following information on conservation easements and the advantages they provide to mitigate climate change and to preserve open space that offers social, environmental, economic, and health benefits. Together Colorado is a non-partisan organization that does not support or oppose candidates for political office or political parties. This letter is intended for these educational purposes only.

#### Conservation Easements, Open Space, and Climate Mitigation

How land is used and how open space is preserved are cornerstones of mitigating climate change. The importance of identifying and prioritizing landscapes for conservation contribute directly to maintaining healthy ecosystems and creating environments which are necessary for the biodiversity that mitigate climate change – both locally and globally. (Open Space Institute, 2022).<sup>1</sup>

Globally, the Campaign for Nature's *30 by 30 Campaign* seeks to identify lands for conservation and protection in perpetuity to address climate change, as well as provide access to nature for a growing population – especially critical ecosystems and natural areas (McCarthy, 2020).<sup>2</sup> President Joseph Biden has laid out a *30x30 Conservation Plan* for the United States to set aside contributing areas and lands for the health and wellbeing of today's population and future generations.

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<sup>1</sup> Open Space Institute (2022). "Prioritizing Climate in Land Protection" in Nevitt, James N. and Chandni Navalkha. *From the Ground Up: How Land Trusts and Conservancies Are Providing Solutions to Climate Change*. Policy Focus Report. Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Chapter 4, p. 29)

<sup>2</sup> McCarthy, George W. (October 2020). "Cities invest in Open Space" in *Land Lines* (Vol. 32, No. 4). Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Here in the state, Colorado Open Lands, a trust that exists to protect Colorado's land and water resources, emphasizes the importance of conservation easements (i.e., permanent open spaces) within urbanized areas:

*Approximately half of Colorado's population resides in the Denver Metropolitan Area. Open space can create buffers for free-standing communities and protect air and water quality for metro residents. As demand increases for local foods and a new and nontraditional cohort of farmers emerges, there is a strong demand for accessible farmland in the metro area.*<sup>3</sup>

Many cities and states are moving to using a "climate lens" to evaluate proposals for new development projects and investments. Cities are integrating climate action into local planning and zoning decisions. Local communities are also developing "sustainability corridors" for land conservation to mitigate climate change (Local Government Commission, 2008).<sup>4</sup>

Demographical information shows that asthma and other respiratory and chronic diseases impacts minority neighborhoods (including African Americans and Latinos) disproportionately from air pollution. Elderly residents are particularly vulnerable to changes in the environment and are also disproportionately impacted by pollution and climate change. And our young people are facing a future in an Earth crippled by catastrophic changes in climate (Eco-Justice Program Office, 2008).<sup>5</sup>

The Catholic Coalition on Climate Change states the following: *[t]he Impact of climate change falls heaviest on the poor. Our faith invites us to tread lightly and act boldly. As faithful, we have a moral obligation to care for both Creation and the poor.*<sup>6</sup>

A final word on conversation, open space, and climate mitigation in Colorado cities and counties. Parks and open space are much more than a recreational amenity or simply an aesthetic feature of a local government. Parkland is an integral part of a community's "green lungs." The benefits from parks are exponential – for recreation and health, for

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<sup>3</sup> Colorado Open Lands (n.d.). *Metro Denver Area Conservation Easements: Pockets of protection amid growth.*

<sup>4</sup> Local Government Commission (2008). *The Ahwahnee Principles for Climate Change*

<sup>5</sup> Eco-Justice Program Office (2008). "Responding to Global Climate Change" in *Climate and Church: How Global Climate Change Will Impact Core Church Ministries*. National Council of Churches. Washington, DC. See also sections titled "Injustice of Global Climate Change on Communities of Color," "Impacts of Global Climate Change on the Elderly" and "The Impacts of Global Climate Change on Youth."

<sup>6</sup> The Catholic Climate Covenant (n.d.) *Who's under your Carbon Footprint? Care for Creation. Care for the Poor.*

physical and emotional well-being, local access to nature for young and old, and to mitigate pollution and climate change.

In the Denver metropolitan area and in other urban regions of Colorado, it can be a challenge to ensure that parkland is preserved and expanded commensurate with population growth and new development. The Trust for Public Land calculates that across U.S. the average amount of parkland is 13 acres of parkland per 1000 people.<sup>7</sup> It is especially imperative in urban Colorado for cities and towns to meet or exceed that national average for the climate and air quality benefits, health benefits, and social and economic benefits. Access to local parks and open space is a critical environmental justice issue, along with housing, adequate services, and freedom from pollution.

### Conclusion

We ask the faith community, the people of Colorado, and our elected officials to adopt and expand on practices to ensure that decisions on land use and open space are made based on what is best for the environment and climate, best for equity and justice, and best for the health of all. As part of any decision-making and discernment process, consideration needs to be given to the impacts on land conservation, environmental justice, climate mitigation, and health and well-being.

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<sup>7</sup> Trust for Public Lands (2022). *ParkScore*. <https://www.tpl.org/parkscore>

## For More Information

### Statements of Faith Communities on Caring for Creation and Climate Justice

#### Episcopal Church

*The Covenant for the Care of Creation is a commitment to practice loving formation, liberating advocacy and life-giving conservation.*

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/creation-care/>

#### United Methodist Church . . .

*A relationship with God's creation and a ministry of caring for and healing the earth are integral. We believe that all of creation is God's, and that we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it. Our natural world is to be valued and conserved because God has called humanity to be its caretakers (Genesis 1:26-31).*

<https://www.umc.org/en/how-we-serve/social-issues/creation-care>

#### Presbyterian Church USA

*The national eco-justice network cares for God's creation by connecting, equipping, and inspiring us to make creation care a central concern of the church.*

<https://presbyearthcare.org/>

#### United Church of Christ

*Christians, in common cause, protecting the gifts of creation . . . clean air and water? We seek justice—to be in right relationship with God, our neighbors, and all of creation. From racial inequities to the ongoing legacy of colonialism, creation justice is deeply intertwined with multiple matters of justice. The current climate crisis gives matters of justice utmost urgency.*

[https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/environmental-justice/creation\\_justice\\_churches/](https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/environmental-justice/creation_justice_churches/)

#### Roman Catholic Church

*Faithful Stewards of God's Creation: A Catholic Resource for Environmental Justice and Climate Change: "As people of Faith, we are convinced that "the earth is the Lord's and all it holds....We believe our response to global climate change should be a sign of our respect for God's creation."*

<https://www.usccb.org/resources/climate-change-justice-and-health-initiative>

#### Lutheran Church (ELCA)

*The Caring for Creation Social Statement: explains teachings on ecology and the environment, grounded in a biblical vision of God's intention for the healing and wholeness of creation.*

<https://www.elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements/caring-for-creation>

Colorado Jewish Climate Action

*Addressing Climate Change: We are inspired by Jewish tradition that teaches: If not us, who? If not now, when? We are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are we free to desist from it.*

<https://www.coloradojewishclimateaction.org/>