

Pilgrimage to Pando speech
LA Councilmember Paul Koretz - 9/6/18

Good evening everyone,

With the gift of sacred tobacco, I want to acknowledge and thank the Paiute people for hosting us on their land today. I also want to acknowledge that the people, their language and their culture barely survived their encounters with Europeans over the last 242 years. The first environmental justice sin in this country began the day the Europeans encountered the Natives.

I'm so pleased and honored be here with you all today. It was a long trip, but the second I stepped off that bus and saw the lake, it was all worth it. I'm so proud to be a Pando Populus Board member and I can't wait to meet the grove of trees tomorrow that inspired it all.

Tonight I want to say something you'll probably never hear another LA City Councilmember say in your life, that is, I want give you some insight into where we actually are in creating an ecological civilization in a City of freeways, smog and conspicuous consumption; how Pando Populus has been and continues to be integral to that effort; and what we're doing to address environmental injustice and climate change on the ground in LA.

This past December, I spent two very long days at a fire command post in Bel Air, feverishly hoping and praying and working to be sure that the Skirball fire wouldn't suddenly explode and destroy even more than the handful of homes it took down. Of all the big fires that were burning in the Southland, ours in Council district five probably did the least amount of damage because LAFD hit it fast and hit it hard, yet it still destroyed six homes, damaged twelve others, burned four hundred acres and could have easily resulted in billions of dollars in losses. Together, all these fires triggered the evacuations of nearly 200,000 people, including two of my own staff members. It destroyed 1,100 buildings and devastated a third of a million acres of land.

Los Angeles fire chief Ralph Terrazas called the conditions his team faced the worst he'd seen in his 31-year career. The atmosphere over Southern California was the driest in recorded history. Unprecedented wind strength and dryness reached an entirely new color classification: not red flag days, but purple, the most extreme. As we've all learned far too well, in eighty-mile an hour winds, there is almost no way to fight fires.

The real tragedy, of course, is that our fires pale in comparison to the devastation in Northern California. In just nine months, those fires have twice broken our brand-new December record of the largest fire in California history. Today, more than a month after they began, the Mendocino Complex fires are still burning. Ironically, or frighteningly, the height of California's normal peak fire season actually began on Sept. 1st.

When I first started talking about climate change regularly - maybe six years ago – I would discuss an extreme storm event that took place somewhere in the world in the last month. A year or so later, it became in the last week; then it became yesterday. Now, you see multiple extreme climate events taking place nearly every day around the world. Scientists say that you cannot attribute any one event to climate change, but it's about the accumulation. Each successive year, Mother Nature continues piling on more and more, hoping to finally get our attention.

This week alone, extreme rains washed out roads and bridges in Harford County, Maryland, cancelled the first day of school in Milwaukee, and flooded Galveston, Texas, under 10 inches of rain, while Typhoon Jebi devastated Japan prompting evacuation advisories for more than a million people. Meanwhile, right now, today, very heavy rains have caused flood alerts to be issued in five northern states of India. Right now, today, California is still on fire and setting records. Right now, today, in British Columbia, there are over 600 fires burning (how is that even possible?), while, across the Atlantic, the European Union is facing possibly food shortages due to crop failures caused by its ongoing heatwaves. Right now. Today.

Climate change isn't just happening to our children and grandchildren, it's happening to us, right now, today, in real time.

So, instead of sitting around watching the world's worst and most dangerous reality show emanating out of Washington DC, I firmly believe that those of us who are "climate awake" need to keep our heads down and focus on creating the new future we desperately need, through a massive global emergency mobilization in order to restore a safe climate as rapidly as possible.

On top of that, I want us to consider how do we do it in such a way that we begin to heal the deep wounds we, as a society, have inflicted with our extractive, exploitive and, often racist fossil fuel economy? While the climate emergency is real and critical, for far too many people, daily chaos is not a new phenomenon. I think it's vital to acknowledge and work to transform the lives of those who live on the frontlines of our extractive economy every single day. Those who live beside active oil drilling sites, or in communities where unemployment is at 20% or more, or where the prison industrial complex pipeline is in full force, and that especially includes our Indigenous First Nation communities.

I firmly believe there is one silver bullet that can take on all of these struggles and win: emergency climate action taken through an environmental justice lens.

So how did we come to this vision? After being inspired by the amazing Pando Populus conference in 2015 -- for which our John Cobb here was the stunning intellectual architect – my environmental guru, Andy, and I started working with more focus and clarity on concrete, on-the-ground efforts to address our, "pending civilizational collapse." In addition to the initiatives we've sponsored with Pando, which I'll get to, we began tracking efforts by both the Climate Mobilization organization and Naomi Klein's Leap Manifesto, believing that both were on the right track. The Climate Mobilization sees climate change for what it is, the most pressing issue of our time and, truly, of all human history. As a representative of the Climate Mobilization, one of my Council District 5 constituents was able to put into the Democratic National Platform during Hillary Clinton's run, a plank stating that she would launch a national and global mobilization on a scale not seen since World War II in order to *solve* the climate crisis, beginning with a climate emergency summit held within the first 100 days of her administration.

As if we weren't depressed enough that fateful Wednesday November morning. What an incredible missed opportunity!

So, when that didn't happen, a couple of days after the Presidential election debacle, we called up the Climate Mobilization folks and said, hey, we bet you guys aren't as busy as you thought you were going to be, want to come mobilize LA? They said yes.

Then, we said, let's do that with the heart and soul of Naomi Klein's Leap Manifesto, in which frontline communities, First Nations, and the communities of color who have borne the brunt of the extractive fossil fuel economy receive the first benefits of the new economy. Together with the Climate Mobilization, we reached out to Naomi Klein's folks and pitched the idea. They also said yes.

So we've been working with both teams, led by a coalition of local LA environmental justice groups and a wider coalition that includes Pando Populus and many of our local activist groups, including social justice and labor organizations.

We're taking a three-pronged approach. First, we're partnering with our local universities, including UCLA, USC and Cal State Northridge, to map out the environmental justice struggles going on across LA County. We've asked them to study the potential results if all those struggles were all victorious by 2025. What would be the health benefits, the increase in worker productivity, the jobs created? And then, what are the particular legislative policies that can actually get us there in seven years?

Second, we're putting together a detailed Climate Mobilization Implementation Plan written by a genius engineer who, in addition to being a Climate Mobilization volunteer, actually reviews the climate science of the United Nations' scientists in his spare time. We are ground-truthing the plan through our local frontline communities to ensure that it is firmly rooted in principles of justice and a just transition. Some of the more dramatic concrete steps we're looking at putting into the plan include drastically expanding electric vehicle charger installations, bans on sales of gasoline and natural gas vehicles and gas stations, in a thoughtful way that doesn't negatively impact lower income people, and actually producing solar panels directly in Los Angeles to feed our need.

Thirdly, I'm so proud of how this coalition worked together to help me gain the City Council's approval to explore the creation of an official Climate Justice Emergency Mobilization Department. We were able to set aside in the City Budget half a million dollars as seed money to get the department off the ground and to see what type of ongoing budget we will actually need going forward.

Our department will also be extensively ground-truthed to make sure we meet the needs of our frontline communities. It will be overseen by a commission, including environmental justice and labor leaders, who will ensure that the department stays on task going into the future.

I'm pleased to say that's the story that prompted the Cities of Berkeley and Richmond to find out about us and declare a climate emergency of their own, about which I couldn't be more thrilled. Berkeley hosted a Regional Town Hall on Climate Emergency two weeks ago, which I was invited to keynote and we came out of it with a plan to get 100 cities to declare climate emergencies by the end of this year and 1000 by the end of next year. To get there, we're going to need some serious help, but I'm happy to say that the Mayors and Councilmembers from the Southern California cities of Culver City, Lancaster and Long Beach this week committed to join us.

As we bring more cities into the fold, I am very conscious that, as a planet, we have gotten really, really good at making declarations and pledges and plans, but we are really, really terrible at implementing them. So we have been working hard to lay the tracks for exactly how these cities can achieve a climate justice mobilization and what it will look like on the ground, neighborhood by neighborhood, including those we've been working on with the Pando team.

While there are 15 City Council districts in LA, the City is further broken down into 98 neighborhood councils, each of which represents between 5,000 and 50,000 people.

In order to maximize their effectiveness in the climate fight, we were able to help start up a Neighborhood Council Sustainability Alliance, whose goals were to get an Environmental or Sustainability Committee going on as many of those neighborhood councils as possible and therefore make it easier to support and spread environmental policies and education through the City. We've made it to about 45 of the 98 councils so far and are continuing to grow, hoping to achieve critical mass about the time we are ready to physically launch the climate mobilization, so they can lobby their own Councilmembers to get them all on board with the specific aggressive steps.

Next, in order to give those Neighborhood Councils a focused way to proceed, we initiated a pilot project called Cool Blocks, which is where one person in a neighborhood agrees to lead his or her neighbors in a four-month collective effort to reduce their energy, water and waste, to drastically increase their emergency preparedness and, along the way, build a stronger community.

We just completed the pilot for 9 of them and found some remarkable results. At the end of the pilot, folks who have lived on a block for 40 years have finally met the other people on the block who have lived there just as long. We're reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but we are also increasing community and community resilience.

In an unexpected test of our success, the week after our last Cool Block finished up in June, LA had a record-breaking heatwave which knocked out the power for half of that block. Since they had already mapped out who the elderly and most at-risk people were, and who had the biggest refrigerators, they were able to keep each other safe during the worst, hottest week to be without power. After that, we knew Cool Blocks worked exactly how it was supposed to. Best of all, with the emergency preparedness aspect, we were able to enroll more conservative people who never expected to get actively involved in the climate fight.

In terms of organizing everyone else, business communities, educational institutions, faith-based communities, municipalities and other sectors, this is where Pando Populus comes into the equation.

We needed an approach that was smart, thoughtful, creative, meaningful, and, most importantly, when you're facing down an existential threat to all life on the planet, fun.

Many businesses throughout our region have employed Chief Sustainability Officers, mainly as a way to mitigate risk and maximize profits through efficiencies. But the Chief Sustainability Officers on the whole tend to be very interested in protecting the environment and they tend to be extremely knowledgeable about sustainability and also have strong opinions about what the City, County or State should or could be doing better.

So, together with Pando, we thought organizing a group of these folks would be especially useful in maximizing our efforts to get environmental policies accomplished in Los Angeles County, while minimizing pushback from businesses – always a problem in political legislation -- because businesses were already actively engaged in crafting the policies.

So far, we've had an excellent response. One of the terrific ideas that has already grown out of this group is the idea of having peer-to-peer mentors, which we're calling City Blitz. If one city in Los Angeles County has excellent sustainability and resilience policies, it mentors other cities to improve their policies quickly -- no one has to reinvent the wheel. The City of Claremont hosted the first very successful iteration and has been mentoring, among others, the City of Carson. It's truly a win-win for the whole of LA County since we all breathe the same air.

At our next meeting, I intend to present a proposal suggesting we work together to create a multi-beneficial electric vehicle charging policy for the whole region. With General Motors, Audi, Volvo, Ford, Jaguar and many other car companies making plans to drastically-increase their electric vehicle production, our region --- and all regions, really -- needs to radically-increase its overall electric vehicle charging structure. Since one of the strongest drivers of EV purchases is the availability of chargers at work, I'm going to challenge them to commit to increasing their onsite electric vehicle chargers by 10% each year and to challenge other businesses and institutions across the region to do the same.

The other big thing we've been working with Pando Populus on that I want to tell you about is our eco-village effort. We've been working with this radical group of amazing Nuns – at least two of whom are with us here this weekend – called the Maryknoll Sisters to build a sustainable ecovillage model that we could duplicate and spread across the country. These are the fearless women who have ventured into the most fearsome places in the world and now are retired on a 7-acre compound in Monrovia, near Pasadena.

As we were conceptualizing the ecovillage idea, the MaryKnoll sisters said, hey, why don't you start here? We realized this was a very concrete way to help Pope Francis actually implement the vision of an ecological civilization he wrote about in Laudato Si, his groundbreaking encyclical on the environment and climate change.

So, as you'll hear more from others, we are actively creating a working eco-village, with our very first resident -- where's Geneva? -- and with what we're calling "a residential research park for integral ecology," in order to incarnate the principles of Laudato Si. The best part is, as far as I understand it, the consultancy to many of the orders of Women Religious across the country who advises on the use of their assets and property, is already working to spread and extend the ideas that are being developed by the MaryKnoll Sisters and Pando to other communities of Sisters across the country, working together to develop a model to create the Pope's vision nationwide, something I very much hope this group can help support.

In closing, I just want to say that, in a thousand years, when people are still telling tales about how we – these generations in this room – were able to successfully turn around our greenhouse gas emissions, transition to an ecological society, clean up our frontline communities, create a just and equitable economy, protect our biodiversity, and keep our beautiful planet healthy and habitable, one of the stories they're sure to tell is how Pando Populus began as a grove of quaking aspen and, how, under John Cobb's tutelage, that grove of interconnected trees inspired a diverse, intergenerational, interfaith and even governmental movement that brought to life Pope Francis' encyclical and helped save the planet for generations newly-born and for those yet to be born. Thank you.