Testimony of Cecil Scheib  
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before  
New York City Council Committee on Environmental Protection  

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Good morning Chairman Constantinides, and fellow Council Members. My name is Cecil Scheib and I am the Assistant Vice President for Sustainability at NYU. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today as you consider legislation on the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in the City’s buildings.

At NYU, we are committed to making the University one of the nation’s greenest campuses and have launched renewed effort to achieve this goal. Since 2007, NYU has reduced its emissions by 30% - an amount equivalent to planting enough trees to cover all of Manhattan, and all of Brooklyn, in forest. We have pledged to achieve a 50% reduction from the baseline by 2025 and carbon neutrality by 2040. This reduction in emissions is something the University has voluntarily undertaken not only because we believe it is part of NYU’s role as an anchor institution in New York but also because it positively impacts our community. We support the City’s strong leadership in addressing existing buildings, the principal source of NYC carbon emissions, as it will take a concerted and collective effort across the city to effectively combat climate change.

NYU has proven deep carbon reductions are possible. In 2014 we renovated Brittany Hall, a student residence on Broadway at East 10th Street. During the process we removed heavy #4 fuel oil boilers from the basement, a big source of unhealthy airborne particulates, and replaced them with light natural gas boilers on the roof, far from any potential flood risk. They are ready to be replaced with electric heat pumps when required. In all, we reduced fossil fuel needs for heating needs by 81%. That’s right – not 8% - not 18% - 81%. It is not a passive house project – just run of the mill engineering. Reasonable efforts can achieve deep results.

And it's affordable. Brittany Hall cut its operating costs in half as a result of the renovation. At 370 Jay Street, the old MTA headquarters in downtown Brooklyn that the University is currently renovating and which just received LEED Platinum, we actually saved capital costs by retaining the existing façade (another carbon benefit) and air sealing it instead of replacing it. In all, our 30% carbon reductions are saving about $15 million per year, and just about everything we did had a 1-4 year payback. We believe sustainability is good business practice for NYU.
To achieve carbon neutrality, we must achieve deep energy reductions in our buildings as over 90% of NYU’s energy consumption is building related. Electrifying energy uses, replacing the use of fossil fuels, gives us the opportunity to buy clean and renewable energy to reach our 2040 goal. But as bold as this goal may be, we believe that the health, comfort, and productivity benefits of this effort will outweigh the energy savings.

Medical studies show that cognitive function doubles in offices with better indoor air quality. But the same issues that cause poor air quality – old drafty buildings (a key issue for us as 60% of NYU’s space is more than 50 years old) – also cause energy wastage and high carbon emissions as we heat and cool air that is immediately lost through drafts. The things we will do to save energy in these buildings will also help people think more clearly, which is our mission. In addition to our carbon goals, we have committed resources to ensure that every significant construction project NYU undertakes will be LEED certified, targeting Silver certification as a minimum, to ensure the health and comfort of our students, faculty, staff and administrators as well as lowering carbon emissions. Projects certified and undergoing certification account for over 2 million square feet of LEED space in Manhattan and Brooklyn – including three rated Platinum. Our message is not that we must reduce carbon for the good of the planet. Our message is that we will enhance NYU’s academic mission by providing comfortable and healthy spaces that enhance NYU’s excellence, and that the energy savings will help pay for it – and we’ll achieve our carbon goals, too.

We are pleased that the City Council is taking up this important issue of emissions reductions in the City’s buildings and support the efforts of this legislation. A key item is setting the actual carbon targets and metrics appropriately for each building group and within each building group. NYU has performed building energy data analysis for the City for years, including its annual reports on energy use and carbon emissions. We are already using our expertise to help the City set targets and metrics that are appropriate, meaningful, contextual, and nuanced, so that carbon reductions are both impactful and achievable. We are happy to offer our assistance to the City as this work proceeds.

In addition, NYU routinely and actively engages with the City on analysis of climate policy from a legal perspective, be it that of owners or climate justice. As it is essential that portfolio owners be freed to align work with capital cycles so that they may cost-effectively do deep energy retrofits when other work is already planned, as well as support energy efficiency in traditionally underserved building types, as the carbon trading study commences, we would also offer our assistance in that area as well.

NYU hopes to continue to partner with the City Council as we work to make New York more sustainable and reduce the impacts of climate change on our City. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify again and I welcome any questions you have.