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POLICY BRIEF

Bait and Switch: State Funding to Reduce Air Pollution in Overburdened Communities Prioritized Advocacy, Not Cleaner Air

Four steps the state can take to improve health outcomes, including requiring estimates of pollution reduction and accountability for failure.

By Todd Myers,
Vice President for Research
April 2026

Key Takeaways

1. Of nearly $8.5 million spent, the vast majority of projects produced little to no measurable reduction in air pollution.
2. On average, 58% of funds went to staffing and about 10% to overhead, while only 13% went to equipment that could directly impact air quality.
3. None of the projects will collect environmental monitoring data, making it impossible to verify effectiveness.
4. Projects were funded without requirements for measurable results, cost-effectiveness or consequences for failure.
5. Many of the grants, including to the Urban League, the Somali Independent Business Alliance and one for "Latinx Migrant/Refugee Communities" were used for "policy advocacy" and organizing efforts rather than direct pollution reduction.
6. Programs like e-bike subsidies and bike giveaways showed no measurable reduction in vehicle use or emissions, according to cited research.
7. Other projects were unable to implement the promised activity, yielding no air quality improvements.
8. Only one project stood out as cost-effective. A Spokane road-paving project both quantified pollution reduction and delivered it at a reasonable cost per ton.
9. In the future, the state should require that all projects provide reasonable estimates of air quality improvements and create accountability for projects that fail to deliver on promises.

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Introduction

In August 2024, just months before voters were set to decide the future of the state's tax on CO_2 emissions known as the Climate Commitment Act (CCA), the Department of Ecology announced grants to "fund locally led projects in overburdened communities to reduce sources of 'criteria' air pollution" like particulate matter. The press release noted that "The Climate Commitment Act supports Washington's climate action efforts by putting cap-and-invest dollars to work reducing climate pollution, creating jobs, and improving public health."

The claim that revenue from the CCA would help reduce air pollution has been one of the main arguments made by supporters of the law. In May 2024, then-governor Jay Inslee said, "We have this epidemic of asthma in our state," and promised that money from the CO_2 tax would help address it. The CCA, he claimed, "hands out $10 million in grants to community organizations targeting air quality improvements." State Representative Joe Fitzgibbon, one of the authors of the CCA, told the Seattle Times editorial board later that year that the CCA is "important for addressing health disparities."

The CCA required the state to spend $20 million per biennium to "reduce health disparities in overburdened communities by improving health outcomes through the reduction or elimination of environmental harms and the promotion of environmental benefits." To achieve that, in 2025 the Department of Ecology offered grants to reduce air pollution in "overburdened communities." We can now assess how those projects, which cost nearly $8.5 million, performed and if they reduced air pollution to address the "epidemic of asthma" that Jay Inslee purportedly championed.

An examination of the 21 projects funded by those grants shows that very little of the money was spent on addressing air pollution. Most was spent on things that do nothing to improve air quality, like paying for staff, overhead and public meetings. None of the projects monitored air quality improvements and only a couple attempted to estimate pollution reductions.

For example, money from the "Washington State Air Quality in Overburdened Communities Grant" was spent on:

- "Policy advocacy" to "groups to push for environmental justice legislation, such as the HEAL Act…"
- Paying $2,000 each to members of a "community advisory board" on air pollution
- Giving away 50 refurbished bicycles and providing middle school students "with the skills to maintain their bikes"
- Subsidizing the purchase of electric bicycles, which has not shown to reduce air pollution

Only one project reduced air pollution at a reasonable cost. Most projects allocated little to nothing toward tangible efforts to improve air quality.

It is another example of the bait and switch proponents of the CCA have routinely engaged in to justify its high cost. Supporters promise that funding will help disadvantaged communities reduce asthma. Instead, the state funds special interest groups who pocket the money and lobby for additional subsidies.

As long as the taxpayers are going to pay the cost of the state's CO_2 tax, they should get what they pay for. The legislature and the Department of Ecology should require that projects prioritize real-world air quality improvements, measure effectiveness and rescind funding for failed projects.

Funding Public Engagement and Projects to Reduce Air Pollution

Under the Department of Ecology's rules, two types of programs could apply for funding under the Washington State Air Quality in Overburdened Communities Grant. Groups could use the funding to "engage people in their community to design projects that reduce criteria air pollution" or "implement locally led projects that reduce criteria air pollution." The argument for community engagement is that it helps ensure future projects are more effective and address the concerns of the community. In reality, the funding for community engagement produces little new information that can be used in future projects.

On average, 58 percent of funding for each project was spent on staffing, with several projects spending between 80 and 100 percent of the funding on staff. Another ten percent was spent on un-itemized "overhead." An average of just 13 percent of grants is spent on equipment to improve air quality.

Additionally, none of the projects indicated they would collect environmental monitoring data that would be useful in assessing the impact of the project. Few of the projects are even projected to produce measurable results, meaning there is little to monitor.

Public Meetings and Public Advocacy Instead of Health Benefits

Millions of dollars in grants were provided for projects consisting entirely of public meetings or political advocacy.

For example, the Urban League of King County received $411,691 for "Advancing Environmental Justice in South Seattle's Vulnerable Communities." The project promised to educate 2,000 residents about environmental justice and the health risks of air pollution. The funding would also help advocate "for policy change by partnering with local governments and environmental justice organizations to push for stronger environmental protections and equitable resource distribution."

Although the grant application claimed it would equip 500 households with "energy-efficient home upgrades," none of the money in the budget the Urban League included with the grant application was used for those upgrades. Instead, it funded 10 ½ staff, which accounts for nearly 80 percent of the funding. Another 20 percent was requested for overhead.

Similarly, $170,200 was granted to the Somali Independent Business Alliance to run "inclusive meetings, educational workshops, & stakeholder feedback" to learn about air pollution impacts. They claimed the meetings would increase awareness, create enhanced capacity, improve decision-making, advance environmental justice and create a "foundation for future implementation." The grant did not actually improve air quality.

The budget allocated $104,000 for salaries and benefits, another $13,000 on consultants and contractors, $11,000 to pay people to participate in the meetings and $15,000 for un-itemized overhead.

A project in central Washington by the Community Health Worker Coalition for Migrants and Refugees spent $219,575 on the "Latinx Migrant/Refugee Communities Engaging in Air Quality Improvement" project that consisted entirely of public engagement.

The grant application notes that the group would "convene a Community Advisory Board, conduct three workshops with both an educational and community engagement component, and facilitate a one-day summit to identify at least three actionable and innovative interventions that address cumulative criteria air pollutants in the Moxee Valley among Latinx migrant/refugee families. In addition, a multimedia campaign of communication will be done to advocate the participation of the community in reducing air pollution." To achieve this, the group will "use Liberating Structures exercises as a guide for the activities. Liberating Structures are easy-to-learn microstructures that enhance relational coordination and trust."

On the organization's web page, the organization noted that 62 people met to discuss ways to reduce particulate matter (PM 2.5), writing that their participation "inspires a relentless spirit of advocacy, fostering a dynamic community committed to safeguarding our environment for future generations by improve [sic] air quality."

I emailed the organization to see what recommendations were generated. They wrote that "most of these materials contain HIPAA-protected information and represent the intellectual property of our community. There is a formal process for releasing any public information. Additionally, all of our programs are still active, and we have not completed full evaluations yet."

The public meetings did not yield any tangible environmental or health benefits and it is unclear what recommendations they have going forward. The organization did, however, pay seven members of its "community advisory board" $2,000 each.

Finally, the City of Seattle received $655,746 that it then distributed to three groups to "ensure our target BIPOC, immigrant, and refugee communities are engaged on community-based solutions to criteria air pollution" that included "brainstorming and developing short- and long-term solutions, and connecting residents with resources to improve their quality of life and alternatives to single occupancy vehicle use."

The money was split between $394,833 for El Centro De La Raza, $118,000 for Outreach and Transform Lives and $137,913 for the Environmental Coalition of South Seattle. What they did with that funding is unclear and no additional information was provided in the grant application.

These are just a few examples of the millions of dollars' worth of grants that yielded no reduction in air pollution.

Some argue that such outreach efforts are necessary to make sure that projects are grounded in the community and listen to the voices of underrepresented people. But if that doesn't result in actual health improvements, those efforts are harmful to the community they claim to care about.

In other instances, even when community input was collected, it had little impact on the types of project that were subsequently recommended. For example, two community outreach efforts in central Washington identified the top air pollution concern was wildfire smoke. The recommended projects, however, were to fund electric bikes, EV charging stations, urban forests, replacement of wood-burning stoves and composting yard waste instead of burning it. Those may be fine projects, but none of them addressed the major concern, nor are they unique to central Washington. What did the community outreach do, other than spend money that could have been used more effectively to tangibly help people breathe easier?

Some projects combined community outreach with tangible efforts.

For example, the "Nuestro Aire – Nuestro Salud" project received $189,830 to conduct in-person Spanish language discussions about "the sources and impacts of air pollution, protective behaviors, and community resources for mitigating risks. Including community input to allow for sharing of experiences within their neighborhoods." They also planned to hold an event on Earth Day.

In addition, they planned to hand out portable HEPA filters to clean indoor air. That is probably valuable, but it accounts for just $18,000 - less than ten percent of the grant total. In a project titled "Our Air – Our Health," funding to tangibly improve air quality and health was a minimal part of the spending.

Projects That Are Unlikely to Improve Air Quality

There are three steps that can help accelerate the use of GNA by states and tribes. Not all funding went to public meetings. There were projects that promised

real-world reductions in air pollution. Most of those projects, however, are unlikely to have a meaningful impact.

A few were built around the notion that distributing bicycles or e-bikes would replace car trips.

In the Wenatchee Valley, a grant of $231,800 promised to "improve air quality by promoting alternative transportation through biking." The organization promised to create a "mobile bike repair and outreach unit" at community events and middle schools. They promised to train people how to repair bicycles and to distribute 50 refurbished bikes at an average cost of about $2,000 per bike. Ultimately the project spent nearly a quarter-million dollars on bike repair training and 50 bicycles.

Two projects offered rebates for the purchase of electric bicycles, claiming that this would reduce the use of cars.

A grant for $667,500 was given to a group in Tacoma that offered rebates for e-bikes and funding for 420 portable air cleaners.

Another program run by the City of Shoreline received $670,893 and distributed 125 e-bikes "to residents living or working within the identified community, prioritizing applications who are at or below 80% of the area median income level." Although the grants are supposed to reduce "criteria air pollutants" like particulate matter, the grant made no estimate of air quality benefit.

The grant application did claim that, based on surveys, the project would reduce 43 metric tons (MT) of CO_2 by reducing the number of miles traveled in cars. That amounts to $1,500 per MT of CO_2 – about 23 times more than Washington's current CO_2 price. That estimate is probably very high.

A study from University of Washington researchers for the Washington State Department of Transportation found that subsidizing e-bikes increased the number purchased but did nothing to reduce use of cars or the number of vehicle miles traveled (VMT). Instead of relying on self-reported results, the researchers used GPS to more accurately track usage. The researchers wrote, "Neither the $300 nor the $1,200 rebate offers produced a statistically significant change in daily VMT relative to their respective control groups." As a result, they found that "during the six-month timeframe of the study, GPS-based trip data did not show measurable reductions in daily vehicle miles traveled (VMT), and consequently, no detectable reductions in carbon emissions or non-carbon pollutants."

Despite that result, the City of Shoreline has announced they will again run their e-bike rebate program called "Pedal Forward," later this year.

In other cases, projects that sounded good ended up doing nothing.

A $100,000 grant for the South King County Tool Library was designed to provide access to electric tools and replace 20 wood-burning stoves with cleaner alternatives. Wood burning stoves can be a significant source of air pollution and replacing them can be an effective strategy to reduce air pollution. One challenge is that people with the stoves don't want to give them up, even when incentivized.

Indeed, the Director of the South King County Tool Library told me that "we found many folks that had wood burning stoves do not want to part with them,"

and so instead of replacing the stoves, they developed "a digital resource guide (in English and Spanish), and created a checklist for tools and processes on how to know IF their stove needed to be recycled." Ultimately, the project failed to replace any wood stoves.

They projected that 75 percent of the funding would go to staff and overhead. With the failure of a key part of the program, that percentage may end up being higher. Either way, it is a significant spend for little to no improvement in air quality.

What We Can Learn From the Projects That Do Deliver

Not all projects failed to deliver improvements in air quality. Two projects in Spokane stand out as examples of efforts that successfully reduced air pollutants.

The best project was a $404,760 grant to Spokane Public Works to mitigate dust on gravel roads. The project aimed to "chip seal" about 1.6 miles of road which "eliminate[s] dust from being dispersed into the air and will reduce PM2.5 and PM10 particulate matter..."

The grant is only one of two that provided an estimate of pollution reduction. Project sponsors estimated the anticipated reduction of particulate matter "equates to approximately 312.2 tons of PM10 and 31.2 tons of PM2.5" over the 20-year lifespan of the project. They calculated that the cost to reduce each ton of PM10 would be about $1,400. According to California air quality agencies, the maximum reasonable cost to reduce one ton of PM10 is $9,850, putting Spokane's paving project well within the reasonable range.

This grant does two things that none of the others do.

First, it provides an actual projection of the pollution reduced by the project. Second, it estimates the cost-effectiveness of the program by comparing it to standard metrics.

Another project in Spokane also provided estimates for the reduction in air pollution but the results were much worse.

The Gonzaga Institute for Climate, Water, and the Environment, in collaboration with the City of Spokane and the Lands Council, proposed replacing ten pieces of diesel parks equipment with electric equipment. The grant also distributed 400 portable air cleaners.

Of the $674,661 provided by the state, Gonzaga sent $445,012 to the City of Spokane, presumably to replace the diesel equipment. The grant estimated that replacement of the diesel equipment would reduce PM2.5 by about 12.66 kilograms per year, for a total of 0.012 tons per year and 0.25 tons over a 20-year period. By comparison, the chip seal project would reduce PM2.5 by 31.2 tons over that same time span. The implied cost to reduce one ton of PM10 is $175,755 – nearly 18 times as much as what California considers reasonable.

Although the project does provide an estimate of pollution reduction (good), that estimate shows the project to be an extremely expensive and wasteful way to reduce particulate matter (bad).

The project also provides 400 portable air cleaners. Other projects estimate the cost of those air filters at $150 each, putting the value of these at about $60,000, or about ten percent of the value of the grant.

Although the project fails to achieve reasonable air quality improvements, the fact that it provided an estimated impact is laudable. It is only one of two environmental projects to do so.

Another road-paving project in Spokane also received a grant. The Northeast Public Developmental Authority received $700,000 to help pave a road to reduce "blowing dust" and reduce tailpipe emissions.

I asked the project lead how paving roads would reduce tailpipe emissions. They responded that "paving does support future transit use because the roads in their current condition are not suitable for transit. Paving the road will enable the corridor to facilitate future transit use." Expanding transit, however, would be a separate cost and assumes that paved roads would not increase vehicular traffic but would increase transit use.

Paving may reduce particulate matter, but the grant provides no projections for this and some of the claims rely on additional funding.

State's "Air Quality" Program Doesn't Improve Air Quality

Despite arguing that CCA-funded air quality grants would "decrease health inequities caused by criteria air pollution and environmental injustices," the program provided very little real-world benefit. Instead, much of the funding went to staff and overhead costs. Few projects produced actual improvements in air quality. None of the projects tracked their results. And only one project is likely to tangibly reduce particulate matter in a cost-effective way.

Some argue that gathering community input as part of the planning process is necessary to ensure projects meet the needs of overburdened communities. But the projects identified by that outreach was not innovative or targeted. Ironically, now that this information has been gathered, the funding for these grants has been cut. House Bill 2251 cut funding in half, making the information gathered in that community outreach even less valuable.

The state should do four things to ensure that future projects yield actual environmental benefits.

1. Require all grants to provide an estimate of the amount of PM2.5 and PM10 that will be reduced.
2. Rank projects based on cost-effectiveness. The more environmental benefits the projects provide per dollar, the higher the project should be ranked.
3. No more funding for "community outreach."
4. Organizations that fall short of achieving the projected air quality improvements should face accountability, including returning a portion of the funding based on the shortfall and should be banned from receiving future CCA grants.

Like so many of the programs funded by the billions in new taxes from the state's CO_2 tax, the air quality grants for overburdened communities delivered almost no environmental benefit. Once again, the cause of that failure is a lack of any metrics of environmental benefit or accountability for failure. What is supposed to be a program to reduce asthma has become a piggy bank for politically connected community organizations.

Unless the state changes how grants are prioritized, overburdened communities will continue to deal with the health impacts of poor air quality.

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If you have any comments or questions about this study, please contact us at:

Washington Policy Center
PO Box 3643
Seattle, WA 98124-3643

Online: www.washingtonpolicy.org
E-mail: wpc@washingtonpolicy.org
Phone: (206) 937-9691

About the Author

With more than two decades in environmental policy, **Todd Myers**'s experience includes work on a range of environmental issues, including climate policy, forest health, old-growth forests, and salmon recovery. A former member of the executive team at the Washington State Department of Natural Resources, he is a member of the Puget Sound Salmon Recovery Council.

He is the author of "Time to Think Small: How nimble environmental technologies can solve the planet's biggest problems," which outlines how small technologies are empowering people to protect threatened wildlife species, reduce CO2 emissions, and reduce ocean plastic. His previous book "Eco-Fads: How the Rise of Trendy Environmentalism Is Harming the Environment" documented how our environmental policies are driven by a desire to look good rather than to help the environment.

His writing has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, National Review, Seattle Times, and USA Today, and he has appeared on numerous news networks including CNBC, Fox News, the BBC, and CNN. He served as vice president of the Northwest Association of Biomedical Research and received their Distinguished Service Award in 2018 for his support of bioscience. He has also served as president of the Prescription Drug Assistance Foundation, a nonprofit providing medicines to low-income patients.

In 2021, Myers served as president of his local beekeeping club in his quest to build an army of stinging insects at his command. He has a bachelor's degree in politics from Whitman College and a master's degree in Russian/International Studies from the Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington. He and his wife Maria live in the Cascade Mountains in Washington state with 200,000 honeybees, and he claims to make an amazing pasta carbonara and an incredible dirty vodka martini with blue-cheese-stuffed olives.