Testimony of Cecil Scheib
Assistant Vice President for Sustainability, New York University
before
New York State Senate Committee on Environmental Conservation

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Good morning Chairman Kaminsky, and fellow Senators. 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 the Climate and Community Protection Act.

At NYU, we are committed to making the University one of the nation’s greenest campuses and are pleased to see the State Senate take a leadership role in addressing climate change for all New Yorkers by addressing greenhouse gas emissions and encouraging renewable energy. NYU has launched a vigorous effort to achieve our goals. Since NYU is a “city in miniature” – with apartment buildings, offices, laboratories, gyms, and classrooms all part of its portfolio – I hope that some successes I will share today can serve as a model for other entities as the state moves forward with climate change legislation.

Since 2007, NYU has reduced its emissions by 30% - an amount equivalent to planting enough trees to cover all of Manhattan and 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.

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.

The public health benefits of carbon emission reductions must not be underestimated. This is why NYU is pleased to see that the Climate and Community Protection Act requires evaluation and reporting on these benefits. We hope that the State will work closely with other municipalities such as New York City – which is considering its own legislation on this topic – so that emission targets, and any mechanisms to achieve those targets, are carefully coordinated. For example, NYU has communicated with both New York City and New York State regarding strategies to reduce emissions from the transportation sector, including increasing vehicle electrification, an initiative that would benefit tremendously from coordination between City and State agencies. We also would encourage the State to continue, and even accelerate, its efforts to encourage low-carbon electricity transmission from upstate to NYC through the development of new transmission infrastructure as well as offshore resources so that users in can take advantage of these options as paths to carbon neutrality.

Given our own goals and the benefits we have already experienced – both economic and non-economic – from our reductions to date, NYU is supportive of the climate and Community Protection Act and ready to be of assistance as the state moves forward. This includes sharing
our experience of portfolio-wide deep carbon reductions and planning or tapping into our expert faculty who routinely and actively engage with government on analysis of climate policy from a legal and data driven perspective. For instance, NYU’s scholars have previously been called upon to assist lawmakers in analyzing the appropriate framework for pricing carbon emissions and in assessing the impact of policies designed to reduce energy use in New York City’s buildings. Our faculty also includes some of the country’s foremost experts on the design of emission trading regimes. NYU hopes to continue to partner with New York to make the State more sustainable and reduce the impacts of climate change for our citizens. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and I welcome any questions you have.