August 26, 2019

Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Executive Chamber
Capitol Building
Albany, N.Y. 12224

RE: S.2385 (Parker)/A.1564 (Peoples-Stokes)

Dear Governor Cuomo,

The Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter urges you to sign into law S.2385/A.1564, an act to incorporate environmental justice principles into New York State agencies’ decision-making processes.

This bill would make permanent the Environmental Justice Advisory Group within Department of Environmental Conservation and require NY State to incorporate environmental justice principles into policies and permitting practices across all agencies that impact low-income communities. Such an approach will begin to address these issues of fundamental fairness and equity by institutionalizing and coordinating actions that steer both state and private projects, policies and developments in a way that uplifts all communities. No neighborhood should ever bear the disproportionate environmental burden of a project or policy that enriches the privileged in NY, especially with state money.

Signing S.2385 into law is doubly important because the Environmental Justice Advisory Group will be one of the key entities that facilitates climate solutions and the promulgation of regulations under the historic Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA), that you signed in July 2019. This transformational legislation requires that NY moves towards a zero-carbon society where our entire transportation, heating, industrial and building sectors will be electrified and powered by renewables by 2050. But without a clear mandate for the Environmental Justice Advisory Group to act, the social justice aspects of this law to ensure low income communities and communities of color are not hurt in the transition are put in jeopardy.

New York State has a proud legacy of environmental protection and our air quality, waterways and wilderness areas have made a remarkable recovery in the past 40 years under the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act and other seminal environmental
protection laws and regulations. But as we have made consistent progress to improve New York’s environment, low-income areas, communities of color and traditional immigrant neighborhoods have borne the disproportionate burden of pollution that was displaced by stronger environmental standards for more affluent areas elsewhere. This inequity is largely a function of systematic, institutionalized racism and deference to corporate values over basic human needs.

As the threat of climate change intensifies, low-income communities now have to contend with the greater likelihood of extreme flooding, vulnerable infrastructure, heat waves and exotic diseases on top of their already disproportionate exposure to pollution. We are urging you to act immediately and sign S.2385/A.1564, because the State of New York can no longer stand by and let this injustice persist for those that contribute the least to climate change, yet receive the worst effects of its impacts. We also want to see an efficient and expeditious implementation of CLCPA that requires the passage of S.2385/A.1564 so that the Environmental Justice Advisor Group can help facilitate the process of moving NY and the world out of the climate crisis in the most just way possible.

Thank you for your consideration of this important legislation.

Sincerely,

Roger Downs
Conservation Director
Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter