

# The Trailblazer

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## Divestment Movement Momentum for Western New York Higher Education Institutions

By Dave Reilly

Universities and colleges promise a “higher” education and the enlightenment of young minds through teaching that takes place both inside and outside of the classroom. Many purport to help develop the “whole student” through missions and visions that emphasize creating leaders, critical thinkers, active and engaged citizens and young ethical professionals who are concerned with social justice. Within this framing, campaigns have been undertaken to encourage colleges and universities to look introspectively at their own policies, to recognize the inconsistencies of their own messages and practices, and to become vehicles of social change.

That is the essence of the fossil fuel divestment movement that has swept higher education since 2011. Across the country there have been growing demands that college and university administrations stop investing in fossil fuel industries and reinvest in environmentally and socially responsible alternatives. Sierra Club has been at the center of this effort, working with other organizations and building coalitions to challenge status quo practices.

The divestment statistics across all industries are impressive: according to Arabella Advisors, 436 institutions and 2,040 individuals across 43 countries and representing \$2.6 trillion in assets have committed to divest from fossil fuel companies. Climate Week in September 2014 served as a catalyst for the movement: since, there has been a fifty-fold increase in the total combined assets of those committed to divest from fossil fuels.

Most colleges and universities have enormous endowments—Harvard’s is nearly \$38 Billion, and the median college endowment is \$59 million—so the effort to redirect their stocks, bonds, or investment funds away from companies that are unethical or morally ambiguous is more than a symbolic gesture. Such efforts can reduce the capital that is necessary for fossil fuel industries to thrive. Fossil fuel investments pose a risk to the planet, and as [gofossilfree.org](http://gofossilfree.org) notes, “Breaking the sponsorship link between oil companies and institutions will not alone prevent disasters. It will not bring justice where it is due, but by creating an informed public debate questioning the acceptability of associating these companies with our institutions, we strengthen attempts to hold the fossil fuel industry accountable in political and financial spheres.”

Now, the divestment movement is gaining traction in Western New York. Vanessa Dwyer, an undergraduate student at SUNY-Buffalo and student president of Fossil Free UB has been escalating a divestment campaign on campus since early 2015. Canisius College and Niagara University faculty met in mid-October to coordinate plans for mission-based divestment strategies, building off the Catholic Climate Covenant, for the two schools. And they are following the lead of their students: Canisius undergraduates have already completed a preliminary sustainability report that encourages divestment, while Niagara University students are researching divestment options and reaching out to other WNY schools to build a critical mass of support.

A major organizing initiative for these efforts will be the Divestment Symposium at SUNY’s College of Environmental Science and Forestry on November 18<sup>th</sup>. After successfully waging their own divestment campaign that has resulted in a commitment by ESF’s administration to completely divest from fossil fuel industries within five years, the organizers have moved on to the larger task of educating others within New York State about the importance of divestment. Alex Poisson, ESF’s Sustainability Coordinator and a Ph.D. candidate in Environmental Sciences, highlighted the NY Renews effort (to which Sierra Club is a signatory) as an example of how building coalitions and creating joint initiatives will increase the impact and power of all collective strategies, divestment included.

The one day symposium, which is open to all but is directed specifically to students, will include the following:

- General overview of divestment in higher education, with discussion about Native People and the Environment and the Responsible Endowment Coalition
- Mechanics of divestment with financial experts Reinvestment strategies, to move beyond the negative aspects of campaigns
- Student panels on organizing, coalition-building, and effective planning

*Continued below*

See more stories like this at [NiagaraSierraClub.com](http://NiagaraSierraClub.com)

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## SEE IMPORTANT ELECTION BIOS AND BALLOTS ON PAGE 2!

## Boreas Pond Adirondack Wilderness Threatened to Change Classification

By Larry Beahan

The Boreas Pond Tract is 20,000 acres of pristine Adirondack wilderness purchased by New York State for the Forest Preserve on May 10<sup>th</sup> 2016. The Adirondack Park Agency is beginning the process of its classification by holding a series of hearings across the State. Classification will determine how the public makes use of this marvelous forest.

Sierra Club’s Adirondack Committee, the Adirondack Mountain Club and other environmental and outdoor organizations believe it should receive the classification of “Wilderness.” That designation would deny access to motor vehicles except for a snowmobile trail along the Blue Ridge Highway. Local towns favor “Wild Forest” which would give motorized access to most of it, negatively impacting the natural habitat with motorized vehicles, and disrupting the serenity of the land.

The Boreas Pond Tract lies south of Lake Placid in the East Central portion of the Adirondack Park.

It wedges between the southern borders of the High Peaks and the Dix Mountain Wilderness areas. If it is designated Wilderness, we would have a 300,000 acre contiguous Wilderness, larger than either Rocky Mountain or Zion National Parks. With climate change looming, these large intact forests are crucial for their ability to take carbon out of the atmosphere and store it.

The Adirondack Park Agency will hold a hearing on the classification of the Boreas Pond Tract Monday November 28<sup>th</sup> (tentative date) at 7 pm in Rochester Institute of Technology’s Sustainability Hall. We urge you to join us in attending this meeting to advocate for “Wilderness Classification” and preserve the natural habitat for wildlife’s designated home. Please contact Sara Schultz ([sjws1979@gmail.com](mailto:sjws1979@gmail.com)) for bus transportation.

Find more information here:  
[www.adirondackalmanack.com/2016/09/apa-plans-hearings-boreas-ponds-classification.html](http://www.adirondackalmanack.com/2016/09/apa-plans-hearings-boreas-ponds-classification.html)

*“Divestments” Continued from above*

More information, including registration for the *Divestment 2016: Setting a Path for a “Just Transition”* symposium, can be found at <http://www.esf.edu/outreach/divestment/>. What makes the symposium particularly valuable is the opportunity to bring together students and academics with shared interests to determine how best to work collectively and on each individual campus. As Alex Poisson notes, “Because every campus and every campus culture is different—in academic mission and departments—being creative about what the global fossil fuel divestment campaign should mean on that specific campus and fitting that with the vision, mission, and identity of each campus is important for success.” Students from Canisius, Niagara University, and SUNY-Buffalo plan to attend and to build a Western New York network of advocacy for divestment from fossil fuel industries. Together they hope to become leaders for social justice and to apply the lessons from their work in the classroom to bring about real-world environmental change.

*Dave Reilly is a Professor and Chair of Political Science, and the Director of International Studies at Niagara University. He serves as the president of Niagara’s faculty union, the moderator for the Black Student Union, and teaches Environmental Policy (among many other courses). He is on the Political Committee of the Sierra Club Niagara Chapter. Interested in starting a divestment campaign? Contact Dave at [dreilly@niagara.edu](mailto:dreilly@niagara.edu).*

# Elections 2016: Time to Vote!

As a member of the Sierra Club, you are asked to participate in two elections this fall. The first is our Niagara Group election of members of the Executive Committee – see information in this Trailblazer. The other election is for members At Large for the Atlantic Chapter (New York State) of the Sierra Club. Information will be available in the next issue of Sierra Atlantic, and also on the website: <http://atlantic2.sierraclub.org/>. We ask for your considered participation!!!

Please read the following biographies of the candidates.

## Laura Evans

Growing up in Western New York, I spent a lot of time outside falling in love with the natural world. This love fueled my environmental education and work over the past 12 years. I graduated from Cornell University in 2007 with a degree in Natural Resources, then moved to Austin, Texas to be an AmeriCorps literacy tutor while applying to law school. In 2008, I studied at University of Texas School of Law and took every environmental and administrative law course possible, edited the Texas Environmental Law Journal and worked in Alaska for Earthjustice. I practiced environmental law in Texas for four years. Currently, I'm an environmental consultant, authoring environmental review documents for federal navigation and water supply projects. The Sierra Club Niagara Group's Climate Justice Rally in September 2015 was my introduction to this group. I continue to be impressed with the Climate Justice Campaign's ability to bring many diverse groups of people together around the common goal of taking climate action.

I am deeply concerned about the environmental problems that our world faces, especially over-extended natural resources, climate change, and pollution of all kinds. Although I am grateful for my legal background, I am more interested in environmental education and motivating non-traditional environmentalists to live a sustainable life. In an attempt to inform more people about environmental policy and healthy living, I taught myself how to create websites. I created and continue to work on two websites: [www.keepingthingsalive.org](http://www.keepingthingsalive.org) and [www.fedgreen.org](http://www.fedgreen.org). I am excited to amplify my public education efforts by joining forces with the passionate and dedicated members of the Sierra Club Niagara Group.

## Bob Ciesielski

My experience serving on the Executive Committee of the Niagara Group dates back to 2004. My past and present roles in the Sierra Club have varied over time, including my role as SCNG Chair for five years. Currently, I am serving as Delegate-at-large to the NYS Atlantic Chapter, and was appointed State Atlantic Chapter Energy Chair in January 2012. I have been actively involved in the opposition movement toward hydro-fracking and gas pipelines and am a strong advocate of local and statewide renewable energy development, stressing the economic benefits of a new energy economy. I currently continue my passionate advocacy for our natural world, and thank you for supporting the Niagara Group to protect the health of our environment, citizens and children.

## Laurence Beahan

I have been elected to the Board of Sierra Club's Niagara Group quite a few times now. Over the years, I have served as Niagara Group Secretary, Vice Chair, Group Chair, Conservation Chair, Group Delegate and Alternate Delegate to the Atlantic Chapter, as well as Delegate to the Niagara Relicensing Environmental Coalition. Over my long incumbency, our group has had lots of energetic new blood on the Niagara Group Board. New faces, new ideas, and new energy certainly, well, keep us "honest". But isn't it useful to have tenured members around who "remember where the bones are buried?" When we start to reinvent the wheel, I remind the group how we did it last time, am familiar with many of the intricacies of National SC, and how our bylaws affect our operation.

As current Conservation Chair, some of my work has focused on the preservation of Buffalo's Outer Harbor as a natural and public park, humane standards for trapping on Grand Island, limitation of National Fuels Occupation of Allegany State Park, blocking the water-way threats of the Northern Access Pipeline, promoted wind power on Niagara Counties Lake Ontario shore and monitored Niagara Greenway monies to ensure they were actually spent on "Green" projects. In addition, I have written several books of fiction and history on Allegany State Park and the Adirondacks and have maintained a longstanding interest in their conservation.

I would be very pleased to have another crack at it.

## John Szalasny

I come from the silent majority in America – the population who cares about the environment and would like to see it preserved for future generations, but also feel under qualified and overwhelmed by the need to save the polar bears and the amazon rainforest (and everything else!). The issues are too global, and the environmental threats from big business interests

too powerful for one voice to make a difference.

Hearing the dire predictions from Al Gore & Bill McKibben, I knew I had to get involved. Before I became overwhelmed by the need to "Save The Planet", I needed to determine what my "Think Global – Act Local" action plan would be. The issue that got me started was hydrofracking. I wrote a 'Letter to the Editor' in the Buffalo News on the non-decision of banning hydrofracking in NYS at that time. In addition, I joined the Amherst Against Fracking group. It took two years, but the Town of Amherst passed a local fracking ban which also prohibits entry & disposal of fracking byproducts. Recently, I was appointed to Amherst's Energy Conservation Citizens Advisory Committee where I hope to press the finalization of the town's certification as a Climate Smart Community.

The Sierra Club Writer's Group has been my primary activity in SCNG. I have had multiple publications in the Buffalo News and the Amherst Bee on issues, including the Northern Access pipeline, Bomb Trains, and proposed a reuse of the Huntley Power Plant site as a solar park. Saving the planet may not be possible for one individual, but I hope to save one environmental issue at a time and would appreciate the opportunity to put my energy and ideas into effect through this very active WNY group.

## Nicole Gerber

I grew up in Grand Island, NY and my favorite activities always involved being outdoors and exploring nature and learning about the plants and animals in the environment. During high school and college, I worked at a small animal hospital and studied biology at the University at Buffalo where I obtained my Doctor of Philosophy in Biological Sciences. Though my career has not involved animals, my enjoyment in working with animals led me and my dog Monty to volunteering as a therapy dog and handler team and founding the therapy dog program at Roswell Park Cancer Institute.

In recent years, my fiancé, Dave, and our family have become strong supporters and advocates of the environment and wildlife. We participated in the People's Climate March and initiated a campaign to eliminate sport wildlife trapping on Grand Island public lands. The Humane Society of the United States recruited us as WNY District Leaders based on the actions of the campaign. We have created permaculture gardens and butterfly, pollinator and bird gardens. We have fields with native milkweed, and registered that space as a Monarch Way Station with Monarch Watch. Our butterfly garden was featured in the 2016 Grand Island Garden Walk. We obtained certification of our yard in the Erie County SPCA Humane Habitat Program and continue to expand and create sustainable

gardens and landscapes that protect the land and natural species. Recently I obtained a NYSDEC Wildlife Rehabilitator License and will be volunteering as a wildlife intern with the Erie County SPCA.

As my personal interests and passions are animals and the environment, I am interested in assisting the Sierra Club Niagara Group advance and implement the organization's wildlife and native plant mission, with the primary focus to preserve and protect wildlife and habitats. Sierra Club Founder John Muir supported and defended equal rights of wildlife. He believed that wildlife had equal rights with humans and that animals can teach us about wisdom and civility if we observe and appreciate them. The loss of habitats and ecosystems has increased due to man-made influences that include climate change, so it is critically important to promote education, increase awareness, and advocate on behalf of the wildlife and environment. Serving on the Executive Committee would assist SCNG incorporate the goals as envisioned and set forth many years ago by John Muir.

## Ellen C. Banks

My first environmental project was a high school paper on the pollution of the Mohawk River by General Electric. Girl Scout camp in the Adirondacks and rambling in the woods near home in Schenectady gave me a love of the outdoors. Being a working class kid in a middle class school environment brought awareness of social class inequality.

The SCNG Climate and Energy committee was formed in 2006 and later affiliated with the Sierra Club, I am currently chairing this committee. With the Sierra Writers' Group, I've published many letters to editors, op-eds, and a feature article on wind power in the Buffalo News.

Retiring from full-time employment in 2014 has permitted increased involvement in the Niagara Group, as an interim member of the Niagara Group Executive Committee, and a delegate to the Beyond Coal Campaign. I am a member of the Town of Amherst Conservation Advisory Council and a delegate to the Town's zoning revision committee, active in the Foothills Trail Club, and enjoy hiking, camping and paddling, especially in the Adirondacks.

As climate change becomes apparent all around us, and even more intensely in coastal areas, it is imperative to build coalitions to leave all fossil fuels in the ground and to develop renewable energy. I'm encouraged by the emphasis on Climate Justice and the multi-faceted partner organizations that combine climate action with community development, work and leadership development, and other aspects of social justice. I would like to continue my efforts to protect and conserve our environment well into the future.

## Nominees for 2017-18 term on Niagara Group Executive Committee

**IMPORTANT: Single Membership - Use one ballot. Joint Membership - Use both ballots. Ballots must be received by December 25, 2016**

### NIAGARA GROUP OFFICIAL BALLOTS

**BALLOT 1**  
BOARD OF GOVERNANCE  
AT-LARGE DELEGATES  
CHOOSE UP TO 6 BOARD MEMBERS

- Laura Evans  
 Bob Ciesielski  
 Laurence Beahan  
 John Szalasny  
 Nicole Gerber  
 Ellen C. Banks

**BALLOT 2**  
BOARD OF GOVERNANCE  
AT-LARGE DELEGATES  
CHOOSE UP TO 6 BOARD MEMBERS

- Laura Evans  
 Bob Ciesielski  
 Laurence Beahan  
 John Szalasny  
 Nicole Gerber  
 Ellen C. Banks

#### Election Instructions:

To be eligible to vote, you must be a member in good standing with the Niagara Group as verified by a member's mailing label. Please read all of the candidates' statements on Page 2. Indicate your choices by checking the box next to the candidates' names on the ballot. Each member may complete one ballot. Joint members may complete two ballots. Please detach this page and mail your ballot(s) to the address below in an ordinary letter-size envelope with proper postage. Send your ballots to:

2016 Niagara Group Elections Committee • Sierra Club Niagara Group • P.O. Box 1127 • Williamsville, NY 14221-1127

**\*Ballots must be received on or before 12/25/2016\***