Big Crises Require Big Investments

Why the Size of the Recovery Plan Matters

We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build a more just economy. President Biden’s American Jobs Plan (AJP) offers a promising start. Now we’re asking Congress to go even bigger and deliver a plan as large as the physical reality of the climate crisis, the economic reality of mass unemployment, and the structural reality of systemic racism.

Economic modeling shows that Congress should invest $1 trillion per year for a decade to create over 15 million good jobs and achieve full employment; cut climate pollution in half by 2030; and meaningfully curb racial, economic, gender, and environmental injustice. The THRIVE Act embraces this bold plan, with backing from dozens of congressional leaders, a strong majority of voters, and over 100 union, racial justice, climate, and other grassroots groups.

Millions of human livelihoods are at stake. With large investments, millions of people will achieve cleaner air and water, healthier living conditions, family-sustaining wages, and climate resilience. A plan that is too small, however, would ask many communities—particularly Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color—to continue to endure high rates of asthma, economic insecurity, and destructive storms. Here are some specific examples of why scale matters:

**Clean energy**
The burning of gas and coal for electricity is responsible for one-fourth of U.S. climate pollution. It also contributes to the over 300,000 deaths in the U.S. each year that are caused by air pollution from fossil fuels. Economists estimate that to meet Biden’s goal of cutting climate pollution in half by 2030, we need to swiftly spur a five-fold increase in wind, solar, and geothermal power. This will require $1.1 trillion in public investments over the next decade, with three times as much coming from the private sector. These investments should include direct pay tax incentives, as in the Clean Energy for America Act. The initial AJP proposal would invest $400 billion—about one-third of what’s needed. Congress should go further. Compared to the initial AJP proposal, investing at the full amount would provide over 700,000 additional clean energy jobs each year, prevent tens of thousands of additional deaths from air pollution, and enable the U.S. to meet its goal of cutting climate pollution in half.

**Public transportation**
Each year, over 20,000 people in the U.S. die from air pollution emitted by gas vehicles, while transportation is the largest source of our country’s climate pollution. One solution is to expand access to clean, affordable, and electrified public transit. The initial AJP proposal allocates $85 billion to public transit. Congress should go further and invest the $200 billion that is required to fully electrify our public transit buses, school buses, and commuter rail, while also investing to expand access to public transit, as in the BUILD GREEN Infrastructure and Jobs Act. Compared to the initial AJP proposal, investing $200 billion just to electrify public transit would prevent over 2,000 additional deaths from air pollution, cut an additional 12 million metric tons of climate pollution, and create about 200,000 additional good jobs.

**Electric vehicles**
Another way to reduce our reliance on gas vehicles, and the lethal air and climate pollution that result, is to make electric vehicles more affordable. The initial AJP proposal allocates $174 billion for electric vehicles. Congress should go further by fully funding the Clean Cars for America proposal from Senate Majority Leader Schumer that would invest $454 billion to replace over 63 million gas vehicles with affordable, U.S.-made, union-built electric vehicles. Doing so would replace over 30 million additional gas vehicles and create more than 200,000 additional good jobs, compared to the initial AJP proposal. This investment also would slash climate pollution and spare thousands of people from air pollution-related deaths.
Public housing
Over 2 million people live in public housing. The initial AJP proposal includes a $40 billion investment in public housing. Congress should go further to upgrade the full public housing stock, which would cost about three times as much, as reflected in the broadly backed Green New Deal for Public Housing. Compared to the initial AJP proposal, investing at the full amount would improve living standards for over 1 million additional public housing residents, cut an additional 4 million metric tons of climate pollution, and create an additional 160,000 good jobs.

Water, transportation, and electricity infrastructure
The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) has given our physical infrastructure a grade of C-, reflecting long-neglected repair needs for crumbling public transit, rail, roads and bridges, drinking water, stormwater, wastewater, electric, and school infrastructure. The initial AJP proposal includes $664 billion for these categories, while ASCE estimates that more than $2.5 trillion—about four times as much—is needed just to get our physical infrastructure to a B grade. Congress should invest at the full amount. Compared to the initial AJP proposal, this would create over 3 million additional good jobs, upgrade thousands of additional schools in disrepair, improve unhealthy stormwater systems in hundreds of additional communities, and ensure greater electric grid reliability to prevent disastrous grid failures like the one that communities in Texas recently endured.

Pollution cleanup
About 21 million people live within one mile of a Superfund site—places laden with hazardous waste and toxic pollution. The initial AJP proposal includes $5 billion to remediate polluted Superfund and Brownfields sites. Leading members of Congress have called for four to six times as much investment to address the historic backlog of unfunded cleanup needs. Congress should invest at the full amount proposed by congressional leaders. Compared to the initial AJP proposal, this would clean up dozens of additional polluted sites in communities across the country instead of leaving them to bear the health consequences of toxic air and water.

Unplugged oil and gas wells
The U.S. has at least 2.6 million unplugged oil and gas wells. Each year, unplugged wells leak an estimated 7 million metric tons of methane, a potent greenhouse gas, along with carcinogens that harm nearby communities. The initial AJP proposal includes $16 billion for plugging oil and gas wells and reclaiming abandoned mines. Environmental and Indigenous groups are calling for over twice as much—$35 billion—to clean up nearly 500,000 orphaned oil and gas wells, while urging $10 billion more for abandoned mine reclamation. Congress should heed these calls. Compared to the initial AJP proposal, this would create tens of thousands of additional good jobs for oil and gas workers and plug over 200,000 additional oil and gas wells, addressing a dangerous source of toxic emissions and climate pollution.

Civilian Climate Corps
Millions of workers need to be hired to conserve our public lands and waters, protect and restore forests and wetlands that help reduce climate impacts, support community repairs after storms and floods, enhance recreation, and improve health outcomes. There is no shortage of workers ready to do such work. Half of all voters under the age of 45 say they would consider joining a new Civilian Climate Corps (CCC) to work on such projects. The initial AJP proposal allocates $10 billion to create such a CCC, which would provide jobs for fewer than 30,000 workers. Congress should go further and invest $132 billion to create a CCC workforce that looks like America, drawing on the Civilian Climate Corps for Jobs and Justice Act, 21st Century Conservation Corps Act, and RENEW Conservation Corps Act. Compared to the initial AJP proposal, this would create good jobs for nearly 300,000 additional workers in just the first year while supporting climate resilience in hundreds of additional communities nationwide.