

PEOPLE OVER PROFIT: THE CAMPAIGN FOR UTILITIES JUSTICE IN ALBANY, GA

Executive Summary

July 2021





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No one's light bill should be higher than their rent. Yet, too many of Albany's working families are having to choose between paying their electric bills or paying for food or medicine. Utility bills can easily be \$300, \$400, \$800 each month. The People Over Profit: Campaign for Utilities Justices in Albany, GA report explores the critical question — “Why are the light bills so damn high?” and puts forth a list of demands by the community to address the utilities crisis.

Utility justice is the right to have affordable, accessible, healthy, and community- controlled energy.

So why are the light bills so high?

According to the National Resource Defense Council¹, low income households in the Southeast have some of the highest energy burdens – African-American households in the US experience a median energy burden 64% greater than white households.

Energy burden is the percentage of income that goes to all household energy costs such as electricity, heating.

The report presents four main reasons for the energy burden in Albany:

1) Monopoly of energy

Energy is generated by a few, powerful corporate entities – namely Georgia Power, a subsidiary of Southern Company, which is one of the largest providers of energy in the South, and worth billions of dollars.

2) Challenges with Local and State Governance and Accountability

Power is purchased by cities like Albany through the Municipal Electric Authority of Georgia, a nonprofit joint action agency that the City is locked into with decades-long contracts. These contracts can become burdensome on cities like Albany that are experiencing economic decline.



¹ <https://www.nrdc.org/experts/khalil-shahyd/study-highlights-energy-burden-households-and-how-energy-efficiency-can-help>



3) Poor Housing Conditions

Most of Albany's housing, especially in South and East Albany, was built before 1980 (some before 1960), and is energy inefficient. Much of the property is dilapidated and blighted, and the majority of the city residents are tenants, many of whom rent from slumlords. 60 percent of the city's residents rent, 64% of housing stock is at elevated risk for lead hazard exposure, 67% of renters spend more than 1/3 of their income on housing and energy costs, and 38% of renters spend more than half of their income on housing and energy costs

4) Climate Change and Energy

Climate disasters like the floods of 1994, tornadoes, hurricanes, and more have severely impacted housing quality and stability in Albany, and the quality of utility services provided.

These burdens create major financial insecurity, especially for black, indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) women and families who often bear the brunt of poor housing, climate disasters, and high light bills.

What is the movement doing?

After identifying high light bills as one of the most pervasive issues facing women and working families in Southwest Georgia in 2017, 9to5 Georgia quickly mobilized and co-founded the Albany Coalition to Lower Utility Bills (ACLUB) with Black Voters Matter and SOWEGA Rising.

Rooted in community power and justice, ACLUB has been leading community meetings, protesting, and pushing leaders to become more transparent and community - oriented, helped get out the vote in local elections, and worked with 9to5 Georgia to launch the Utilities Justice Fellowship Program.

The Utilities Justice Fellowship Program is for people in Albany and Southwest Georgia with high utility bills to educate, train, and organize for economic justice. The fellows have been a strong and powerful voice demanding solutions from city leaders and working with other advocates to bring attention to the utilities crisis. After the first cohort's protests, petitions, and subsequent meetings with city officials, the city adopted two major reforms to address the utilities crisis - the [Energy Conservation Loan Program](#) that assists residents to weatherize their homes and the [Know B4 You Move](#) policy that allows residents to check the average light bill before moving into a place.





Just help us out. The utilities are higher than the rent most months.
- Albany resident

We [are] paying late on a lot of other stuff because we can't do anything but pay utilities. I've had audit after audit after audit and they find nothing wrong.
-Albany resident

Much work remains: Moving forward with our demands

The report concludes with eight demands necessary for a long-term systemic change. These demands will make a difference because it has been centered and developed by working families in Albany, GA.

The following steps are necessary for a long-term systemic change:

1. Establish a Utilities Justice Taskforce of community members, elected officials, and utilities management and City staff to work on utilities reform and long-term policy changes
2. Establish Tenants Bill of Rights and Utilities Bill of Rights
3. Establish the Office of Sustainability in the City of Albany
4. Conduct an external audit of Albany Utilities
5. Allocate public investment in solar energy
6. Establish public accountability measures
7. Increase taxes on land and inherited wealth
8. Adopt a local Green New Deal — an investment in creating jobs and building new energy efficient housing

Our hope is that this report will clarify the current state of Albany's utilities crisis, highlight the people taking on the fight, and amplify the opportunities for a better Southwest Georgia and a new South.

To access the full report, go to <https://bit.ly/9to5PeopleOverProfitReport>.

