

RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EP 480 TRANSCRIPT

Steve Skrovan: Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. My name is Steve Skrovan along with my co-host David Feldman. Hello, David.

David Feldman: Hello, Steve.

Steve Skrovan: And the man of the hour, Ralph Nader. Hello, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Hello, everybody. We're talking about citizen victories today.

Steve Skrovan: For more than four years, the Sierra Club in Maryland has been fighting Governor Larry Hogan over an \$11 billion highway expansion bill. The proposed expansion would have widened the Capital Beltway, built new toll lanes and ultimately added hundreds of miles of highway to an already congested and polluted region. The politicians backing these plans argued that expansion is necessary for progress and that it will decrease traffic from millions of DC-area commuters. The Sierra Club and their allies insisted that the financial and health related cost of such an expansion was unacceptable; it would increase air and water pollution and disrupt surrounding communities. Our first guest today is auto safety expert, Byron Bloch. He'll join us to discuss the Sierra Club's successful campaign to stop Governor Hogan from approving the expansion bill, and what Maryland's election of their new governor, Wes Moore, means for their ongoing work.

The second part of our show will be joined by Sari Kayyali, Microgrids, Manager for GreenRoots now focusing on Chelsea and Chinatown power microgrids, self-sufficient energy systems that serve a discrete geographical area, like a neighborhood or college campus. As global warming and decaying infrastructure threaten our power systems, microgrids are one option for building more resilient sources of energy. We'll speak to Mr. Kayyali about the possibilities for microgrids to make essential utilities more accessible to vulnerable communities, promote sustainable local development and give consumers a voice in how they receive their energy.

Finally, as a bonus, we're going to speak to our executive producer and the executive director of Progressive Democrats of America, Alan Minsky, about the work PDA is doing to bolster the Progressive movement. He's in Washington, D.C. attending some conferences and we'll have the latest from him. As always, somewhere in there we're going to check with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber. But first, it's always good to hear about activism that succeeds. David?

David Feldman: Byron Bloch is an independent consultant and court-qualified expert in Auto Safety Design and Vehicle Crashworthiness. Over the years, he has fought for safer fuel tanks, stronger seats, the need for airbags, better truck underride guards, and has testified on these safety issues at Congressional Hearings, and to NHTSA. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Byron Bloch.

Byron Bloch: Thank you, and it's quite a pleasure to join with Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Welcome, Byron. People should know that Byron was an auto safety reporter on ABC television in Los Angeles for seven years, so he knows how to talk concisely and factually. I want to start with telling the audience that this situation that Byron's going to describe in terms of highway expansion in Maryland has similar patterns with these public-private partnerships around the country. Different actors, similar problems. And Byron lives in Potomac, Maryland and so he caught wind of this Australian corporation connecting with the Maryland state government and proposing what's called a public-private partnership to widen the major I-270 and I-495 highways in the Greater D.C., Maryland, Virginia area. And in a detailed description submitted to the authorities, Byron Bloch says, quote, "The scheme is fraught with critical public health and safety hazards that will adversely affect adjacent communities and counties for decades to come. Many thousands of our citizens will be sickened with asthma, silicosis, lung cancer. This Hogan-Transurban scheme is unwarranted, irrational, must be stopped from proceeding any further. Indeed, it even increases traffic congestion.

Now, I'm going to give away the result but Byron and others, he's going to describe "stop this project cold". So Byron, why don't you describe how the civic community, including the Sierra Club and you, rose up to block what was going to be a huge boondoggle and a hazard for hundreds of thousands of people?

Byron Bloch: Okay. This was a concerted effort by many citizens and organizations such as the Maryland chapter of the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council and others, including citizens groups that were named Don't Widen270.org is one, and another one was CABA, Citizens Against Beltway Expansion, 495.org. Various environmentally focused organizations got together, and we had a series of in-person meetings, and of course over the pandemic years, we had Zoom meetings as well. And we coordinated our efforts to show that this was a scheme that would be injurious to public health and traffic safety would not reduce congestion as that was the ploy to widen the I-270 and the 495 Beltway and add two high-priced toll lanes in each direction. This was recently stopped when Transurban, the lead company in this consortium of the public-private partnership scheme, just recently withdrew a couple of months ago. Transurban withdrew because of public pressure from citizen organizations and individual citizens, and I was proud to be one of the many people who contributed to that effort.

Ralph Nader: Well, in your description, which is very detailed and informed hundreds of citizens and citizen groups, you said that all these health concerns toxic pollution, risks of respiratory diseases—were not even addressed in the environmental impact study. How does a giant Australian corporation, Transurban, get its hooks into the Maryland state government?

Byron Bloch: Well, I should point out, Transurban doesn't actually do the work. They don't make the highways wider or do that kind of work. They subcontract out to other companies to do the real work. What they do is push the scheme at the state level to try to get cooperative, let's call it, partnerships with the public government—in this case it was with Governor Larry Hogan, who was the Maryland Republican governor. He's no longer the governor. He's been replaced with a Democratic governor. So what they do, under the guise of it being a public-private

partnership, is try to say that it won't cost the state money because it'll be done with private funding and all we want is for the predominant toll revenue from these high-priced toll lanes to go to us for 50 years to help repay the money that we fronted to get this thing built. Basically, Transurban was the agent that orchestrated putting the scheme together.

Ralph Nader: What kind of massive amounts of silica would have been polluting the air over large numbers of square miles here?

Byron Bloch: I was one of many people who examined portions of the environmental impact study, which they were required to produce, and I tried to see what they were ignoring, what they did not include. And one of the things that jumped out to me was that they were not at all addressing the issue of what is called crystalline silica construction dust, which the National Cancer Institute has identified as toxic and a carcinogenic and that you should not be breathing in the silica construction dust during the length of this project which could go from three to five years of literally cutting apart and destroying the existing road, which is mostly concrete construction, and the many bridges that go across the road and the sound walls. And daily for three to five years, wherever you lived along the way, you would be breathing in toxic carcinogenic silica construction dust, as they were using the saws to cut through the concrete and then cart it away. God knows where they would take it to. And in the meantime, the tiny particles of silica construction dust would be breathed in by children playing outside, people taking walks with their dogs or for exercise or bicyclists. We'd all be breathing this in. We'd have to keep the windows closed in our residences and in our schools. And the kids couldn't go out and play at recess.

Ralph Nader: The state of Maryland and the Australian company's argument was that they had to widen and rebuild the road and the bridges on I-270 and 495. What's going to happen now?

Byron Bloch: Well, what's going to happen now, and they ignored this by the way, is that the so-called traffic congestion had been significantly alleviated because of the workarounds that many people did during the three-year pandemic era and the so-called congestion on the road would have been exacerbated, increased by going... now it's five lanes that funnel down to two, going north toward Frederick, Maryland. And can you imagine if they're saying it's a congested road now, where you have five lanes funneling down to two, but they wanted to make it seven or eight lanes funneling down to two, which would have increased the bottleneck problem of funneling even more lanes of traffic down to those same two lanes as you go north of Gaithersburg to Frederick, Maryland.

Ralph Nader: How did they draw it down from five to two? What they're trying to do seems to be contradictory. Is it because of the construction period that they have to do that?

Byron Bloch: No, no, no. Right now, that stretch of road from Gaithersburg north to Frederick, is only two lanes in each direction. So what they should have focused on but didn't, was widening the two lanes that go north from Gaithersburg, Maryland and north to Frederick, Maryland to make those lanes four lanes or possibly five instead of two. They should have been widened previously, but that would alleviate the bottleneck situation of the traffic, certainly the

northbound traffic, which is one of the major things they're saying that this Transurban scheme was going to alleviate.

Ralph Nader: After the victory, do you think they're coming back—that the Australian company and their allies are going to come back with another scheme?

Byron Bloch: Yes. My colleagues and I have discussed this; it's Transurban's modus operandi. And there are other companies as well that try to entice states and counties to these public-private partnerships where they then capture and take over one or more of those publicly funded roads and privatize some of those lanes in each direction that were built and paid for with public funding, as toll lanes. They want to take over, so they're very creative in promoting under the guise of alleviating traffic congestion. But they ignore the environmental impact, such as the silica construction dust that will give children and adults respiratory diseases. By the way, when they were challenged on that, they said, "Well, we may," they came back with a modification in the environmental impact study — and they had not addressed this initially, Ralph, disgracefully so, they had totally ignored it — and the response was, "We're going to consider using the tanker trucks with water to water down the work areas where we're going to be cutting the concrete so then we can suck up the silica construction dust that will be in the water. That is a very marginal process at best, and it's even been criticized within the roadbuilding industry as being a marginal, minimally effective way to capture the silica dust.

Ralph Nader: Before we get to the overall goal that affects all public highways in the US, which is corporations are basically telling the states they can relieve them of running these highways by taking them over on 50-year leases, we collect the tolls. And the politicians seem to get relieved short-term. Before we get to that, did the civic and environmental group oppositions involve something other than just public information? Were there lawsuits involved?

Byron Bloch: Yes. There were lawsuits filed by a collection of some of the organizations I mentioned, for example, the Maryland chapter of the Sierra Club working with the NRDC, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and other organizations. They got together and filed litigation, which is another area that citizen groups listening to your program should consider because the required environmental impact studies are typically done in such a minimal, evasive fashion that opportunity exists for citizen groups to protest and then to file litigation alleging that the environmental impact studies are totally inadequate in many ways, including public health and traffic safety issues.

Ralph Nader: This drive to corporatize public highways is a huge pot of gold that is seen by these corporations. Some of them are US, some of them are out of Spain and Australia, as we mentioned. They've got a whole lesson plan on how to do it. They went into Indiana and assured officials not to worry about their highways because they'll be well maintained if you just give us a 50-year lease. And you won't even have to use public funds. Then before they know it, the tolls start going up and people can't do anything about it. They took over the public parking garages in Chicago, promising all kinds of relief for the taxpayers, and then suddenly the parking rates went up and they couldn't do anything about it. So it's part of the corporatization of public infrastructure. In Connecticut for example, the private electric utility monopoly, Eversource, is buying up drinking water systems in small towns, saying the same thing, i.e., since your budgets

are strapped, small towns, we'll take the burden, just let us buy these drinking water systems out. So they either want to buy them out when it comes to drinking water systems or they want these 50-year guarantees, full of fine-print contracts secretly negotiated between state officials and these corporate lawyers. So here we go again. What's your take, Byron Bloch, on how to keep these corporations at bay so they don't come back again and again? How are you getting ready to block them from coming back with a new scheme?

Byron Bloch: Well, for one thing, Ralph, as you pointed out many years ago involving with the auto industry, the revolving door game keeps going on. And that's where people of the state government and county government end up becoming consultants and then employees of the companies that are trying to push this. That's one thing that happened in the Hogan Administration. A top employee left to go to work for Transurban. And of course, you know the connections are there and the political contributions are there, so the politicians feel grateful for the contribution, and ask "How can we help you?" Being very mindful and regulate and make public the contributions from these companies.

Ralph Nader: When you documented the corporate cash going into the pockets of these campaigning state legislators, did the cash register work, no hearings in Annapolis by the state legislative committees on this?

Byron Bloch: Correct. Yes. It was pushed through as a godsend by Governor Hogan as a way to alleviate traffic congestion and not have to spend our money because this nice company from Australia is going to fund everything and alleviate the financial burden on the citizens of the State of Maryland.

Ralph Nader: And was the 50-year contract released publicly for review before it was signed off by state officials?

Byron Bloch: No, not yet.

Ralph Nader: Is it public now?

Byron Bloch: No. This is being requested in the litigation process for the contractual obligations of the state to pay Transurban or whoever would be the privatized party for the payback on the toll scheme.

Ralph Nader: Listeners, this is what we've been talking about week after week. The corporate state arrives in different manifestations – the military-industrial complex and the pentagon – this is what's going on at the state level. Doesn't get many national headlines, but it's the merger of corporations with state government and a lot of secrecy involved, a lot of phony promises, a lot of misleading rhetoric, and the legislators are compromised by the campaign contributions and the pressure from the governor's office. And before you know it, 50 years handcuffs and higher and higher tolls. So tell our listeners, Byron Bloch, how much time, how much effort did it really take? You told me earlier when you talked to me about this months ago, you weren't getting great press, you weren't getting much press at all in the *Washington Post* and *Baltimore Sun*.

How did you pull it off? Did you have a lot of meetings with the Sierra Club local, with the NRDC, with other citizen groups? Give us an idea how much time and effort it took.

Byron Bloch: Okay. In brief, this scheme started in 2017, when Governor Hogan and Transurban announced that this was their proposal to alleviate congestion on the Beltway around Washington, D.C. and this major road in the State of Maryland, the I-270. Citizen groups became concerned as they learned what was going to happen and how it would infringe on the parklands and forest areas here in Maryland, and how it would take away residences and other public property adjacent to the widening of the road. And citizen groups started to learn more about these proposals that would alleviate congestion. The big banner that Governor Hogan and Transurban were waving was "No one likes congestion. We're going to alleviate it with this wonderful plan." So I got involved and was educated a lot also by the Sierra Club people and others regarding the environmental impact study that was required by law and could I help analyze certain portions of it with regard to vehicle safety and other issues. I became very concerned that the Hogan and Transurban plan was not addressing public health issues.

Ralph Nader: And all of you didn't even think you could go to the state legislature or some sympathetic, say, Democratic state senators and representatives?

Byron Bloch: We tried.

Ralph Nader: Hogan just took the legislature off the map?

Byron Bloch: Yeah. We tried. Here in Montgomery County, Maryland, our Montgomery County Council basically was smooth talked by Governor Hogan that if you don't vote to stop this project here in Montgomery County the carrot was he'd consider some state funding for public transit and other perks to help you as well. And so the nine-member county council at the time got bamboozled with these phony promises as he told them verbally that if they vote to allow this public-private partnership with Transurban to go through and to privatize the toll lanes and widen the 270, he would help with the other needs in your county. And the county council members did not have the spine or the analytical ability and the courage to say, wait a second; there are many other adverse areas that you're overlooking with this widening and tolling scheme, so we're going to vote against it.

Ralph Nader: Okay. So thank goodness for judicial procedures. I think the giant Australian firm, Transurban, said, "They've got a very credible case to defeat a motion to dismiss and this is going to have to go through the courts for months if not years, we're out of here." Byron Bloch, I want Steve and David to come in here because they have some questions or comments.

Steve Skrovan: Yeah, Byron, glad to have you here. Aren't freeways, highways kind of like fish tanks that no matter how big you make the road, the traffic conforms to the size of the road? Do all of these widening schemes really relieve congestion? Because I live in Los Angeles and that never seems to happen.

Byron Bloch: No, no, no. And I used to live in Los Angeles, and one of the main reasons my family and I left was the insane overly congested roads that take you two hours to round trip it to

something at an adjacent area that should be a 20-minute round trip became a two-hour round trip. And Steve, you probably have seen what they've done with the San Diego Freeway going over the Sepulveda Pass. It was more lanes and more lanes and more lanes and that will alleviate traffic congestion. What it actually does though is invites more vehicles to use those wider roads on the pretext that it'll make your trip quicker and easier. And it is a pretext because the roads fill up very rapidly. What we have to do is refocus and say we are a people-oriented nation, not a vehicle-oriented nation. And if you look at it in terms of people-oriented nation, then you ask, what are the economics, and what are the health and safety issues that affect people. But instead, it becomes the almighty vehicle-ization of the nation and that means more lanes, more traffic, more lanes and then more traffic.

Ralph Nader: I'll bet you some of our listeners are thinking, Talk about public transit, modern mass transit as the alternative. Well, months and months ago, we mentioned the GM oil company, tire company criminal conspiracy in the late 1930s and 1940s that bought up 29 urban trolley systems, which they thought was their competition and scuttled them. And the biggest one was in the Greater Los Angeles area. They bought up the biggest trolley system in North America and in effect, disabled it. And they were caught by the Justice Department, criminal prosecution under the antitrust laws in Chicago federal district court. And the Justice Department won. The fine on General Motors was \$5000. And to this day, people are suffering in Southern California because of this criminal conspiracy. They're suffering from air pollution, from delays, irritation, auto crashes, all of which could have been minimized by maintaining and modernizing this great trolley system.

Byron Bloch: When this Hogan and Transurban scheme was put forth, one of the things that jumped out to me was that this was not a multimodal transportation proposal. It was only "widen the roads and add toll lanes." Where was any public transit or for bicyclists and pedestrians and other concerns as well as rapid transit trains and electric buses and so on? And I said very succinctly, if this were proposed in Europe instead of here in Maryland, it would have been laughed at because it doesn't have anything multimodal, which to most of the European nations, makes it a non-starter, unless you include multimodal transportation, meaning, public transportation as well as car-centric. So that was sort of an alarm right from the beginning. Where's the multimodal –

Ralph Nader: On that point, Byron, how can people get a hold of your very clear documented case against this boondoggle that was defeated for the time being by civic action?

Byron Bloch: Yeah. Actually, the Sierra Club used that same thing that I sent to you. They used that as part of their submission to the state in opposition to the Transurban scheme. And the Sierra Club would be the resource to contact. So it would be the sierraclub.org/maryland. And by contacting the Sierra Club of Maryland, that's where they have that information, my pages and information as well.

Ralph Nader: David?

David Feldman: What's the environmental impact on people who live alongside toll roads? Because many people who drive professionally know how to avoid tolls, so what do toll roads do to service roads and city streets?

Byron Bloch: It increases the traffic going on and off the toll lanes and sometimes they have to be able to fly over ramps that go up in the air to get the centrally located toll lane entry and exit across the other public lanes as well. So it becomes like you see in Los Angeles, the multi-level ramps that go in all kinds of directions as you try to figure out where to connect to. So it's along those lines. But the health effects are horrific. Even the increase in the particulates from the tires and the brakes cause toxic materials to be ingested by citizens who live within a mile or two even of these increasingly congested roads. So it's a major health hazard that is not being addressed at all. The toxic silica construction dust during the phase of demolishing the existing concrete structures and then rebuilding is not addressed. Nor is the particulate inhalation from the tires and the brake linings addressed. So we are literally breathing in the materials that will give all of us asthma, silicosis, COPD and lung cancer. And it's not a maybe. It's well-documented by the American Public Health Association, by the National Cancer Institute. They've all documented these adverse health effects and they are not being responded to with remedial measures by the companies that want to build and widen all these roads.

Ralph Nader: Unfortunately, we're out of time. We've been talking with Byron Bloch, auto safety expert advocate, expert witness in product liability cases, who joined this citizen movement with environmental groups using the courts to block this ill-considered boondoggle that was conceived in secrecy and perpetrated with corporate campaign cash spreading around. I was surprised, Byron, that the *Washington Post* didn't highlight this more, because their Maryland edition has a number of reporters. But you prevailed anyway, and we'll keep up-to-date if the Australian company comes back for a second attempt to get this accomplished. Thank you very much, Byron.

Byron Bloch: Thank you, Ralph, for bringing this subject to public attention.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with Byron Bloch. We will link to his work at ralphnaderradiohour.com. Up next, we welcome Sari Kayyali to talk about microgrids. What are they and what can they do? But first, let's check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber.

Russell Mokhiber: From the National Press Building in Washington, D.C., this is your *Corporate Crime Reporter* "Morning Minute" for Friday, May 19, 2023. I'm Russell Mokhiber.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) said last week that 67 million airbag inflators made by Knoxville, Tennessee based ARC Automotive pose an unreasonable risk of death and injury to vehicle occupants and must be replaced before more people die. In a statement eerily reminiscent of Takata Corporation's decade-long resistance to recalls of its own airbag killers, ARC refused to comply. "ARC appears to be following the Takata playbook," said Jerry Cox, who wrote a tell-all about how Takata and its car maker customers manipulated federal regulators and courts to minimize the cost of replacing inflators that have killed three dozen people and grievously injured several hundred others.

For the *Corporate Crime Reporter*, I'm Russell Mokhiber.

Steve Skrovan: Thank you, Russell. Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. I'm Steve Skrovan along with David Feldman, Ralph, and the rest of the crew. Let's find out about microgrids. David?

David Feldman: Sari Kayyali is a mechanical engineer and the Microgrids Manager at GreenRoots Chelsea, a community-based organization with a 20-plus-year track record of achieving significant environmental justice accomplishments and public health victories. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Sari Kayyali.

Sari Kayyali: Thanks for having me.

Ralph Nader: Yeah. Welcome indeed, Sari. You're working out of Chelsea and Boston, Massachusetts, developing something known as a microgrid. So for all the listeners who are fed up with their electric monopoly company, the arrogance, the dominance, the unaccountability, the control over the regulators, this is the first foothold where local communities can set up their own microgrids for multiple purposes. I know that very few people know what a microgrid is, and that's why we have Sari Kayyali here to discuss it. Tell us what a microgrid is before you tell us what you're doing, right as we speak, in Chelsea and part of the Chinatown neighborhood in Boston, Massachusetts.

Sari Kayyali: Yeah. Microgrids are essentially defined by local electric generation. Traditional electric grids, they'll generate power at a power plant pretty far away from the customers they're serving. They will transmit that electricity over those large transmission lines that you'll see along the highway, and step down the voltage and distribute it on the electric lines that you'll see from street poles in neighborhoods. Microgrids have their own advantages in that by having your electric generation on site, you have a more resilient form of electricity so that if that traditional grid loses power, you'll have backup power and it can be more efficient. The transmission process can cause a 5% loss in the power that's being generated, and it lets you switch back and forth between the electricity that you're generating and the electricity that the traditional grid is generating, since the cost of electricity varies based on how many people are using the grid at any one time.

Ralph Nader: So in other words, it can be a competitive tool by residential and business customers, against the prevailing monopoly. Three years ago or so, Eversource confronted inadequately a storm and resulted in anywhere from four to eight days blackout in parts of Connecticut and Massachusetts. And they never were really fully held accountable in order to reimburse fully the customers. They cut a deal with the legislature here in Hartford to get out of it. They didn't have adequate technical people in the field. They had to import some from Canada at the time. How are you getting these microgrids authorized locally when Eversource is regulated at the state level? Where's the elbow room come from here, the local town government or what?

Sari Kayyali: Yeah. We are working with the local municipal government in Chelsea. We are still stuck operating through Eversource, the local electric utility, so we're not disconnecting from Eversource; rather, we're operating in parallel with them. That involves going through their interconnection application process where we have to submit our design for our microgrid to Eversource and they need to approve all of our designs before we can actually go ahead and purchase and install the equipment. And that's been a really tough roadblock to get past. The review process for our designs has taken over a year at this point and we've recently had two of our three initial sites approved but we're still waiting on approval for that last site.

Ralph Nader: Well, it seems like you're not going to get anywhere if it's just up to Eversource to decide whether they're going to let you in or not. What's the position of the state government here, the Attorney General, Governor Healey? Where are they positioned here? That's where it's going to end up.

Sari Kayyali: I'm not sure how much I can comment on where the governor is at with this. We have been advocating for — and it's not just us; it's many other — not just communities and community-based organizations but solar developers, battery storage developers, everyone's advocating for reforming the interconnection process, streamlining it, making it more accessible, making it faster. But it is a pretty significant barrier that we're all trying to work with and work around to reach our goal of a decarbonized and cleaner electric grid.

Ralph Nader: I know one of the goals is to accelerate the move to renewable energy as you just alluded to, but let's take it from the viewpoint of a residential electric consumer – homeowners, apartment owners. And you're coming to them. Why should they join your effort? What are the benefits apart from having an alternative source of electricity in case of a blackout by Eversource or a storm?

Sari Kayyali: Well, we also offer electric savings. Essentially, between Eversource and the state, there are a host of tax incentives and programs that you can participate in that will allow your clean energy assets, specifically solar panels and battery storage, to bring you revenue. We come in and offer to install the batteries. And by owning, ~~and~~ operating, and coordinating all the batteries at these different sites together, we can control a larger load which allows us to tap into more lucrative revenue streams than any one of these sites would be able to tap into just on their own.

Ralph Nader: You're also working in Chinatown in Boston, one of the worst polluted areas in Boston, if not in the state. Who are you working with there?

Sari Kayyali: There we are working with Chinatown Power, Inc., a public benefit corporation founded by members of the Chinese Progressive Association and the Chinatown Community Land Trust.

Ralph Nader: I know that you were once asked, what did you learn about these projects in your interviewing process that you found surprising, and you said, quote, "I was pleasantly surprised to discover the level of excitement among community members in the efforts being made to empower them to make energy decisions for themselves. It's refreshing to see the community

being treated as a partner rather than as an obstacle," end quote. This is going to be a little difficult, listeners, to have Sari explain, but in the old days you only paid for the electricity you used. Then came along a regulation that mandated paying a minimum amount regardless of how little you use. And now they have something called peak rating. Could you explain how these microgrids can relieve people of some of these peak rating surcharges on their monthly bill?

Sari Kayyali: Yeah. So basically, when the grid is operating at peak consumption, that means it's the most electricity that's being used like for that year, for that day.

Ralph Nader: Like a hot summer day.

Sari Kayyali: Exactly. You have a hot summer day, everybody's running their air conditioners on high trying to stay cool using more electricity than the grid is typically designed to handle. So the utility needs to fire up what they call peaker plants. They're more expensive to operate than typical industrial power plant facilities and are less efficient. But their advantage is being able to start up faster. Typical power plants are pretty expensive to operate, and they essentially just shift that cost onto the consumers. So by reducing your consumption, whether that's through a battery or a smart thermostat, which will reduce the level your AC (alternating current) for a little bit, you can reduce the utility's reliance on these peaker plants. And the utility will actually pay you not to use their electricity in that case because then they don't need to buy this expensive electricity from these peaker plants (used to balance the grid during times of high energy demand/use).

Ralph Nader: Before we talk about what's going on with microgrids around the country, a couple specific things. You said when someone asked you, what are the benefits of microgrids, you were very specific in saying, "When the main grid goes down, your lights stay on and your internet stays connected. The rest of the time, we can monitor electricity demand to strategically alternate between the main grid that's a resource and the microgrid to save you money on your electric bill by reducing the dependence on inefficient peaking plants that energy companies rely on when demand is high. With microgrids, we can reduce our dependence on fossil fuels, improve the resilience of our electric grid and save people money all at the same time." Well, I don't think people quite understand what a huge task you're engaged with, because you literally have to sign up building by building, don't you?

Sari Kayyali: Yeah.

Ralph Nader: Explain that.

Sari Kayyali: It's been tricky in both locations where we're working, but essentially we need to go building by building, to perform a full assessment of their current electric consumption—their boilers, their water heaters, their heating systems, the quality of their insulation, their windows, their roof capacity—to see whether or not the roof can support the added weight of solar panels. It's quite an involved process. We're trying to get buy-in, not just from the building owners but also from the building residents. We do a lot of education about our work and about its advantages. And all of that needs to be done before we can even submit our designs to Eversource and then wait for approval and so on.

Ralph Nader: There must be a pretty remarkable city government in Chelsea, Massachusetts. How large is Chelsea?

Sari Kayyali: Chelsea has a population of, I believe, roughly 45,000 people.

Ralph Nader: Forty-five thousand people have formally embraced the following goals and principles for microgrids that encompass 1) community ownership and governance, 2) ongoing project expansion, 3) reduced emissions, 4) improved public health environmental justice, 5) minimal waste and toxins, 6) creating local jobs with livable wages and job training opportunities, 7) a socially responsible, diverse supply chain, and finally, value-aligned financing. So that's an amazing position by a town government. Are they being besieged by Eversource lobbyists, well-known to throw their weight around? By the way, the CEO of Eversource makes over \$11,000 an hour, on a 40-hour week out of Boston. Are they fighting it in Chelsea? Because if Chelsea breaks through, other cities and towns may wish to emulate them.

Sari Kayyali: I wouldn't say they're being besieged. I'd say this approach that we're taking is built around working through the existing system, as inefficient as that is. So aside from the typical bureaucratic delays and whatnot, we haven't really seen a lot of pushback from Eversource, at least in Chelsea.

Ralph Nader: Are you getting good press?

Sari Kayyali: Yeah. I think there's been a lot of excitement around the project.

Ralph Nader: Sari, some old-timers among our listeners may be reacting this way: there are over a thousand publicly owned electric companies in America. Jacksonville, Florida is public. We all know about (TVA)Tennessee Valley Authority as a power generator and its rolling blackouts. How do you respond to someone who says, "Why don't we just try to take over the utility and replace it with a municipal utility?" Davis, California I think tried to do that years ago. What do you say about that? And then, you see, you've got your entire show, so you don't have to deal with Eversource and overlap and pushback, etc.

Sari Kayyali: Well, I can't speak to the process in other states. I know that at least in Massachusetts, establishing a municipal light plan, isn't something that has been done in at least 100 years. And one of the main reasons for that is just the process by which you establish it, which involves getting approval from the existing utility to form your own municipal utility.

Ralph Nader: You mean utility regulator, the state regulator.

Sari Kayyali: I believe it's from the utility as well. I can double-check that.

Ralph Nader: I think there are about four towns in Connecticut that have their own municipal electric company. These go back a long way when there was more support for public facilities than there is today. Is the microgrid movement catching on around the country?

Sari Kayyali: Yeah, definitely, especially since the technology around clean electric generation – solar panels and battery storage – are experiencing a revolution. In the past decade alone, solar panels have dropped to a third of what they used to cost to manufacture; battery storage has improved dramatically in terms of energy density, cost and reliability. And so a lot of places around the country are looking to these as solutions. Microgrids have been around for a while. They don't necessarily need to use clean technology. You can have a microgrid that's powered by diesel or natural gas generator. But clean microgrids are really catching on all around the country and around the world as a method of bringing electricity to rural locations.

Ralph Nader: What if people want to get more information about microgrids and what you or others are doing, can you give them a website slowly?

Sari Kayyali: Yeah. Microgridknowledge.com is a great website for information on microgrids and news about microgrid projects around the country and around the world.

Ralph Nader: Listeners should know that Sari Kayyali is a mechanical engineer, so don't hesitate asking him technical questions about this. Please give the website once more before we close, Sari.

Sari Kayyali: microgridknowledge.com. If people are interested in learning more about GreenRoots, they can go to greenrootschelsea.org.

Ralph Nader: And especially people in Massachusetts because this could spread first in Massachusetts coming out of Chelsea. Thank you very much, Sari and good luck to you.

Sari Kayyali: Thanks for having me.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with Sari Kayyali. We will link to his work at ralphnaderradiohour.com. We're going to segue right into our next guest who happens to be in Washington, D.C., working for Progressive Democrats of America, the organization working to promote progressive issues. David?

David Feldman: Alan Minsky is a lifelong activist and executive director of Progressive Democrats of America (PDA). Alan has worked as a progressive journalist for the past two decades. He was program director at KPFK Los Angeles from 2009 until 2018 and he has coordinated Pacifica Radio's national coverage of elections. He is the creator and producer of the political podcasts for *The Nation* and *Jacobin* magazines, as well as a contributor to Common Dreams and Truthdig. Welcome, Alan Minsky.

Alan Minsky: Great to be with you, guys.

Steve Skrovan: Alan, what are you doing in Washington, D.D. with the PDA? What's going on?

Alan Minsky: Well, I'm here now because of one of the things I got involved with when I became the director of PDA. I was really looking out at American society, thinking about where

the Progressive Movement is and what it needs to do to become a really mature movement that the public will have faith in progressives leading the US government. For example, there's a whole bunch of elements that the Progressive Movement hasn't been that attentive to, including things industrial production, and what the transformation requires with the work between state business and government to transform American society so that it's operating on clean energy, and so that its industrial manufacturing doesn't have breaks in supply chains. Of course, this was five years ago before the pandemic, but I was even more concerned about the necessity of this kind of transformation with the COVID pandemic and the breakdown in supply chains. So I got involved with a lot of projects that aren't that common for Progressives to be involved in, and one of them is advocacy for high-speed rail. Another, is to develop a whole new manufacturing policy for the United States of America that is pro labor, pro green energy, etc.

I am here in Washington, D.C at the highest profile high-speed rail conference that's been held probably ever in the history of the United States. And it's absolutely fascinating, as the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* listeners probably know because they're very sophisticated, that almost all of the rest of the industrialized world features high-speed rail as part of its national transportation system. If you go back a few decades, it was unquestionable that the United States was the most technologically advanced country. Today the press reports that's not really the case anymore. Other countries are passing us by and there's not really a way to make that clear to people other than to point out that there's not a single mile of true high-speed rail in the domestic United States. China now has the largest, most elaborate high-speed rail system the world has ever seen. And high-speed rail is all throughout Western Europe. It's basically all throughout the rest of the world that's rich, except in the United States. So this really is an industrial social necessity. High-speed rail can have zero carbon emissions and would be an incredible manufacturing employment boon for the United States. And I'm very excited, and it's great to be the progressive voice in the room with a bunch of capitalist industrialists.

Steve Skrovan: What will it take, Alan, to get high-speed rail in the United States?

Alan Minsky: Well, that's the thing; it takes a lot. One of the things it takes is federal incentives. And we saw some of that come to fruition with the large bills that were finally passed in the last Congress when the Democrats controlled both houses. With that thin majority and then with Biden in the White House we've had some of that incentivization take place and that looks like is helping; a few projects are starting to approach completion.

David Feldman: I remember the Obama stimulus package of 2009 with shovel-ready projects and he and Biden were pushing high-speed rail back then. But within three or four years, it was dead in the water. High-speed rail between Los Angeles and San Francisco and Sacramento turned into a joke and it was said, "This is never ever going to happen." So are we looking at the same thing?

Alan Minsky: One of the things that happens when you go to a conference like I'm at right now, and as much as I've thought about high-speed rail, you learn so much that you sometimes forget about. But one of the things was, it's going to be easy to build this line through the Central Valley in California, but it's going to be difficult to connect the Central Valley to Los Angeles because of the mountains that are referred to as a grapevine, and the mountains that go between

San Francisco and the Central Valley. But Japan, a country that is basically a set of volcanic mountains sprouting out of the Pacific Ocean, had the first high-speed rail. They tackled that in the 1960s. So, what's happened with American production is due first of all to the hyper-reliance on private capital as opposed to having it funded by the federal government, as it would have been in the Roosevelt Administration years. The federal government back then said this is going to get done and it got done. We know that in China, and we don't have a model like that, but when 15 people sitting around a table in Beijing say this is going to get done, it gets done. And the motivation of labor and the industry that takes place in China is something on the order of what you would have maybe had in Egypt where they just snap their fingers and tens of thousands of people jump to it. But, the United States doesn't operate that way. And one of the things industry complains the most about, and this pertains to the host of the great projects that we're on today who's not with us on this interview with Ralph Nader, which is the regulatory hurdles that have to be overcome so that things can be pursued. And this is the big thing around permitting reform, and a lot of industry and the fossil fuel industry wants to see permitting reform removed, and then many of the people no doubt at this conference want to see permitting reform occur so that barriers to getting things done will be eclipsed. I think it's all very mismanaged, and I disagree with those industrialists. Environmental justice protections have to be in place, and they really are not the barriers. I think that's largely a ruse. The primary barrier remains relying so much on private capital to fund projects. Private capital is not going to invest in projects they don't think they're going to get a major financial return on. So federal government needs to take the initiative. And I believe that these could become profitable very quickly, and then those profits can flow back to the people of the United States if the money is put in by the federal government. But that hasn't been the way American government, has been organized, especially since Ronald Reagan. At the core of the problem is that everything is structured so that all the losses are socialized and all the gains are given to the investor class. ~~So I think that's at the core of the problem.~~

Steve Skrovan: Let's just wrap up this discussion with a final brief word here about the post-Bernie Progressive Movement. Ralph commented pretty sharply a couple of weeks ago about Bernie endorsing Biden without any conditions. What is the PDA's take on that and the post-Bernie Progressive Movement?

Alan Minsky: I live and breathe that question every day. I wake up with that on my mind and go to sleep with that on my mind. First of all, Progressive Democrats of America will work for the Democratic nominated candidates after the primary season. But we never officially endorse candidates who do not stand for the public policy platform that we call for. We didn't officially endorse Joe Biden for president at any point in 2020 and we probably won't in 2024. That doesn't mean that we won't mobilize our members to get him elected after the primary season. So yes, I harmonize with exactly what Ralph said about disappointment in Bernie.

And yeah, this is a very, very tricky moment for the Progressive Movement because we must be naïve about what elevated this to the level where we are now— having a voice on the national political stage. And what achieved that were the 2016 and 2020 Sanders campaigns. The presidential elections in the United States of America are followed hourly by people across the world. The level of interest in the general population towards any election in and across America is minor compared to the presidential primaries, and then above that is the general presidential

election. It is simply the largest spectacle in all of American society. And Bernie Sanders effectively took a close third place in two successive elections, and in so doing, brought into the national public discourse and consciousness, a set of public policies that were broadly embraced way more than the policies of moderate Democrats or the Republican Party. So in 2024, in the absence of a strong Progressive challenger inside the Democratic primaries, fuels the real fear that Progressive policies will again get re-marginalized. The Progressive Movement be consciously vigilant of that. And all money—the entire establishment of political apparatus, wants nothing more than to marginalize progressive politics. We see that from the avalanche of money that pours into Democratic primaries against Progressive candidates.

So as a movement, we clearly need to elevate the progressive platform and then some way, somehow, make sure it plays in front of the American people across this electoral cycle. My favorite method would be to have a set of clearly competitive congressional and senatorial candidates. But senate candidates cost a lot of money; there's not the passion that exists for the presidential race. Bernie outraised everybody in the Democratic field last time. And in the last election cycle, it was \$19, not \$27 – \$19 was his average donation. You can't get that in the senate race because the public passion isn't there even though we'd like it to be so. But we'll see what we can do on the senate level. We'll certainly see a bunch of great people who are running for the US House of Representatives who are challenging more moderate candidates. I'm hopeful that those candidates can capture and stimulate the public's imagination. And whatever the case may be, we must find ways through this election cycle to keep progressive policies front and center in the national political discourse. So that's what we're intent on doing at PDA.

Steve Skrovan: Well, Alan Minsky, thank you for joining us from a hotel lobby in Washington, D.C., and taking some time out from the events you're attending there. Alan Minsky is the head of the Progressive Democrats of America. We will link to his work at ralphnaderradiohour.com. Thank you very much, Alan.

Alan Minsky: It's great to be with both of you.

Steve Skrovan: Take care. I want to thank our guests again, Byron Bloch, Sari Kayyali and Alan Minsky. For those of you listening on the radio, that's our show. For you podcast listeners, stay tuned for some bonus material we call "The Wrap Up", including the return of Francesco DeSantis and "In Case You Haven't Heard. A transcript of this program will appear on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* Substack site soon after the episode is posted.

David Feldman: Subscribe to us on our *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* YouTube channel. And for Ralph's weekly column, it's free, go to nader.org. For more from Russell Mokhiber, go to corporatecrimereporter.com. A new issue of the *Capitol Hill Citizen* is out now. To order your copy of *the Capitol Hill Citizen* "Democracy Dies in Broad Daylight", go to capitolhillcitizen.com.

Steve Skrovan: And remember to continue the conversation after each show, go to the comments section at ralphnaderradiohour.com and post a comment or question on this week's episode.

David Feldman: The producers of the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* are Jimmy Lee Wirt and Matthew Marran. Our executive producer is Alan Minsky.

Steve Skrovan: Our theme music "Stand Up, Rise Up" was written and performed by Kemp Harris. Our proofreader is Elisabeth Solomon. Our associate producer is Hannah Feldman. Our social media manager is Steven Wendt.

David Feldman: Join us next week on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. Thank you, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Thank you, everybody. It's good to have a victory or two.