

# Akron has unique strengths to create sustainable future

Your Turn

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Guest columnist

*Editor's note: This column is a part of a series in which community leaders envision the next 100 years for Akron in honor of the city's bicentennial.*

Akron's story has always been one of resilience and reinvention. From our rubber boom days to the present, we've embraced innovation to meet the global needs of our time. Today, as we look a century into the future, we stand at the intersection of two extraordinary advantages: our world-leading polymer expertise – poised to transform a global industry and fuel local economic opportunity – and our geographic location.

Here in Northeast Ohio, we are more insulated than most from natural disasters like hurricanes and wildfires, and we occupy a region containing 20% of the world's fresh water. These unique strengths position us to lead in creating a sustainable future that people run toward.

Imagine it with me.

Akron will leverage its deep roots in polymer science to lead the charge in creating sustainable solutions, not just for Akron, but for the world by innovating materials that are already everywhere – in water bottles, medical devices and equipment, packaging, clothing and fabrics, automobiles, energy equipment. Akron can create a new future with polymer products designed to be continuously recyclable. Simplified polymers without toxic additives, ones made from plants, and ones designed for safe biodegradation. Polymer products that enable higher-energy electric vehicles. Polymers created with captured carbon dioxide. Over the next 100 years, we can become the world capital of sustainable polymers – one that doesn't lose sight of the people of Akron in that global journey and that leads on environmental responsibility just as expertly as it does on innovation.

Our expertise in circularity will extend beyond polymers to create a culture of waste reduction – and perhaps waste elimination. Composting will be the norm, reuse will be second nature, and

landfills will be as outdated a concept as dial-up internet is to us now.

Our stewardship of fresh water will be unmatched. We will continue to protect and restore our rivers, streams and lakes, ensuring that our share of the world's most precious resource is clean, accessible, and wisely used. Advanced water recycling systems, green stormwater infrastructure and equitable access to water will uphold Akron as a global example of responsible water management.

A century from now, Akron hums with clean power. Solar panels blanket homes and rooftops, integrated perhaps seamlessly into the building materials themselves. Innovative energy storage undergirds both. Beneath our feet, we tap into the warmth of the earth, heating and cooling entire districts with geothermal. Neighborhoods will share microgrids that keep power local, reliable, and affordable – no more cascading blackouts that inequitably impact lower-income communities. Buses powered by electricity (or whatever carbon-free technology I can't even see yet) reduce our car dependency and keep our air clean.

As folks flock to Akron for our climate resiliency and economic opportunity, Akron will be a city of dense, connected, walkable neighborhoods that make it easy to live, work, and play. Our streets will be marked by bike lanes, efficient public transit, trees and green infrastructure – all designed for people first.

We will have weaved nature back into the fabric of our city. Native meadows, pocket parks, and greenways will clean our air, cool our streets, and restore biodiversity. There will be no more disparity in temperature from heat islands that drive up energy bills and exacerbate health conditions for vulnerable populations. Green roofs and vertical food gardens will turn our buildings and homes into living landscapes, marked by both beauty and resilience.

Most importantly, sustainability will be about more than technology. It will be about people. Every Akron resident will have a stake in our shared future, with equitable access to the sustainable opportunities we're envisioning – from water to clean energy and transportation to polymer innovations.

We are not so far from this as we might think.

If we need inspiration or convincing, we can look to the city of Akron's incredibly unique and efficient wastewater treatment process, with biodigesters that run largely on waste heat and turn wastewater sludge into energy that powers multiple facilities.

We can look to the unprecedented billion-dollar investment in our combined sewer system, designed to create resilient infrastructure

for the future and improve our shared waterways.

We can look to the transformation in our recycling contamination rate, which we reduced from nearly 40% to 12% in just a few years.

We have the grit and talent to make this sustainable future a reality. But the choices we make today will echo through the next 100 years. Let's make them wisely and together.

*Casey Shevlin, the city of Akron's first director of Sustainability and Resiliency, is responsible for helping coordinate and grow the city's focus on future-focused environmental issues.*