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Opinion, Ezra Klein

All Biden Has to Do Now Is Change the Way We Live

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A 2022 Ford F-150 Lightning Electric truck in production at the Dearborn Truck Plant in Michigan. Credit...Brittany Greeson for The New York Times

, By Ezra Klein, Opinion Columnist

When the summer began, the Biden administration was mired in failure. Inflation was high, the Build Back Better agenda was dead, the Democrats were doomed. Then came the fastest turnabout I've seen in American politics. In short order, the CHIPS Act and the Inflation Reduction Act passed; Biden canceled billions in student debt; gasoline prices dropped; employment kept booming; Democrats began outperforming in special elections. All hail Dark Brandon.

Recent presidents have etched their core achievements in the tax code, in regulatory language, in social insurance programs. If Biden succeeds, his legacy will be atypically physical: electric vehicle charging stations, battery manufacturing plants, vast areas of land covered in wind turbines and solar panels, tens of millions of homes warmed by heat pumps, thousands of miles of new energy transmission lines, new hubs

for hydrogen energy research and development, and the list stretches on. Build back better, indeed.

But all of this is, for now, merely imagined. The passage of these bills does not ensure the realization of Biden's aims. Biden's legacy — and our climate future — will turn on what actually gets built, and how quickly.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Act, the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS Act add up to about $450 billion in clean energy investments, subsidies and loan guarantees. It's a lot of money, though less than Biden hoped for and much less than climate activists wanted. But it's not just money. In conversations with Biden advisers, I heard the climate strategy described as a three-legged stool. Investment — money — is one leg. Another is standards. The various payment programs are thick with provisions demanding that this much of an electric car be made in America, adding bonus payments for creating jobs in low-income communities, or insisting that a project pay prevailing wages. The third leg is coordination and planning — creating structures and setting aside cash to persuade the many, many stakeholders who need to work together to get anything built to cooperate.

This is a rickety stool. One leg of it — money — is longer and sturdier than the other legs. There are standards in the bill, yes, but the most important of them — the Clean Electricity Performance Program, which would have used payments and penalties to keep utilities on track for zero-carbon electricity — was dropped. And the coordination and planning provisions of the bill are even spottier, and in key cases, nonexistent.

Transmission lines are a good place to ground this (sorry: energy infrastructure joke). The decarbonization strategy, at its core, is simply this: Most cars, homes, buildings and industry are currently powered by fossil fuels. In the future, they will be powered by clean electricity. But right now, 60 percent of electricity comes from fossil fuels. We need to rebuild our electrical grid around clean sources, and then we need to triple or quadruple the total amount of electricity we generate.

"A lot of that needs to be built where the resource is," Liza Reed, an electricity transmission expert at the Niskanen Center, told me, "where the solar is, or the wind is, or the geothermal is. So you need to move that power around from the places it's generated." That means building many, many more power lines than we currently have. But the way we presently build transmission lines is a mess.

To spend significant time tracing the way transmission lines are built is to wish you didn't have a job in which you needed to spend time tracing the way transmission lines are built. There is no federal agency with the power to plan and build a national transmission system. Authority is split between federal, state and local regulators — in Oklahoma, for instance, each municipality can independently decide if and where a power line gets built.

Transmission projects often come in late, and over budget, and many planned projects stall out. A 2016 report by Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory looked at five major transmission projects with projected completion dates by 2021. Only one of them has been completed. Construction hasn't even begun on the other four.

"Money is not the only barrier to transmission infrastructure," Reed said. "It's been a problem and contentious when it comes to transmission, but it's not, I would say, the most significant barrier to getting transmission built."

There is no single framework for planning or community participation, and there is no accepted approach to compensating the communities or states that host infrastructure from which they don't directly benefit (this is a good overview, if you're looking for some light bedtime reading). There have been past efforts to give federal regulators more power over the process — particularly in the 2005 Energy Policy

Act — but that authority often collapsed when challenged in court. There is some money in the Inflation Reduction Act to nudge regulators and utilities to be more ambitious and cooperative, but there are no dramatic new authorities or structures to make what was impossible yesterday possible tomorrow.

And that's just transmission. The center of our decarbonization strategy is an almost unimaginably large buildup of wind and solar power. To put some numbers to that: A plausible path to decarbonization, modeled by researchers at Princeton, sees wind and solar spanning up to 590,000 square kilometers — which is roughly equal to the land mass of Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Ohio, Rhode Island and Tennessee put together. "The footprint is very, very large, and people don't really understand that," Danny Cullenward, co-author of "Making Climate Policy Work," told me.

We haven't built on this scale, in this country, in decades. Decarbonization is a construction project no smaller than electrification or the construction of the interstate highway system. And while there's both public and private money for it, there's no integrated approach to planning and executing it.

The old theory was that we would price carbon, and the market would take care of the planning for us. But we never passed a national carbon tax or cap-and-trade plan. Other countries rely on much more centralized planning by the national government, but our federal government doesn't have that authority or that capacity. What we're betting on now is coordination, in part greased by money. But it needs to happen at a scale and speed unlike anything in our recent history. We are already failing to build infrastructure on budget and on time. How will the fractured systems struggling to deliver those projects now begin building more projects, and building them at a far-faster pace?

This will be the focus of fights yet to come — and one of them is coming quickly. The deal that the Senate majority leader, Chuck Schumer, struck with Senator Joe Manchin to pass the Inflation Reduction Act included a promise to attach separate legislation streamlining environmental reviews and permitting authority to must-pass legislation. The package is already splitting climate hawks, with some, like Senator Bernie Sanders, opposing it, and others, like Senators Brian Schatz and Ron Wyden, backing it.

There's no final text on that package, but people familiar with it describe four main components. First, an effort to quicken environmental reviews for energy projects, limiting the reviews to two years, cutting the time in which lawsuits can be filed to 150 days after the final action, and designating a lead agency to coordinate the process. This is similar to reforms made under the Obama administration for transportation projects. Second, a public list of 25 projects designated as strategically important, though this is mostly an effort to focus government and public attention; inclusion on the list doesn't free these projects from any existing reviews or regulations.

It's the next two provisions that are a bigger deal, both for bad and for good. There is special language to accelerate the Mountain Valley Pipeline, a natural gas project important to Manchin (and his donors) but loathed by environmentalists. And there's a whole set of reforms to give the federal government more power to plan, build and spread out the costs for national and inter-regional energy transmission lines.

From what I know of it, I'm inclined to hope the deal passes, for three reasons. The first is that the streamlined permitting will do more to accelerate clean energy than it will to encourage the use of fossil fuels. New clean energy infrastructure will be built far faster, and at far larger scale, than new fossil fuel infrastructure, so a simpler, swifter path to construction means more for the clean energy side of the ledger.

Second, supercharging the federal government's ability to get multistate energy transmission lines permitted and financed is a bigger win for decarbonization than the completion of a single natural gas pipeline is a loss. The Mountain Valley Pipeline provisions are a single carve-out for a single project, whereas the new transmission authority is a structural change that will make it possible to move mass amounts of clean energy across the country.

Third, this was the bargain that won Manchin's vote. Democrats will hold the House and Senate through the January lame-duck session. There's a decent chance that they will hold the Senate in the midterm elections, and an outside chance that they'll keep the House, too. Anything they want to get done on party lines will probably need Manchin's vote. If they renege on the deal they made with him, they're not going to get it. That's a bigger threat to future climate legislation — and everything else on the Democratic agenda — than anything in the permitting package.

But the permitting package is modest legislation, and it won't come close to easing all the impediments to building. "Administrative capacity is a huge bottleneck in this," Cullenward told me. "It's not all hippies filing lawsuits; it's under-resourced agencies working on these projects. Think about the Inflation Reduction Act. One way it subsidizes clean electricity is by beefing up I.R.S. enforcement. We understand that if you increase the administrative capacity of the I.R.S. you get more tax enforcement. We need to think about that in energy planning."

This is something Donald Trump never understood. In 2016, he ran as America's foremost builder. The Trump mythology was made of steel and cement; it was built out of, well, buildings. He mocked the sorry state of our roads and bridges; he vowed to use his know-how to restore American infrastructure and manufacturing. He promised renewal so often that it became a political joke. In Trump's Washington, every week seemed to be "infrastructure week." But no week actually *was* infrastructure week. Trump was a marketer, not a builder. He promised that he alone could fix it, but the rebuilding that America needs is an all-of-society effort.

Still, Trump was right about the hunger for a return to a more physical form of policy. "Together, we're reclaiming America's proud heritage as a nation of builders and a nation that can get things done," he promised. With this and similar utterances, he unlocked a political door that Joe Biden walked through. Trump proclaimed infrastructure weeks; Biden has created the conditions for infrastructure decades.

But now the hard work begins. A lot will have to go right, at every level of American government and industry, to make good on the promise of these bills. Biden, alone, cannot fix it.

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Ezra Klein joined Opinion in 2021. Previously, he was the founder, editor in chief and then editor-at-large of Vox; the host of the podcast "The Ezra Klein Show"; and the author of "Why We're Polarized." Before that, he was a columnist and editor at The Washington Post, where he founded and led the Wonkblog vertical. @ezraklein