

DULUTH

# 'We don't have forever': Teen activists push Cook County to declare climate emergency

The Board of Commissioners unanimously passed the measure on Tuesday.

By **Christa Lawler** (<https://www.startribune.com/christa-lawler/8761943/>) Star Tribune |

FEBRUARY 23, 2022 — 11:18AM

DULUTH — Cook County became the first Minnesota county to declare a climate emergency on Tuesday, joining more than a dozen cities in the state, an act prompted by two teenaged activists and nature enthusiasts from Grand Marais.

Olya Wright, 16, and Naomi Tracy-Hegg, 15, faced the Board of Commissioners — who unanimously passed the resolution — with prepared statements about how the climate emergency must be addressed immediately. Community trash pick up and opting out of plastic bags is no longer enough, they warned the board.

"We don't have forever," Wright read. "Not to act, not to live, not to slowly combat the climate crisis. We must have decisive, immediate action. We must declare a climate emergency."

Tracy-Hegg added that she shouldn't have to worry about losing her house to a forest fire, her lake's biodiversity collapsing, the world falling apart around her.

"I should live the life of a young person, not an adult," she told the commissioners. "But I can't. Because our leaders are not acting to save this planet and my future. Now is your chance to change the narrative."

The resolution is an acknowledgement of climate concerns and a promise to find ways to do better. They asked that the government reduce its carbon footprint by way of building efficiency, conserving water and reducing emissions from its fleet of vehicles. Some of this is already in motion, Cook County administrator James Joerke said, as part of a capital improvement plan they are in the process of creating.

"Our eyes are on the ball," he said in the meeting, before encouraging the girls to consider public office when they are old enough. "We are going to be taking action."

Wright traces her environmentalism to the Nordic Nature Group she started when she was 8 years old. It was a playgroup for kids who wanted to hunt for mushrooms, study birds or look at trees. Tracy-Hegg was a natural fit for the club. The group's mission statement, she recalled, was redundant: "to help nature in good ways and take care of the earth." Her family moved from Maple Grove about six years ago, specifically looking for a life near the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

The girls' nature know-how increased — and so did their collective understanding of the bigger picture about the environment.

"We would go on hikes, camp out and have fun," Tracy-Hegg said. "And then we were like 'Our world is burning. What can we do about it?'"

Jeanne Wright recalled Olya being overwhelmed by what she was learning. She wanted to protect her daughter from the reality but said that would be a disservice. Eventually kids have to know the truth, Jeanne Wright said.

"I talk with her a lot about how we can sit here and be upset, or we can take action," she said. "Action can help us feel better. Not that we're solving the problem. It helps to move and it helps to go forward."

Over the years, the girls have cleaned up trash, marched, created petitions. Tracy-Hegg has spent the day in a 3-foot round Earth costume. The girls joined iMatter, a Twin Cities-based group for young people interested in climate and equity issues. They made a climate inheritance resolution and graded their town's greenhouse gas emissions.

The duo had immediate luck with the city of Grand Marais, but didn't fare well in their first go-round with the county. In 2017, they were met with resistance — which makes Wright appreciate Tuesday's gesture.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NAOMI TRACY-HEGG

Olya Wright (front) and Naomi Tracy-Hegg made the push for Cook County to declare a climate emergency, which its Board of Commissioners

"They weren't able to think about creating a climate action plan or a resolution to say they cared about it," she said. "The fact the county commissioners have said we're going to support it, I think it's a big step forward. There has never been a big formal statement."

---

**Christa Lawler** covers Duluth and surrounding areas for the Star Tribune. **Sign up** to receive the new North Report newsletter.

christa.lawler@startribune.com    ChristaLawler