If Illinois is to seriously crack down on greenhouse gas emissions, it has to start with the tailpipes of cars and trucks and the same day-delivery desires of home shoppers even as policy makers set their sights on retiring an already dwindling number of coal-burning power plants.

Economic upheaval has diminished the state’s once thriving but heavily polluting coal industry while putting a cavalcade of gas and diesel-burning vehicles on the roads. And that dramatically complicates and personalizes an already difficult regulatory path to fighting climate change.
This story is part of a multi-newsroom collaborative project called Middle America’s Low-Hanging Carbon: The Search for Greenhouse Gas Cuts from the Grid, Agriculture and Transportation. The effort, led by the nonprofit news organization InsideClimate News, includes 14 Midwest newsrooms and aims to give readers local and regional perspectives on climate change. For more, go to the project page.

Latest data show exhaust from cars, trucks and planes has overtaken coal plants as Illinois’ single-biggest source of carbon dioxide emissions, the largest contributing factor to climate change.

The significant pollution change is being driven by more car commutes, the
popularity of home-delivery services such as Amazon and ride-hailing alternatives like Uber and Lyft. That’s a dramatic shift in the Midwest given that coal has been a far greater source of greenhouse gases in the region. In Illinois, coal was the leading source of carbon emissions for every year but one since 1980 when the federal government began publishing state-level records.

What the data on climate warming emissions now make clear is that the central problem in Illinois has shifted from high-sulfur coal mines in southern Illinois to the sprawl and congestion of the northern end of the state.

That also makes Illinois an outlier among its neighbors. The Midwest still accounts for about one-third of U.S. coal consumption. Environmentalists say it’s good news Illinois is relying less on coal. However, the transportation emissions presents an all-new problem in the climate fight.

“What we’re seeing in Illinois is what we’ll see in other Midwest states in the future,” said Gabriel Filippelli, professor of earth science and director for the Center for Urban Health at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. Coal will be replaced with other sources of cleaner energy, he said, but as vehicle emissions rise, reduction of fossil fuels in cars and trucks is a problem that must be tackled.

“As the flaws in our transportation system become more glaring, we need to grapple with solutions,” he added. “We need to expand public transportation options and we have to get fuel out of vehicles” and move to electric cars and trucks.

Gov. J.B. Pritzker has pledged to reduce planet-warming greenhouse gases in Illinois, and the Democrat-controlled House and Senate are mulling legislation advocates say will start to bring that about. But bills under consideration now in the legislature are short on addressing the growing transportation component to climate-change threats, and political forces with an economic stake in carbon-based fuels are strongly lobbying to keep it that way.

“One of our big challenges is transportation,” said Jesse Elam, deputy executive director at Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. “The question we should ask ourselves — now that we know we really have to tackle the transportation system — is how do we do it?”
A Better Government Association review of the current status of climate change contributors in Illinois shows that a heavy focus on the coal industry will no longer be enough to address the future threat of global warming:

- More than half of Illinois’ carbon emissions from transportation are coming from the Chicago area, including Cook, DuPage, Kendall, Will, Kane, McHenry and Lake counties, according to CMAP. Cars, SUVs and other light-duty trucks account for the overwhelming majority of transportation-produced carbon in and around the city.
- The number of miles driven in Illinois has steadily increased in the past few years, coinciding with a growing economy, Illinois Department of Transportation data show.
- Industry groups have pushed back on efforts to encourage electric vehicles in the state and politicians have yet to fully embrace incentives.
- Nationally, Illinois trails only Texas, California, Florida and New York — all states with far larger populations — for transportation emissions, federal data show. Illinois produces more carbon from gas and diesel vehicles than any of its bordering neighbors.
- For total carbon dioxide emissions, Illinois is seventh among the states behind Texas, California, Florida, Pennsylvania, Louisiana and Ohio.

Some states with big metro areas have taken steps. California has clean-car standards more strict than federal ones and is pushing drivers through infrastructure development and community incentives to use electric vehicles. In New York, a fee on cars and trucks entering Manhattan is set to take effect in 2021 to reduce traffic. The money raised from the fees will pay to improve public transit.

Regulating carbon in Illinois has long been a challenge. More than two decades ago, then-Gov. Jim Edgar and lawmakers passed legislation that explicitly declared the state would not get into the business of regulating carbon emissions, leaving it instead to the federal government. In that 1998 debate, lawmakers questioned whether climate change was real, an argument that reappeared in the 2016 presidential election.

“It would be great to say it took us 20 years and we finally woke up,” said U.S.
Rep. Jan Schakowsky, an Evanston Democrat who was a state lawmaker at the time. “The jobs vs. environment issue has not significantly changed ... at the end of the day, we are still hearing that it’s a job killer.”

Stakes are high as cities and the state must already brace for more severe weather brought on by climate change. If they hope to make strides in further reduction in emissions, politicians will need to ask drivers and consumers — aka voters — to shoulder a palpable cost.

The last time transportation was a bigger source of carbon in Illinois was one outlier year in 1989 when gas-guzzling SUVs were a symbol of the time and the fuel-efficient cars driven today had yet to be developed.

By far, the largest source of transportation pollution in Illinois is passenger cars, followed by diesel-fueled trucks and other vehicles, the latest data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration show. Jet fuel is a contributor, albeit much smaller, according to data through 2016.

The number of miles driven in Illinois has steadily increased in the past few years, coinciding with a growing economy, state transportation data show. In 2016 and 2017, the total miles bounced back from recession-era declines and returned to levels last seen in the early to mid-2000s.

In its analysis last year, CMAP provided three forecasts for the climate outlook in Illinois and even the most optimistic fell short of scientific goals to curb the extreme weather patterns brought on by global warming. In the Midwest, that can bring more record floods, extreme heat during summers and other severe weather. “None of these scenarios achieve the region’s stabilization goal,” the report concluded.

In Illinois, poor and minority communities bear much of the brunt of climate change, another challenge for policy makers and government planners, Elam noted. Urban flooding and excessive heat are hitting communities that are already heavily burdened by pollution.

Investigation
As the regional planning agency for infrastructure, Elam’s organization has proposed local and state governments brace for future flooding and other extreme weather and prepare to mitigate impending future crises by reducing carbon. Among the recommendations, there should be incentives for electric vehicle infrastructure. Meanwhile, local government and transit agencies should switch to electric vehicles, the group recommends.

The electrification of Illinois’ cars and trucks is striking a nerve with some business interests that are against any taxpayer or electric ratepayer subsidies for electric vehicles. Opponents include the Illinois Chamber of Commerce, the American Petroleum Institute and Americans For Prosperity, the advocacy arm of the conservative billionaire Koch brothers, whose fortune is greatly reliant on carbon-based fuels. Each organization weighed in last fall when the Illinois Commerce Commission asked for public comments on a broad range of questions related to building electric vehicle infrastructure.

Favoring electric vehicles, which are generally more expensive than gas and diesel powered ones, is “discriminatory” and helps the wealthy, Americans for Prosperity wrote in an October letter to the ICC. The Illinois Chamber of Commerce accused the commission of unfairly favoring one technology over others. State incentives, the chamber wrote in October, “could distort the market, misrepresenting consumer choices.”

“We prefer a market-based approach” to electric vehicle infrastructure, chamber lobbyist Katie Stonewater said in an interview.

That argument misses the point, says Brian Urbaszewski, director of
environmental health programs at Respiratory Health Association in Chicago.

The market for electric vehicles is now concentrated among middle- to upper-income consumers but, with prices expected to fall, poorer urban neighborhoods and communities are going to need the infrastructure to encourage reliance on cleaner cars and trucks, Urbaszewski said. These are the same communities that currently bear the brunt of the worst air pollution, usually along expressways or in industrial corridors.

And despite the chamber’s opposition to subsidizing electric vehicles, local and state governments have done just that. In Downstate Normal, startup Rivian Automotive is building electric pickup trucks in a plant abandoned in 2015 by Mitsubishi Motors. The Michigan-based company applied for local and state incentives to locate in Normal, including Illinois tax credits estimated at more than $49 million. Rivian pledged to create 1,000 jobs by 2024. The company also attracted the attention of some high-profile investors, including Ford and Amazon, earlier this year.

But the resistance to helping the fledgling electric vehicle market illustrates how Illinois is trailing some other big states in tackling the problem. California and more than a dozen other states have already created policies to build the infrastructure and foster demand for electric vehicles.
Traffic backs up at an intersection in front of NRG Energy’s Joliet Station power plant on May 7, 2015 in Joliet, Illinois. Latest data show exhaust from cars, trucks and planes has overtaken coal plants as Illinois’ single-biggest source of carbon dioxide emissions, the largest contributing factor to climate change. (Scott Olson/Getty Images)

Pritzker’s push against greenhouse gases relies heavily on promoting development of renewable energy production from wind and solar sources.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel recently proposed moving all of Chicago’s buildings to renewable power sources and electrifying Chicago Transit Agency buses. Those goals are largely shared by Mayor-elect Lori Lightfoot and endorsed by a recent Chicago City Council resolution. Absent from the recent political rhetoric is the pollution problem of cars and trucks.

Legislation now pending in Springfield calls for the state to move toward renewable energy and nods to transportation being the leading carbon polluter. It proposes taking the equivalent of emissions from 1 million cars and trucks off the road, a significant goal but still modest considering there are currently almost 12 million vehicles registered in the state.

The transportation portion is just a start, said Democratic state Sen. Cristina Castro of Elgin, who sponsored one version of the legislation.
“We have to do a better job with a lot of those things,” Castro said.

The transportation issue also represents the downside of a good economy: As we’re enabled by technology that’s emerged in recent years, the source of pollution has shifted.

Amazon revolutionized shopping, creating an increase in home deliveries and helped Illinois increase its historically sizable role as a major national freight hub.

Uber and Lyft also provided alternatives for bus and rapid transit riders, leading to an almost 4 percent drop in ridership on the Chicago Transit Authority in 2017, the transit agency said.

In response, spokespeople for both Uber and Lyft said the companies want to be seen as complements to public transportation in Chicago.

However, Uber stated in a U.S. securities filing in early April that it is directly competing with public transportation. In fact, part of Uber’s stated strategy is “to rapidly scale our network in new cities by attracting consumers to our platform and away from personal vehicles or public transportation,” the filing said. In an updated document later that month, the company removed some of the language following public criticism.

“They are very clearly drawing people away from public transportation,” said Jemilah Magnusson, spokeswoman for the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy in New York.

In the Chicago area and across the nation, meanwhile, suburban car commuters are significantly adding to congestion, pollution and global warming, Magnusson said. Seventy-five percent of Americans make solo trips in their cars, she said.

Improving transportation is key to changing behavior but other “stick” approaches such as congestion pricing — now being implemented in New York — are also potential tools for policy makers.

As for Illinois’ past approach to let the federal government address global warming, that’s unlikely to happen in the era of President Donald Trump, who calls climate change a hoax and is fighting California to weaken that state’s clean car emissions standards.
“Governors elected last year came in with 100 percent clean energy pledges on climate,” said Andrew Linhardt, Sierra Club’s deputy legislative director for transportation in Washington. “You’re not going to see that at the federal level ... the action is really happening at the state and local governments.”