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Sustainable Cities

Engage Your Community in Bold Initiatives on Climate Change

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by Kathleen Les

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How can local agencies help turn the tide on climate change? Start by engaging the public in a dialogue to promote understanding of the dire consequences of doing nothing and to set the agenda for your city or county. Then be relentless about supporting and compelling the community into action.

California residents are deeply concerned about global warming and its effects on the environment and the economy. And they are clamoring for action. Consider these findings:

- A Public Policy Institute of California study released in July 2007 found that 54 percent think global warming poses a serious threat to California's economy and quality of life, and 81 percent believe corrective steps should be taken immediately;
- In September 2007, the *GfK Roper Yale Survey on Environmental Issues* found that 74 percent of Americans want their own city or local government to do more to reduce heat-trapping gases that cause global warming; and
- The Yale survey also found that 71 percent support local subsidies for energy-saving home improvements and 68 percent support a renewed emphasis to concentrate development in city centers.

Given the public's desire for immediate action, many local agencies throughout the state are embarking on efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Some local governments are taking the initial step of retrofitting public buildings with energy efficient lighting or converting their vehicle fleet to hybrid or bio-diesel. Others are taking a bigger, more all-encompassing step by assessing greenhouse gas emissions generated in their jurisdictional boundaries and identifying ways to initiate sizable reductions through goals embodied in a formal climate action plan.

Creating a concerted plan for energy and greenhouse gas reduction requires a comprehensive approach to community engagement. Involving residents from throughout the community early and all the way through plan implementation is essential when setting goals and establishing a city or countywide plan for green house gas reduction.

How to Promote Community Engagement On Climate Action

Step 1: Decide to take action.

Build consensus on undertaking an emissions inventory by educating the community on the localized effects of climate change and the need for personal responsibility.

Bring key stakeholders together early on for a strong network of residents and business leaders to build support for undertaking an inventory and climate action plan.

Look to existing community networks such as homeowners' associations, civic and business groups, churches and more to get the word out and enlist their support.

Step 2: Develop reduction targets and a plan of action.

Cast a wide net throughout the community to enlist broad involvement and input from all community sectors: residents of all ages, income levels and races, businesses and industry.

Strive for ideas generated from the bottom up, not top down, to achieve emission-reduction goals.

Consult community networks for reaction to proposed reduction strategies and strive for a real commitment to plan implementation.

Step 3: Implement a climate action plan.

Don't drop the ball at this stage: Have measurable goals, realistic and effective strategies for achieving them, and a staff person in charge of working with the community to monitor success.

Report back to the community to share progress on results (good or bad).

Be relentless in engaging the community toward actively achieving energy reduction goals over the long term.

Enlisting the Public in Developing A Local Action Plan

As with all consensus building for local government efforts, the best way to enlist community support is by involving a wide variety of stakeholders -- residents, neighborhood groups, and business leaders -- who will work hand in hand with municipal staff and elected officials in a meaningful, effective way.

The *Climate Protection Manual for Cities*, compiled jointly by the nonprofits Natural Capitalism Solutions and the

International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) Local Governments for Sustainability, is a helpful source of information for involving stakeholders (online at www.climatemanual.org). The community engagement chapter identifies three strategies to involve stakeholders:

- **Local Action for Sustainable Economic Renewal (LASER)** offers free tools on best practices for communities interested in developing sustainability programs (www.global-laser.org).
- **Tools of Change**, founded on the principles of community-based social marketing, teaches how to guide behavioral change in the context of global warming, including changes that promote health and environmentally friendly behavior (www.toolsofchange.com).
- **Business for Social Responsibility** provides tools and resources to encourage corporate responsibility, including how to make the business case for climate protection (www.bsr.org).

Each approach involves education and the vision to stimulate action across a broad economic and social spectrum of residents, businesses and community leaders.

According to the *Climate Protection Manual*, "A vision statement drafted by a few people in leadership will never engender the sense of ownership and common purpose that comes with full community participation."

Palm Desert Calls Community To Action on Ambitious Energy Reduction Goal

Steep electric bills to cool buildings in Palm Desert, where summer temperatures can reach 120 degrees, spurred a partnership with local utilities Southern California Edison and Southern California Gas Company. The partnership assists homeowners and businesses with generous rebates to retrofit old furnaces, air conditioners and pool pumps. City officials soon realized it wasn't just about saving money on utility bills -- they had a responsibility to help curb heat-trapping greenhouse gases generated by their community.

In 2007, Palm Desert adopted a plan to reduce energy consumption 30 percent citywide by 2011. The city established yearly benchmarks to monitor progress, and by the end of the program's first year, Palm Desert saved 27 million kilowatt hours of energy, representing 12.9 percent of their five-year target.

"Our ambitious goal forces us to think outside the box," says Pat Conlon, director of Palm Desert's Office of Energy Management.

How did they achieve a high level of community participation? The city has a wide-ranging marketing and promotions program to inspire residents to take advantage of financial incentives to trade out energy-guzzling appliances. A regular newsletter, *The Bright Side*, featuring energy-saving tips is sent to every home and business citywide, and 30-second TV and radio spots encourage energy conservation and give information on rebate programs.

The city held its first annual Bright Idea Exposition in March 2008, featuring solar vendors, green builders and many activities for kids, attracting families and parents. The program also conducts home energy surveys to provide advice on energy conservation and appliance replacement.

"Climate change can be a harder sell because we are asking people to open their wallets and invest in energy efficiency," said Conlon, who is confident that repeated marketing efforts to reach residents will promote understanding that money spent today is money saved in the long run. For more about Palm Desert's energy reduction program, visit www.settosave.com.

Ventura County Partners With Locals

The Rules of (Community) Engagement

Extend a long arm across economic and racial groups as well as to residential, commercial and industrial sectors of the community. All ultimately have a role in curbing energy use.

Ask, don't tell. Pose questions and solicit ideas from diverse groups, including residents, businesses, nonprofits, staff and elected officials. Residents and stakeholders are more likely to help at the back end on implementation if they feel they've had a hand at the front end developing ideas and a plan of action.

Go directly to the public. Send city or county representatives to visit civic groups, churches, schools, neighborhood associations and business groups to generate ideas and enlist action.

Use all media (including ethnic media) such as print media

After the statewide energy crises of 2001, business and community leaders in Ventura County came together to seek ways to better prepare for the next energy crisis. They formed a joint powers authority, the Ventura County Regional Energy Alliance, which comprises the county, four cities, the local school district, water district, community college district and sanitation district. The alliance now focuses on averting climate change.

The Ventura County Regional Energy Alliance (www.vcenergy.org) educates its members and the community at large about the importance of energy efficiency. Over the past three years, the alliance, in partnership with the Southern California Gas Company and Southern California Edison, launched 75 energy efficiency projects in public buildings, including schools, hospitals and jails. These efforts reduced energy costs by \$1.4 million in the region and lowered carbon emissions by more than 5,000 tons per year.

"Working in collaboration, a number of small local governments have been able to show leadership in their individual communities by undertaking energy-saving projects that reduce carbon and support a framework for further community action," said Cheryl Collart, executive director of the regional alliance.

While many of the Ventura partnership's programs are geared toward local agencies, residents in the 10-city area are also encouraged to reduce their household energy consumption. The partnership engages the community's attention with an online newsletter featuring energy saving tips, training seminars where participants can learn about green building and Title 24, and through kiosks placed strategically around the county featuring energy conservation information.

Berkeley Engages Community On Many Levels

Two years ago, Berkeley began to take stock of its carbon footprint and develop a vision to cut its size. The city's efforts to engage the community every step of the way are among the most comprehensive in the state.

"We knew for a plan to be effective, we needed to have widespread community support," said Timothy Burroughs, Berkeley's climate action coordinator.

City staff met with a variety of civic groups and stakeholders throughout Berkeley to gauge interest in undertaking a plan to address climate change. They took the additional step -- with city council support -- of placing an initiative, known as Measure G, on the ballot to ask the entire community if the city should adopt an aggressive plan to address greenhouse gas reduction. A resounding 81 percent of voters said yes.

After Measure G passed, the city conducted an inventory to determine the extent and sources of carbon emissions within the city. City leaders held a series of workshops and meetings with residents to solicit carbon-reduction ideas, which included everything from converting local schools to solar energy to making public transit more readily available. This input formed the basis for the Berkeley Climate Action Plan, with a goal to reduce carbon emissions 80 percent by 2050.

The Berkeley plan, posted on the city's website (www.berkeleyclimateaction.org), encourages residents to comment and features the Berkeley Climate Action Pledge, which they can sign to show their commitment to reducing their carbon footprint. It also provides extensive resources to help guide green building, recycling and choices on solar energy.

The city recently secured a \$40,000 grant from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District to establish working groups to monitor follow through on its plan. As part of the grant project, Berkeley will establish numerical benchmarks for goal attainment, build a database of stakeholders and launch additional community meetings to share feedback on annual progress toward energy reduction.

Embracing Collaborative Governance to Solve Energy-Related Issues

"Whatever the desired outcome in developing a climate action plan, a city or county will have a better chance of succeeding if the community is supportive and involved," said Terry Amsler, program director for the Institute for Local Government's (ILG) Collaborative Governance Initiative. The ILG program (www.ca-ilg.org/cgi) provides tools and resources to help guide informed and inclusive decision-making at the local level (see "Why Ask the Public?").

"Local governments should engage people to learn together in order to make changes together," said Amsler. "And residents should be assured that their voices will count too."

How Local Agencies Engage the Public in Climate Change Behavior

The City of Long Beach uses its extensive network of neighborhood associations, empowered through the city's Neighborhood Services Bureau, to send newsletters and offer workshops on climate change activities. In the past year, Long Beach received funding from the Port of Long Beach to purchase 2,000 reusable grocery bags distributed to interested residents. And people calling city offices hear recorded energy-saving tips play while on hold.

The City of Sacramento recently adopted a Sustainability Master Plan, which includes a section on public involvement and personal responsibility. An advisory committee consisting of stakeholders from throughout the city (Sacramento Municipal Utility District, Sacramento Tree Foundation, the Environmental Council of Sacramento and community leaders) are working together to encourage people to reduce energy consumption citywide.

The City of Santa Rosa plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 20 percent below 2000 levels by 2010. Its Environmental Committee includes city department representatives, city council members and local community groups, who meet monthly to discuss efforts to reach the goal. The committee actively promotes greenhouse gas reduction strategies at local events, offers Green Building 101 classes for the public, and bestows Environmental

Champion awards each year on citizens and groups who help achieve the city's environmental goals.

The County of Yolo completed a greenhouse gas emission inventory and is now reaching out for local expertise. Plans are under way to work with the University of California, Davis, to provide technical assistance, and to enlist community leaders, the Port of Sacramento and local school districts to provide support and know-how in setting goals for greenhouse gas reduction.

The County of San Mateo has established a Green Team, made up of representatives from each county department who learn and work together to be better "carbon citizens." Ideas and strategies are taken back to county departments to widen the impact of staff action and spread it beyond county offices.

The City of Seattle, Wash., supports its Climate Action Plan through the Greater Seattle Climate Dialogues, a network of study groups throughout the city where residents learn about and discuss solutions to greenhouse gas emissions that balance the risks of climate change against the costs of addressing it. Groups use the *Citizens' Climate Briefing* as a guideline for discussions. This document, developed with top climate scientists from the University of Washington, is available at www.climate dialogues.org.

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