Local Governments Take the Lead on Climate

Portland, Oregon, pioneered smart urban growth policies in the United States. The city's extensive transit network includes a streetcar. ©*AP Images*

In spite of the barriers [such as funding and making a global issue local], local governments can be ideal places to address global warming for three related reasons. First, local governments adopt their own distinctive policies, appropriate for unique local circumstances. Local governments control many of the factors related to greenhouse gas emissions, such as energy codes, land-use decisions, residential and commercial regulations, transit options, and solid waste disposal. Second, local authorities can encourage action by others in response to climate change, by lobbying the national government and by demonstrating the best-practices costs and benefits of controlling greenhouse gas emissions. Finally, municipalities have considerable experience addressing local environmental impacts within the fields of energy and waste management, transportation, and planning and development.

City As Policy Lab

Additionally, actions taken locally are a form of bottom-up environmental protection and resource conservation, and can

act as microcosms for potential national policies. Demonstrations of the effectiveness of mitigation options at the local level could make it more feasible for higher levels of government to adopt similar policies, and could make international actions more attractive. Research has indicated that there is a history of local governments demonstrating the effectiveness of policies, which are then adopted at higher levels of government.

Local governments have a variety of opportunities to influence the emissions being released from their communities. Although the government is limited in its ability to take direct action to reduce emissions from the private sector, it can use policies, incentives, and investments to encourage emission reductions. By taking a leadership role in setting the framework for greenhouse gas reduction programs, local governments can see an increased participation level from all sectors and thereby realize a higher success rate in meeting their emission reduction goals.

[…] Local governments have a great advantage over larger management units in that they tend to be smaller, less bureaucratic, and more flexible than national, international or even state institutions. They are closer to their constituencies and can monitor directly the effects of policies and actions that are put into place and therefore adjust more readily to changing situations. Local governments can experiment more readily with innovative policies. Other communities can adopt the programs that prove successful, and if an approach does not have the desired impact, changes can be made without the entire country having to change course midstream. Thus, the local level is the ideal level at which to tackle greenhouse gas emissions reductions.

Fort Collins, Colorado, supports electric vehicles including electric scooters.
Courtesy of Tim Tay

Lessons Learned

The experiences of the early adopters — the local governments that have been striving to address global warming since the late 1980s — have helped to illustrate some key features that can ensure the success of local climate change programs. To develop a truly successful program, it is important that a local government:

- Have a tangible goal against which progress can be measured. Too often, policies are set with vague objectives, which leads them either to be overlooked or without a mechanism to measure success.

- Develop a formal action plan with specific actions, responsibilities, and performance criteria laid out in it. Building a coordinated effort in which actions and policies support one another greatly improves the chances for success over implementing a collection of actions that are unrelated.

- Tie emissions reductions to other local goals and objectives. […] Climate protection can address communities' public health, economic, and quality of life objectives. Tying emissions reductions to these efforts and integrating them into larger municipal plans will help ensure longevity in the face of limited resources and competing priorities.

- Involve the public and various sectors throughout the process. Ultimately, it is the public that will have to implement most of the policies that are adopted. Therefore, involving affected sectors from the outset, so that they view themselves as stakeholders, will improve the chances for a program's success.

- Form partnerships within and among communities. The greater number of resources, skills, and points of

The Sonnenschiff (Sun Ship) solar-based complex in Freiburg, Germany, produces four times the energy it consumes. ©*AP Images*

view that are brought to the table, the better. It is quite likely that other local programs can support emissions reductions. Facilitate systems where different entities can contribute in their areas of expertise.

• Monitor actively the outcomes and results. No matter how well programs are planned ahead of time, unexpected outcomes can occur. The implementing agency should be aware of the direct and collateral impacts that its programs have.

Most importantly, local jurisdictions must be flexible and willing to innovate. If a monitoring regime shows that a program is not having the desired outcome, the local government should have the flexibility to adjust. Additionally, because climate change is a larger problem than local communities regularly tackle, solutions often will require "outside of the box thinking". Local governments should be open to innovations rather than adhering to business-as-usual policies.

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