

CLIMATE CHANGE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS: A SISYPHEAN CHALLENGE

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Reacting to the most recent report on progress toward meeting greenhouse gas reduction targets, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres declared, “2021 is a make-or-break year to confront the global climate emergency.” The report’s authors described it as a planetary “red alert” because “governments are nowhere close to the level of ambition needed to limit climate change to 1.5 degrees and meet the goals of the Paris Agreement.”

“Decision makers must walk the talk,” the Secretary-General urged. “Long-term commitments must be matched by immediate actions to launch the decade of transformation that people and planet so desperately need.”

We are inured to these kinds of warnings. The United States, with 4% of the world’s population, continues to generate 15% of its carbon emissions. While America’s rejoining the Paris climate accord is a positive sign, the “Green New Deal” remains a controversial partisan flashpoint. The new Biden Administration has heralded ambitious climate action, but faces vociferous opposition from the Republican Party’s 50 Senators. Efforts to circumvent legislative gridlock will run smack into the conservative judges confirmed during the Trump years.

To fill this void of Federal action, American cities have long pioneered ambitious plans and targets. The reality, however, is that local climate action is often more aspirational than functional and more sporadic than sustained. It is hemmed in by political, fiscal, legal and geographic limitations. Given the global forces powering carbon emissions, it is absurd to think that climate change can be stopped within the borders of one’s hometown. Yet local climate action is nonetheless vital to any hope for America to do its share to avoid climate catastrophe.

“There is no single answer to the question of whether it is feasible to limit warming to 1.5°C and adapt to the consequences,” Secretary General Guterres acknowledged. There is similarly no single answer for meeting America’s obligations under the Paris Agreement. Given the urgency and gravity of the crisis, however, we can’t afford the luxury of despair. We must pursue every promising venue and strategy – especially at the local level.

In his provocative essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Nobel Prize winner Albert Camus captured the dilemma of confronting forces that seem beyond our control. When we confront those intractable forces with our will, Camus wrote, “It teaches that all is not, has not been, exhausted . . . it makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among us.”

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“The Paris Agreement is a covenant among nations, but its consequences play out in our cities,” Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti told the international Climate Ambition Summit last December.

Five years before, as a Deputy Mayor, I oversaw the drafting of LA's first comprehensive environmental plan, titled "Sustainable City pLAN." Inspired by New York's "PlaNYC", LA's version was drafted by Chief Sustainability Officer Matt Petersen's team with significant pro bono assistance from the international consulting firm, PwC. It was the product of exhaustive research into global best practices for the environment, economy and equity, applied to the Los Angeles context. From that experience, I offer two lessons on the challenges facing local government in addressing climate action.

The first is the necessity not to succumb to the nearly irresistible temptation to overpromise. If humanity faces an "existential" climate crisis, shouldn't those drafting policies set the most ambitious goals possible? Yes, of course, except that "possible" is an elastic term.

New York had led the way with Mayor Michael Bloomberg's pledge to cut carbon emissions by 30% (from 2005 levels) by 2025. This kind of bold, "moonshot" targeting helped spur other cities to reimagine what was possible. Los Angeles clearly had to go beyond that – as the poet proclaimed, "a man's reach should exceed his grasp. Or what's a heaven for?"

Those were certainly the instincts of the committed team drafting the plan. Yet as a veteran of both setting and effectuating policies in local government, I pushed back on "moonshot" ambition. Our administration had followed Antonio Villaraigosa, who challenged the audience at his inauguration, "Dream with me, Los Angeles!" Despite real accomplishments, the inevitable disappointment was embodied in his failed promise to plant a million trees. As I came to find out, 600,000 trees were planted on his watch, no small achievement. Yet the dominant narrative focused on the shortfall from his shining goal – and the haste and waste that inevitably accompanied the pursuit of an unattainable number.

Beyond the potential for stoking public cynicism, setting lofty goals unhinged to reality fosters what's described as "malicious compliance" from those tasked with carrying them out. Large institutions, particularly public ones, are habituated to shifting political and administrative mandates. Yesterday it was a million trees, today it is cutting greenhouse gases by 30%. The status quo is built to withstand or even resist imposition from above.

Thomas Edison was once asked to define "genius." He responded that it was "1% inspiration, 99% perspiration." The public sector analog is that policy success is "1% inspiration, 99% implementation." The latter element is dependent on enlisting the engagement of the people who make up "the permanent government."

Whatever the size of a jurisdiction, setting carbon emission reduction goals is not an end, it is merely a beginning. Delivering on them is key.

So despite the vocal pressure from environmental groups, I tasked the Sustainability Team to negotiate targets with the departments in Los Angeles that would inherit responsibility for achieving them. We had leverage in that exchange, as Deputy Mayor for Budget and Innovation, I not only had the weight of Mayor Garcetti's authority and support – I had budgetary power that could not be ignored, even if it was best left unstated. My goal was to set targets that were

ambitious, but with enough buy-in from the departments to ensure they could be achieved or even exceeded. In the end we settled on a 45% reduction (from 1990 levels) by 2025.

Which raises the second lesson: the need to develop reliable metrics for measuring municipal greenhouse gas emissions. Those who understand the challenge of managing performance to achieve tangible results know it's best to set so-called "SMART" goals – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timely. But all the other elements depend on the second: the ability to accurately measure a baseline -- and progress toward the target. We are a long way from being able to accurately gauge greenhouse gas emissions at the local level.

It's not for lack of research, but from a shortfall in applied science. Ample studies show that, for example, nearly 40% of the dominant greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide, is produced by the transportation sector. Yet measuring how local land use decisions may spur or curb those emissions is far from an exact science. We know intuitively that segregating people from their jobs leads to more driving, but we are far from credible measures of how increasing residential densities near jobs bears on this crucial factor.

In fact, cities are not as far along as the private sector in measuring the inputs, outputs and outcomes of even their routine activities, let alone sophisticated monitoring of greenhouse gas emissions. In a recent study done for the Vulcan Project at Northern Arizona University, researchers found that the average city had underreported its carbon dioxide emissions by nearly 20%. In some cases, their numbers were more than 100% off – and some cities overestimated them. "This is an extremely complex undertaking to identify those potential errors and account for them," explained Riley Duren to a reporter from Scientific American. Duren, a carbon monitoring expert at the University of Arizona and NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, pointed out that "most cities just don't have the resources to do it."

Fortunately, the World Resources Institute, C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group and Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI) have created a standard for cities known as the Global Protocol for Community-Scale Greenhouse Gas Emission Inventories. Even a consistent global measuring standard, however, won't help cities without the staff and expertise to administer it and apply it to day-to-day budgetary and administrative decision-making.

This forces both policy makers and those charged with implementing the policies to operate largely in the dark about whether those policies are actually working. Clearly converting bus fleets to electric power -- or promoting energy conservation in new construction and building retrofits – will reduce emissions. But by how much? It's not always clear, particularly in relation to which policies are the most cost-effective.

I faced just such a dilemma in my last leadership role as City Manager of Santa Monica. In America, residential and commercial buildings account for 40 percent of energy consumption, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Taking their cue from a City Council long dedicated to sustainability, our Public Works Department designed an office addition to City Hall that would meet the "Living Building Challenge" -- which is more stringent than even LEED Platinum. In fact, no public building in America has yet attained that status as a

“regenerative” structure, which requires carbon neutrality along with water and energy self-sufficiency.

Winning Council approval for the design was not the issue for Santa Monica. Santa Monica, after all, had been the first city in the nation to adopt a comprehensive sustainability plan three decades ago. But even in one of America’s most environmentally-conscious municipalities, there was widespread public and internal staff skepticism about the value of spending \$85 million on the project.

It quickly became clear that an appeal based solely on climate concern was unpersuasive. Yes, there were fervent environmental activists and a city-appointed Environmental Task Force willing to cheerlead for the building’s advanced materials, systems and features. But whether it is Santa Monica’s City Services Building, America’s Green New Deal or Anytown, USA’s climate action plan, advanced environmental policy needs to be grounded in collateral and equitable benefits. Yes, climate change is real. But getting citizens to support the climate action policies and programs needed to combat it must overcome the skepticism and resistance those specific policies and programs engender.

In our case, the primary objection was cost. So we quantified the savings we would achieve by eliminating the significant cost of renting office space as well as the utility bills eliminated by the building’s solar power and rainwater capture systems. The results showed a fiscal net gain over the 30 year span of the bonding costs – and perpetual savings beyond. Not every climate action investment will be able to pay for itself – but it is foolish to duck fiscal accountability for climate policies and programs.

So it is with everything we do in local government. To effectively tackle climate change, we must be both bold and practical. Unless we are bold, we will fail to meet the moment. Unless we are practical, we will fail to meet the test of delivering measurable (and sustainable) results.

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If 2021 is a “make or break year” as the UN Secretary-General asserts, we can’t rely on nations, states or other localities to deliver for the scale of change required. In every town in America, public officials and citizen climate activists must rise to meet the urgent challenge. If “all politics is local,” as Tip O’Neill observed, then cities’ climate actions will look very different in Barrow, Alaska; Burbank, California; Boise Idaho; Birmingham, Alabama; Bloomington, Indiana; and Boston, Massachusetts. What is possible in each will be shaped by politics, financial realities and institutional capacity.

Effective climate action may require refocusing purchasing policies to reduce energy consumption; reforming zoning rules to legalize more compact development; or redesigning road networks to reduce auto-dependence. It may involve adapting best practices from other jurisdictions or pioneering new approaches that have promising prospects of reducing emissions. It almost certainly will require additional investment in analytical and administrative capacity to forge and implement those policies and programs. Ideally, it would be all of the above – and

more. But whether a city mounts efforts that are audacious or merely modest, every city has the responsibility to push the envelope.

Climate change is real. Local governments must rise to the challenge.

Like Sisyphus, our fate belongs to us. “In the universe suddenly restored to its silence, the myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up,” wrote Camus. “There is no sun without shadow . . . the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart.” As the UN Secretary General pleaded: “Long-term commitments must be matched by immediate actions to launch the decade of transformation that people and planet so desperately need.”