

**Local Land Use Planning and Climate Change Policy:
Summary Report from Focus Groups and Interviews
With Local Officials in the Intermountain West**

David Metz and Curtis Below

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Abstract

In early 2009, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3 Research) conducted a series of focus groups and one-on-one telephone interviews on behalf of Western Lands and Communities, a Joint Venture of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy and Sonoran Institute, to better understand how local officials in the Intermountain West are addressing – or not addressing – climate change in their planning and local land use decisions. Our objectives included:

- 1) identifying the primary obstacles to addressing climate change in land use planning, and how they can be overcome;
- 2) determining which information local government officials need to craft effective policies to address climate change; and
- 3) evaluating the best ways to convey that information to local officials.

This report presents notable findings from these discussions, as well as recommended strategies for supporting local government officials in the Intermountain West as they increasingly work to address this challenging topic.

Represented States

Arizona
Colorado
Idaho
Montana
New Mexico
Utah
Wyoming

About the Authors

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With a focus on environmental and conservation issues, Metz has provided research and consulting to help win voter approval for the largest conservation finance measures in national history, including five successful statewide bond measures providing \$15 billion to protect land and water in California, as well as major state and local measures. Additionally, Metz has provided opinion research on key message and policy issues to numerous conservation organizations, among them The Nature Conservancy, the Trust for Public Land, the League of Conservation Voters, the Environmental Defense Fund, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the Wilderness Society, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, the Sierra Club, and the National Audubon Society.

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About Western Lands and Communities

Now in its seventh year, Western Lands and Communities (WLC) is a partnership between the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy and Sonoran Institute that takes a long-term strategic perspective on shaping growth, sustaining cities, protecting resources, and empowering communities. The geographic focus of WLC is the Intermountain West where it continues to emphasize these major initiatives:

- Advancing State Trust Land Management
- Development and Application of Smart Growth Tools
- Reshaping Development Patterns
- Superstition Vistas Case Study: Planning for Sustainable Development
- Western Megaregions
- Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation

The broad mission of WLC is to create sustainable futures for western communities through land-use planning that effectively manages growth and integrates conservation values, open space, transportation, water, and energy infrastructure.

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Methodology

From February through May 2009, FM3 Research conducted a series of opinion research projects to assess the attitudes of local government officials in the Intermountain West on the role of local land use planning in addressing climate change. The research was carried out in two phases: a pair of focus groups (Phase 1) and 30 one-on-one telephone interviews (Phase 2) with elected officials, city and county managers, and urban planners in the Intermountain West (Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming).

Participants in both phases were selected to represent a mixture of small, large and medium-sized local governments, and urban, suburban, exurban, rural, and amenity communities in the seven-state region. Participants also included a roughly even mixture of staff (including planning and community development staff, and city and town managers) and elected officials (including council members, commissioners, and mayors) to capture the different perspectives of local government officials involved in local planning decisions. **Figures 1 and 2** list the different local governments represented in both Phases 1 and 2, but do not include the titles of the individual participants to maintain the anonymity of the results.

Figure 1: Local Governments Involved in Focus Groups

Location	Date	Cities, Towns and Counties
Denver, Colorado	February 3, 2009	City and County of Denver City of Aurora City of Boulder City of Centennial City of Commerce City City of Englewood Summit County Town of Fowler Weld County
Phoenix, Arizona	February 11, 2009	City of Glendale City of Goodyear City of Mesa City of Peoria City of Phoenix City of Tucson Town of Cave Creek Town of Fountain Hills Town of Oro Valley

The two-hour focus groups were held in Denver and Phoenix because the densities of those metropolitan areas permitted drawing participants from many surrounding communities at the same time. The remaining one-on-one interviews were conducted by telephone to cost-effectively contact representatives from diverse communities in the other Intermountain West states and more distant portions of Arizona and Colorado. The telephone interviews averaged approximately 45 minutes each in duration.

Figure 2: Local Governments Represented in Telephone Interviews

State	Cities, Towns and Counties
Arizona	City of Sedona City of Flagstaff
Colorado	City of Durango Summit County Town of Estes Park
Idaho	City of Boise City of Pocatello City of Coeur d'Alene City of Moscow City of Sun Valley
Montana	City and County of Butte-Silver Bow City of Billings City of Bozeman City of Missoula City of Kalispell
New Mexico	City of Albuquerque City of Santa Fe Santa Fe County Town of Taos City of Las Cruces
Utah	City of Salt Lake City City of Sandy City of Provo City of Park City Cedar City
Wyoming	City of Cheyenne City of Laramie City of Casper City of Gillette Town of Rock Springs

The report includes a number of direct quotations from interview subjects or focus group participants, presented in italics within the text to illustrate some of the notable opinions shared by participants.

Executive Summary

The research revealed a wide spectrum of levels of engagement with addressing climate change among local governments in the Intermountain West. While a minority of participating communities reported having formal climate change action plans and openly discussing strategies for reducing the carbon footprints, the majority viewed climate change as a secondary consideration – at best – in land use planning. In fact, numerous participants reported that local residents are generally skeptical that climate change is a serious problem, or that it results from human activities.

However, the participants reported that local government staff – and to a lesser extent, elected officials – are increasingly addressing climate change indirectly through other policy decisions. For example, creating higher energy and water efficiency standards for new development is often primarily motivated by a desire to save money or preserve local resources, but such policies' implementation also helps address climate change. It appears to be far more common for communities to adopt these policies under the auspices of “sustainability” or “economic efficiency” rather than climate change reduction, though such benefits of the policies unquestionably exist.

Participants consistently remarked that case studies of successes from similar communities would be extremely beneficial in helping their local governments adopt additional policies to address climate change. Such information would assist them in making the case for adopting policies that both have tangible local quality-of-life benefits (e.g. cost savings, reduced traffic congestion, etc.) and also help address climate change.

Key Findings

- Climate change is not a top-of-mind issue for most local government officials in the Intermountain West. Asked to assess the future planning challenges about which they were most concerned, participants most often cited the costs associated with providing services to new housing developments, particularly developments on the outskirts of existing city centers.
- However, while climate change is not seen as a pressing issue, many of the challenges these communities reported facing are directly or indirectly related to climate change. For example, many participants mentioned that managing water supplies, reducing energy consumption, building more efficient transportation systems, and protecting open space were all issues seen as significant local challenges.
- Similarly, many commented that addressing climate change was more of a secondary benefit of pursuing “good planning” decisions – including reducing vehicle miles traveled, encouraging denser development, and reducing energy and water consumption. However, some noted that addressing climate change has been a new and helpful justification for adopting some of these “good planning” principles that have faced opposition in the past.

- Despite this lack of explicit local engagement with climate change policies, nearly all participants agreed that local governments should be involved in addressing climate change. While a few based this argument on personal feelings of social responsibility, most pointed out the numerous ways in which local governments are perfectly situated for reducing emissions that cause global warming (e.g. adopting energy efficient building codes, reducing vehicle miles traveled through smart planning, expanding the use of public transportation, etc.).
- Most participants reported that their communities were at the early phases of addressing climate change, to the extent that it was on their policy radar at all. While there were examples of communities with more advanced climate change programs, most had either just adopted or are in the planning stages of adopting relatively modest policies indirectly addressing climate change (e.g. improved energy efficiency standards for new development). Many participants noted that they were hoping to implement these types of smaller policy changes and eventually generate increased support for more significant proposals in the future, should these less far-reaching policies prove successful.
- Of the minority of communities that have more actively pursued and adopted policies addressing climate change, most were comprised of more generally liberal populations or cities significantly influenced by local universities. Several participants from the “university towns” suggested that their better-educated general population was more comfortable accepting the results of scientific or analytic research, creating an atmosphere where the general public understands that global warming is a problem that needs to be addressed.
- Many participants noted that their communities have had much more success adopting policies or making planning decisions that impact new development, rather than existing development. Convincing residents and businesses to voluntarily adopt similar practices – without the ability to subsidize such behavior – has proven challenging.
- In most communities – and particularly in smaller communities – participants cited a lack of sufficient staff resources to research and implement policies addressing climate change. With many staff members responsible for several other issue areas in addition to the environment, even when there is consensus to address climate change, many cities and counties in the region simply cannot devote enough staff time to sufficiently address those concerns.
- While most expressed a general belief that local governments can and should implement both mitigation and adaptation policies, the vast majority of policies cited by participants as examples of addressing climate change focused on mitigation. The types of policies most commonly mentioned addressed energy efficiency, expanded transit, urban forestry and water conservation.
- Part of the hesitance of participants’ communities to address climate change stems from a belief that it remains a politically controversial issue in much of the region. Participants emphasized that – to varying degrees – significant portions of their communities’ populations are simply unconvinced that it is a real problem or one influenced by human activities.

- Additionally, many participants noted that a perception that these policies are more costly to implement further hampers efforts in communities where there is not a strong commitment to address climate change. This puts a premium on demonstrating that the economic benefits of a policy or planning decision outweigh its costs, given that addressing climate change will not be sufficient justification on its own.
- Part of this skepticism and lack of urgency is attributable to the perception that there are few agreed-upon, visible impacts of climate change in the participants' communities. Instead, residents often think about the issue in terms of melting polar ice caps and rising sea levels in parts of the world thousands of miles away from their communities. Several participants suggested that until there were significant, visible changes in their communities directly linked to climate change, residents – and by extension many elected officials – would be hard pressed to feel a sense of urgency to pursue policies addressing the issue.
- Further contributing to this lack of urgency is a widespread perception among residents that individual cities and towns cannot make a difference on climate change. While this belief was not one shared by most participants, many did note that the general public in their communities tend to be more skeptical about the impact decisions at the local level can have on a global problem such as climate change.
- Communities where natural resource extraction (such as coal or natural gas) is a significant portion of the local economy are less likely to have actively made planning or policy decisions addressing global warming. In general, these communities tend to be skeptical about the existence of global warming and are keenly wary of any policies that may negatively impact these local industries.
- All of these factors contribute – in some communities – to a divide between elected officials and staff regarding climate change policies. While many elected officials who participated in this research project were strong supporters of addressing climate change at the local level, many staff participants noted that the elected officials in their communities are, not surprisingly, influenced by skeptical community members and – more importantly – voters. Consequently, some staff participants felt like they were ahead of the community and elected officials in seeing the necessity to address climate change.
- Participants use a wide variety of terms in their communities to describe climate change. While a handful of local governments openly talk about the need to address “climate change” – and even fewer discuss “global warming” – the majority talk about the issue using other terminology. This inconsistent vocabulary poses a significant challenge for developing generic materials that local government officials can use to convince elected officials and community residents to adopt policies addressing climate change.
- Perhaps the most common way of framing policies that impact climate change appears to be “sustainability.” Other communities intentionally avoid any environmental references and frame their policy proposals in terms of “economic efficiency” (e.g. adopting more stringent

energy and water conservation standards will save residents and government money in the long-run).

- In summary, the primary obstacles local governments in the Intermountain West face to addressing climate change include the following:
 - Public resistance to the existence of climate change
 - A lack of urgency attached to the issue, given what are perceived as few tangible current impacts
 - Perceptions that the issue is beyond the scope of local government’s ability to address
 - Lack of staff and money to craft and implement effective policies
 - An inability to impact existing development as comprehensively as new development
 - Tensions and disputes with higher levels of government, or between elected officials and staff

Recommendations

Based on these findings, we recommend the following:

- Communications and reference materials provided to local government officials in the Intermountain West should avoid dwelling on either the potential problems caused by climate change or the past behaviors and policies seen as contributing to the problem. Participants emphasized that materials discussing the potential adverse impacts of climate change were unlikely to be received warmly in communities with mixed opinions on the topic.
- Communications should highlight the “co-benefits” of taking action completely independent of climate change. Participants nearly universally emphasized that policy proposals must be discussed in terms of their “co-benefits” for local residents and businesses – benefits that go beyond the simple reduction of greenhouse gases or the mitigation of potential future damage from climate change. These could include less air pollution, lower energy and water use, more preserved open spaces, more housing and transportation choices, and – most importantly – cost savings.
- Given that resource constraints were routinely cited as a factor limiting local governments’ ability to pursue policies addressing climate change, emphasizing the economic benefits of a particular policy when possible is particularly beneficial.
- Local government officials – particularly those working in city and county planning capacities – want access to case studies from other communities that have adopted policies to address climate change, either successfully or unsuccessfully. Officials stress that they want examples from similarly sized and situated communities. Smaller, rural communities will not find case studies from urban, college towns particularly compelling.
- Communities that are in the early stages of considering policies that address climate would benefit greatly from having access to a local government climate change “starter kit.” Participants called for examples of sample ordinances and modest initial policies that could

be adopted and potentially jumpstart the community's adoption of more substantial policies in the future.

- There is a clear need for an online clearinghouse of materials and information that local government officials can access on climate change policies, particularly given that it appears many of these staff and elected officials routinely start their online searches on Google. Such a site could contain an index of case studies, sample ordinances and climate action plans, techniques for creating baseline metrics and monitoring them over time, etc.
- A potential complement to the online clearinghouse could be a regular email newsletter. To sort through the large volume of general information available on the issue, participants expressed interest in a regular email communication with short summaries of new and potentially useful information. The more detailed information could be accessed later should they find the short summaries interesting.
- Information should be primarily sent to local government staff, particularly planning staff. While some elected officials want to see all of the same information as staff, most participants preferred for it to be sent to staff first.
- Participants expressed interest in getting as much information as possible in an interactive, face-to-face format – whether through “field trips” to communities that have implemented climate plans, in-person discussions with representatives of such communities, or direct presentations to their City Council or other legislative body.
- Participants expressed interest in getting information from small regional conferences and meetings, which could be attended at low cost and would make it possible to tap into existing regional networks.

Detailed Findings

Current Landscape

- **None of the participants volunteered climate change as one of the most pressing planning challenges facing their community.** When participants were asked to indicate the most important issues they must address when making planning decisions in their communities, no one specifically mentioned climate change. This was particularly telling given that all participants had been informed that the topic of the focus group or interview would be the role of climate change in local land use and planning decisions.

Instead, a majority of participants cited struggles with providing services to new developments in their communities as a major challenge. More often than not, the challenge of new development came not from the technical delivery of services, but rather the increased financial burdens placed upon their cities or counties by the need to service such development.

“While there is a segment of the population for whom climate change can be a motivator, there is an equal, or at least another segment of society for whom that is a lack of motivation or who has not bought into that idea.”

- **At the same time, many of the future challenges that concern participants have a connection to climate change.** Many participants did volunteer future challenges that have a clear link with climate change (e.g. ensuring adequate water supplies, providing a reliable supply of energy, protecting open space, expanding transportation systems, etc.). However, participants generally viewed these issues through the lens of population growth, economic development or sprawl as opposed to climate change. When pressed a little on the subject, many participants did acknowledge that working to address these issues would also help address global warming, but that the link between these issues and climate change was not at the center of discussions within government.
- **Addressing climate change is most often seen as a secondary benefit of making “good planning” decisions.** Many participants noted that taking steps to reduce vehicle miles traveled, encourage denser development, reduce energy and water consumption, and pursue other related policies are all components of “good planning.” While they are also beneficial in terms of addressing climate change, those benefits were typically seen as secondary.

Interestingly, several participants noted that climate change has been helpful for them by providing yet one more reason to make these “good planning” decisions. Many noted that the desire to stimulate economic development in their communities has historically – and particularly in recent years – trumped making more holistic and future-oriented planning decisions. Essentially, the push for short-term economic gains has made it difficult to adopt what are more broadly considered best practices of long-term planning (such as placing an emphasis on redeveloping existing city cores over building new developments in open space and farmlands at the periphery of communities). But in the few communities where climate change is more on the forefront of the minds of decision makers, the issue has been used as an added justification for adopting policies that have otherwise languished under the push for economic development.

- **Nearly all participants suggested that local governments should be involved in addressing climate change.** Regardless of their communities’ current practices and planning priorities, just about all participants asserted that local governments should take an active role in addressing climate change. In particular, many noted that transportation and land use planning are inherently local issues, and are among those that most directly impact climate change.

At the same time, participants held differing opinions over how much impact local governments can have on climate change. Some acknowledged that while their communities should make climate-friendly decisions – almost morally rooted in a belief that “it’s the right thing to do” – they were skeptical that those decisions would make much of an impact. This sentiment was, not surprisingly, strongest in the smaller communities. Others were more optimistic that their communities’ efforts could have a more substantial impact, particularly when measured in aggregate with those of other local governments across their state and the country.

Nearly all participants acknowledged that while local governments should be involved in addressing climate change, they could be far more effective with cooperation from their state governments and the federal government. Several cited that they felt better equipped to make decisions that would address climate change than their state government counterparts, given the influence of entrenched special interests at the state level. Also, several mentioned that the federal government had been largely absent from climate change policy discussions over the past decade, forcing local governments to act on their own more frequently. Several expressed hope that a new federal administration would change this dynamic.

Finally, a minority was skeptical that local governments should expend much effort attempting to address climate change. In most cases, those holding these opinions were convinced that global warming is a legitimate problem; however, they also believed that local governments in the Intermountain West would have such a minimal impact on global climate change that attempts to address it could be counterproductive.

“I don’t think [climate change] should dictate every move we make.”

“Why should little old [Smithtown] penalize itself to address a global issue that China will mess up anyway?”

“I believe it’s up to local government to show their constituency how [these policies] work.”

- **Participants believed that local governments can and should adopt policies to both mitigate and adapt to climate change, though most policy approaches they cited dealt with mitigation.** When asked whether local governments should be more focused on reducing climate change (mitigation) or preparing for its impact (adaptation), most participants suggested that cities and counties should pursue both goals. Opinions were divided as to which categories of policies are easiest for local governments to adopt. However, in discussing the types of programs and policies that have already been implemented – or are in the planning phases – nearly all addressed mitigation. Few of the participants’ communities have enacted any significant adaptation policies, though some cited programs indirectly related to climate change (e.g. such as clearing away vegetative fuel that could increase fire risks in warmer temperatures, or attempting to diversify the economies of towns that rely primarily on winter tourism).
- **Participants most frequently cited energy efficiency, expanded transit, urban forestry and water conservation efforts as policies their communities had undertaken that would address climate change.** Many participants indicated that their local government had recently adopted more stringent energy efficiency standards for new buildings – some that closely followed the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards and some that were more loosely based upon formal standards. These types of regulations were generally seen as less onerous to implement – though not necessarily less controversial – because they do not require residents and businesses to change their current behaviors. Additionally, there are clear economic benefits to designing buildings that consume less electricity, making the efficiency standards more compelling to business interests and

developers. A handful of participants noted that local developers supported energy efficiency standards because it enabled them to market their buildings as “green” and give them a competitive advantage.

“It’s actually cool to be energy efficient!”

Several communities also pointed to expanded or improved transit systems as a local policy that would have a positive impact on climate change. Many also mentioned policies designed to conserve water, particularly in communities where water shortages are a current problem. Not surprisingly, these communities tended to reside in the southern portion of the region (e.g. Arizona and New Mexico), but others in high-mountain desert communities also face water shortage challenges.

Others noted the importance of strong urban forests in contributing to greenhouse gas reduction.

- **Most participating communities were at the early phases of addressing climate change.** Although only a handful of communities represented in this research project have formal climate change action plans, more have signed on to the U.S. Conference of Mayors Climate Protection Agreement. However, participant comments suggested that their local governments have done little to meet those emissions reduction targets. In many of these communities, signing on to the agreement was seen as an accomplishment itself. As we will discuss in more detail later in this report, many participants indicated that they are in the early phases of addressing climate change and are eager to learn about any easy to implement “low-hanging fruit” to reduce their global warming pollution emissions.
- **More politically liberal communities and cities with major universities appeared more likely to have devoted resources to addressing climate change.** Time and time again, participants from communities with a major university mentioned that they might have an easier time convincing the local community of the importance of addressing climate change than did participants from other communities. Several participants from these communities cited a better-educated general population more comfortable accepting the results of scientific or analytic research, creating an atmosphere where the general public understands that global warming is a problem that needs to be addressed. In some cases participants felt like their citizens were pushing the city to *more* aggressively implement climate change policies – a phenomenon not reported in most other communities. It should be emphasized that these instances were the exception and not the norm, but it is a good reminder that communities with influential local universities may have an inherent advantage in engaging their residents in programs and policies addressing climate change.

Obstacles to Implementation

Participants cited a range of obstacles to implementing policies to address climate change – ranging from a sense of political controversy around the issue in their community to active opposition from major local industries on the other side of the issue. These obstacles are spelled out in more detail below:

- **Climate change is still perceived as a politically controversial issue in many of the participants' communities.** In all but the largest and most environmentally-concerned communities, participants reported a hesitance within government to take on an issue that they perceived as controversial – with some local residents not perceiving climate change as a problem, and others espousing aggressive action to address it. This was particularly acute in communities where natural resource extraction plays a significant role in the local economy.

“Most people around here do not think that climate change has anything to do with people.”

“We just witnessed the warmest February on record. But is that enough proof? I don't know. It may just be something that happened naturally.”

This dynamic created a slight schism between elected officials and staff in some local governments. While several participating elected officials were enthusiastic supporters of adopting policies that address climate change, many staff participants noted that they often have a difficult time convincing their elected officials to support such policies. This dynamic is not a new one, nor surprising in a community where many residents (i.e. voters) do not believe that global warming is real problem or that human activities are primarily to blame. This creates a challenge for staff promoting some policies – even if they have generally supportive elected officials, those officials are still sensitive to the politics of their community.

Several noted that because of elected officials' apprehension about the issue, a vocal minority opposed to climate change policies could have an outsized impact. As one participant in a small community put it:

“There's no underestimating the passion of a neighbor who's offended. Because we're a small community, we're not insulated from that backlash. We'll get it full on. We can't insulate ourselves from that through some abstract logic.”

- **The economic cost of policies to address climate change poses a major obstacle.** Many officials reported that their community would be unlikely to take steps to address climate change that might impose costs on local residents – unless they were provided with clear evidence that the economic benefits of the policies would outweigh their costs. This dynamic was most apparent in communities with a more generally conservative political climate or a local economy dependent upon resource extraction.

“Goals always cost money.”

“We need a clear demonstration that doing the right thing is going to make a difference and not cost us a whole lot of money.”

- **A widespread perception that individual cities and towns cannot make a difference on climate change also impacts their willingness to adopt new policies.** While most participants agreed that local governments should be taking steps to address global warming, many worried that their local citizenry did not see it as a local issue. Participants reported a

perception among local residents that the issue was better addressed by state or federal governments – a perception some participants shared as well. In communities where this perception was widespread, participants noted that one of their challenges is convincing residents that the steps they take locally do have an appreciable impact, if only when those impacts are accumulated across thousands of small cities across the region.

“I may be doing the right things, but the neighboring community is not, so why bother?”

- **Many participants – particularly in smaller communities – reported a lack of sufficient internal resources to develop climate change policies.** Even in communities where there was the political will, many officials indicated that limited resources – the lack of dedicated staff people with the time to explore the complexities of potential policy alternatives – prevent them from implementing some policies to address climate change. Several participants noted that in smaller cities one staff person is responsible for climate change and other environmental policies, but that they may also be responsible for half-a-dozen other issues areas as well. Consequently, it is difficult for those staff members to devote enough of their time to research and substantiate the benefits to effectively make the case for a particular policy.

One interesting side effect of this resource shortage is the level to which local governments are dependent upon the analytic claims made by those selling products to their cities and counties. Consequently, many participants noted that they rely upon the marketing materials and reports provided by manufactures and have little to no ability to independently verify or perform “sanity checks” of assertions made by companies. Other participants admitted that they often learn about new practices or products not from other local governments or third parties, but directly from salespeople.

- **A perceived lack of tangible climate change impacts results in a lack of urgency in many communities.** For many residents of communities in the Intermountain West, climate change remains an abstraction they only hear or read about. Locally, there may be few obvious signs of changes in their natural environments attributable to climate change. This creates a dynamic where even if there is some baseline acceptance that global warming is a potential problem, it does not appear locally urgent. Some participants openly wondered whether it would take something significant and visible locally – like the melting of all of the glaciers in Glacier National Park – before residents would develop a sense of urgency about the issue, and in turn apply pressure on elected officials to take action.

As one participant put it, if people can see a difference in their own lives “that’s when you really win.” Making it possible for the community to see that difference, however, is the challenge.

“It’s pretty tough to get support for an issue that local folks don’t see an impact from yet.”

“Americans are not very futuristic thinkers. We’re not very good planners.”

- **Local governments find it much easier to impact new development than existing development.** A common refrain from participants was that they have – or are hoping to

implement – new green house gas reduction standards for new development in their communities, but that convincing residents or business to voluntarily adopt similar practices in existing development was challenging. Without the ability to subsidize or otherwise offer tangible economic incentives to residents – a difficult prospect given the trying financial situations faced by local governments throughout the region – many commented on the challenge of encouraging residents to change their behavior or make improvements in their own property.

“I would say the biggest and hardest thing that we have had to deal with in the last couple of years is enacting very strict energy efficiency guidelines as it pertains to our building codes. So above code requirements for energy efficiency on not just new construction, but on remodels and additions and now looking at potential for existing residential, energy conservation ordinance or commercial energy conservation ordinance.”

- **Many participants reported that the scope of the problem – and the volume of information available about it – make it daunting to get started in developing policies.** As one participant put it, “Where do you start?” For those communities that are just now starting to address climate change – a large number of the local governments represented in this research – many suffer from paralysis due to the vast amount of general information about climate change and policies to address it.

“The issue is not so much not having the information; it’s not having a priority on getting that information.”

Several mentioned that it would be helpful if there were one single repository or clearinghouse they could turn to instead of having to conduct all of the research themselves. In fact, many mentioned that it would be very helpful to have a “starter kit” for local governments that are just now embarking on a policy course to address climate change.

- **Monitoring progress toward greenhouse gas reduction goals is also seen as a key information challenge.** Many participants were uncertain how to develop meaningful baseline metrics for use in monitoring the impact of newly adopted policies – a factor which for some discouraged them from adopting such policies in the first place. Some policy impacts are relatively easy to measure (e.g. reduced water and electricity consumption), but participants were uncertain how to measure some of the other positive impacts of their policies.

“It gets very easy to have an argument about what those metrics really measure. I think that is where the science has not caught up with our aspirations, yet.”

- **Communities with local economies dependent on natural resource extraction face particularly stiff opposition.** Not surprisingly, cities and counties where natural resource extraction (such as coal or natural gas) is a significant economic engine have their own special set of hurdles to overcome. First, residents of these communities tend to be more skeptical about the existence of climate change, or suspicious that human activities play a

significant role. Second, any policies that are seen as infringing upon these local industries are met with significant resistance.

Additionally, amenity and resort communities face their own – somewhat similar – set of challenges. When policies are proposed in these communities that seek to rein in sprawl or place more stringent conservation standards into the local building code, resort owners and proprietors often push back. Many of these communities have experienced relatively large growth in the industry in the past several decades, growth which has been critically important to generating local taxes. Policies seen as putting limits on the future growth potential of these industries can be difficult to implement.

In both of these types of communities, participants mentioned how important it is to get buy-in – or at least a commitment not to actively resist – from the local business community before pursuing any type of significant policy changes.

Framing Solutions and Language Choices

One major challenge in Intermountain West communities on the issue of climate change is the lack of a unified vocabulary to use in defining the problems and potential solutions. Most communities tended to avoid using terms like “climate change” and “global warming,” and instead framed the issue as one of “sustainability” or “economic efficiency.” However, some communities do openly talk about the “climate action plans,” while others talk about “smart growth” initiatives. The following section discusses these findings in more detail.

- **Most participants said their communities shied away from using the term “climate change” as an explicit justification for new policies and programs.** The term was anathema for most participants. With the residents of many communities skeptical about the validity of climate change warnings, participants noted that it was often difficult to discuss climate change with the general public, and often, by extension, their elected representatives. (The term “global warming” was seen as even more inflammatory and potentially inaccurate if the local impact of climate change might mean cooler temperatures.) While “climate change” might still be discussed among staff members or at professional conferences, most participants reported that it was rarely part of the discourse within their own community except among small groups of local advocates.

“If you talk about trails or climate change you’re going to get laughed out of the room.”

“You can wear the climate change moniker out by using it too much.”

“We get no play from labeling things around here as being green.”

“We’re not going to sell anything here on the global warming issue.”

The dynamic was very different in larger or more politically liberal communities, where local government was likely to have an explicit climate action plan and there was likely to be a political consensus for some type of action within the community.

- **Participants were more likely to frame and discuss policy proposals as addressing “sustainability” or “economic efficiency.”** Unfortunately, there did not appear to be a consistently used alternative to the term “climate change.” Perhaps the most commonly used alternative was some variation on the theme of “sustainability.” Residents could intrinsically understand the benefits of sustaining their community’s current quality of life and standard of living, independent of the explicit issue of climate change. However, some participants did express skepticism that their community’s residents could understand what “sustainability” meant in a local planning context, so it may not be a perfect substitute for “climate change.”

“‘Climate change,’ that phrase is an obstacle. It’s too big. It has to be [called] ‘sustainability’ at the smallest level and probably up to the regional level.”

“The reason why the term ‘sustainability’ does better as a concept than talking about climate change is a lot of people use the term ‘sustainability’ to try to justify their current standard of living. People in this country look at climate change as a threat to what they have used or their acceptable standard of living, because it forces you to look at things from a more global perspective.”

“Nobody knows what ‘sustainable’ means. It means different things to different people. It’s like ‘quality development.’”

“What I was going to say is I use terms like ‘conservation’, ‘energy efficiency’, ‘savings’”. I think those are terms you can use to do these things without getting into the debate of climate change, whether it’s happening and who is causing it. I think generally, maybe I’m naive, but most people think those are good things. Not that I am trying to say that you shouldn’t be involved in the debate, but I think you can do these kinds of programs without having to have that [climate change] debate, but still have a positive impact.”

Many other participants commented on how they frame these policies in terms of maximizing “economic efficiency” or “economic “resiliency.” While not a concise substitute term for “climate change,” it did appear to be a far less controversial way to frame policies that do directly or indirectly address climate change. This strategy of framing solutions as economically efficient (e.g. instituting energy and water conservation standards saves money in the long run) appeared to have broad appeal in nearly all communities. Even in cities that do not shy away from openly discussing “climate change” and “reducing carbon emissions,” presenting policies as cost-savers was often critical to winning public or business support.

“We won’t call it [climate change]. We’ll call it long-term planning, planning for economic resiliency.”

“Holdouts will only come around when they can see the financial side of the equation.”

- **In a handful of communities “smart growth” was seen as an appealing term.** While many participants who were professional planners freely discuss “smart growth” internally or with others within their profession, most avoided using the term when publicly discussing policies that address climate change. However, that was not always the case. In a few communities, participants did indicate that many of their proposals are openly described as embodying “smart growth” principles. For them, the term was appealing because it spoke to broader quality of life issues and was consistent with proposals that have been advocated for many years. Although “smart growth” does not appear to be a viable replacement term for “climate change” in most of the Intermountain West, the fact that some do openly embrace the term underscores that there is not one unifying vocabulary used to describe and frame local government policies that address climate change.

“Planners have an ability to shape and impact climate change through how we use our lands. ‘Smart growth’ has really helped make those connections.”

“[Talking about] smart growth will get you shot.”

Strategies for Overcoming Obstacles

Many participants suggested that one way to work around the obstacles presented by skeptical residents – and sometimes elected officials – was to remove climate change from the discussion entirely and instead frame the policies as economically beneficial for the local community. By implementing smaller, more discrete policies and programs with measurable economic benefits, momentum can be generated to make more significant changes in the future, while creating a narrative where residents and businesses are part of the solution and not dwelling on past behaviors. The following section outlines some of these potential strategies suggested by participants.

- Blaming residents or being critical of their past behaviors is not seen as constructive. One of the overarching themes expressed by participants was that local governments should strive to avoid discussing policies in a manner that is seen as blaming residents for their past behaviors. There was a definitive thread of “what’s done is done” weaving through participants’ comments. Considering that many residents of these communities are somewhat skeptical about the role of human activities in contributing to climate change, participants noted that finding fault with how residents have lived their lives did little to advance their cause. As one participant noted, an approach that says to elected officials “you’re being irresponsible and this is generally accepted science” may be honest, but will not necessarily be persuasive.
- Given the undercurrent of climate change skepticism, many participants suggested that it was not persuasive to emphasize the potential problems caused by climate change. Most residents have a difficult time accepting the potential impacts of climate change. Melting polar ice caps and rising sea levels are simply too geographically removed from the region to invoke strong feelings in many – though obviously not all – residents. Consequently, justifying local government policies on the grounds that they are needed to address these

potential impacts is not seen as a credible strategy. The exception to this is when very specific local impacts are or will be observable (e.g. the previously mentioned melting of the glaciers in Glacier National Park). Only local – and obviously apparent – impacts were seen as useful in generating support for policies addressing climate change.

“Climate change is an abstract, and unknown. But the [local] view is very known.”

- Participants recommended highlighting the associated benefits of policies to address climate change. Participants nearly universally emphasized that policy proposals must be discussed in terms of their “co-benefits” for local residents and businesses – benefits that go beyond the simple reduction of greenhouse gases or the mitigation of potential future damage from climate change. These could include less air pollution, lower energy and water use, more preserved open spaces, more housing and transportation choices, and – most importantly – cost savings.

“At this point in our community’s stage of development, it really makes sense for us to point out the other positive impacts.”

One participant specifically used the concept of “community health” as an example. They suggested that if a particular policy or planning decision improved the overall health of their community and global warming turned-out not to be real threat, it wouldn’t matter – the policy would have had a community health benefit independent of climate change.

While several participants noted that they personally would like to see these policies adopted because they are the “right thing to do,” they acknowledged that such an argument would likely be unpersuasive to many members of their community.

- Of all the benefits attributed to climate change policies, participants emphasized that economic benefits should be highlighted most. Participant after participant stressed how important it was to demonstrate the economic benefits of a policy, even if the ostensible goal of the policy is to address climate change. Most critically, policies shown to reduce costs for government and taxpayers – such as energy efficiency improvements – were always the easiest to institute and implement, often requiring no explicit reference to greenhouse gas reduction. Secondly, being able to make a credible case that a policy would result in a more stable economic base for the community – particularly in communities dependent on resource extraction or tourism – also makes the policy more palatable.

“We need a clear demonstration that doing the right thing is going to make a difference and not cost us a whole lot of money.”

“People aren’t going to take any steps unless there is some financial incentive to do it. That is just the way it is going to be.”

- Participants noted a tension between describing short- and long-term costs and benefits. Often when confronted with a new policy, decision makers and residents either directly or indirectly weigh the costs and benefits. Participants lamented that often these comparisons

include only the short-term costs and benefits, when most of the policies that address climate change have significant up-front costs and benefits that accrue only over a much longer term. Participants stressed how important it was to detail the long-term benefits in any analyses and discussions regarding new climate change policies, since many such policies are only economically beneficial over the long run and a focus only on the short-term costs and benefits misses the point (and seriously jeopardizes the likelihood that these policies will be adopted).

- Policies to address climate change at the local level many seem more manageable when presented in a series of small steps. Given that one of the obstacles identified by participants was the enormity of the problem, several noted that a successful strategy was to define climate change by its smaller parts rather than its broader impacts. Implementing a new energy efficiency-building standard is a much more manageable and discrete task than “stopping global warming.”

“Theoretical environmental mumbo-jumbo will make people’s eyes glaze over. I need sound bites that give me something small and specific to sell.”

This strategy also has the additional benefit of creating a sense of success and momentum. If a local government can implement several seemingly small policy changes, it can create a sense that larger policies may have a chance of adoption in the future. This is particularly true if any of the smaller policies result in appreciable cost savings.

“What we have done within our land use plan is ... broken it down in the first year of what we know we can succeed in, and those projects we are taking on now currently. So we are feeling that small successes will lead to bigger successes and then you get the total buy-in. It is almost a kind of strategic plan.”

“We are not addressing the issue of climate change head on, but we are doing an update to our plan this year. We are adding a theme, it’s a theme based plan, called Sustainability Triple Bottom Line Approach. That is how we are addressing.”

- Getting support from the community can help elevate comfort levels with climate change policies. Participants cited two different kinds of community support helpful to implement policies addressing climate change. A handful mentioned having formed citizen advisory committees involved in the early stages of policy design and debate. Not only did these committees help identify useful changes to the proposed policies, but they were very helpful in generating a sense of legitimacy for the final policies. These weren’t policies forced upon the community from above by planners; rather, they were collaborative work products developed with active contributions from local residents.

“Community support may not be a pre-requisite, but it’s a post-requisite.”

“We formed a citizen’s advisory committee. We have 18 different people representing everyone in the entire community. We got 100% participation over an 18-month period with two meetings per month. It’s been absolutely amazing. That helped a lot.”

The second type of community support some participants mentioned was more specific to the business community. As previously mentioned, in some Intermountain West communities natural resource extraction and resort/amenity industries are critically important to the local economy. Some participants said that entrenched opposition by these local businesses has made it more difficult to implement climate change policies. Others mentioned that the only way they could adopt policies addressing climate change was to secure buy-in from these industries in advance. One participant used the example of an influential local resort that had previously strenuously objected to the city adopting more stringent energy efficiency building standards. Eventually, the city was able to demonstrate the long-term cost savings potential of the policy to the resort, which agreed to withhold its objection to the policy. A few years later the cost savings did materialize and that local business is now more open to the city pursuing similar policies.

Information Needs

Participants consistently remarked that case studies – from similar communities – would be extremely beneficial in helping their local governments make policy and planning decisions. Case studies highlighting the economic benefits of a particular policy direction or program are the most desirable. The following section details several additional information needs identified by participants.

- **Case studies were seen as the most valuable type of information to help in advancing policy change.** Participants repeatedly emphasized the need to have case studies of both successful and unsuccessful local policies for addressing climate change. Participants wanted examples of what works and what doesn't before committing resources to a new course of action. This was particularly acute in communities in the initial stages of implementing climate change policies. Given that most of these communities are small, they feel like they cannot spend the time and money on programs unless they feel relatively comfortable that the returns will be positive or neutral at worst.
- **Participants stressed the importance of case studies from similarly sized and situated communities to their own.** Given wide variation in communities' demographic, economic, and political characteristics, diverse case studies are needed to enable local governments to better compare "apples to apples." Many participants from smaller communities noted that case studies from urban, coastal and liberal communities – Berkeley was frequently cited as an example – were non-starters for their local governments. Even cities within the Intermountain West were not necessarily seen as being more useful as models; participants from smaller cities in the region noted that case studies from Boulder, Denver and Phoenix were not particularly helpful. Even if the policies' implementations were to be very similar, participants worried that the examples could be dismissed without due consideration. Consequently, communities with local economies dependent on natural resource industries wanted to see case studies from communities similarly dependent on those industries. Participants from amenity and resort dependent communities echoed similar sentiments.

This does present a difficult challenge for those seeking to produce “apples to apples” case studies, given that early-adopter communities are inherently more likely to be urban or have more liberal and environmentally friendly political cultures. This underscores the need to cultivate successful implementations of climate change policies in Intermountain West communities that share similar profiles to the diverse range of communities in the region.

“It’s not terribly helpful when I get a study from North Carolina, that no matter how empirical it is or how objective or relative it is, it simply doesn’t resonate with the location population or the local elected officials. However, if I can get something from right next door, preferably a community that has some of the same characteristics, that is going to mean something.”

- **Case studies that demonstrate positive returns on investment are seen as particularly useful.** Consistent with participant comments that climate change policies are often adopted on the basis of their cost savings potential, it only stands to reason that case studies that show real-world instances of cities and counties saving money are especially helpful. Participants seemed to crave case studies that would enable them to show elected officials, the business community and residents at-large that a particular policy or program was economically beneficial for a similarly sized and situated community.

“Packaging the successes that already happened and providing some historical data that shows that those have improved under different names, under different purposes.”

- **Examples from successful communities can also provide valuable benchmarks to measure the impact of new initiatives.** In addition to case studies helping to provide a proof of concept, several participants noted that good case studies would provide solid quantitative data. If a similar policy or program were adopted in their community, they could use this data to measure their own progress against another community’s experience, enabling them to get a feel for whether or not their implementation has been more or less successful than others.
- **Participants noted that information from local sources would be most credible.** Several said that spokespeople or sources of information that had a local context – such as a local university or business organization – would be more readily believed. There were, however, some exceptions:

“The closer to home the better, with the exception that on occasion things that are close to home are better known and [more easily] discredited.”

- **Smaller communities just starting to consider climate change policies would benefit from policy “starter kits.”** Participants from cities in the early stages of considering policies and programs to address climate change – either directly or, more often, indirectly – suggested that having some sort of “starter kit” would help them immensely. Commonly mentioned components were templates of climate change policies and actual sample ordinances adopted by other local governments. There was a palpable sense among some participants of not knowing where to begin and sample ordinances would help jumpstart the internal and external dialogues.

Also, many participants expressed a feeling that there are probably some “low-hanging fruit” – beneficial policies that their communities could adopt without much opposition. Many participants recognized that because their community has historically done little to nothing to address climate change, some fairly straightforward policies might have been overlooked. There was also a sense that implementing a series of minor initial policies might create some momentum toward considering more significant initiatives.

However, several participants noted that even if a city had these tools – sample ordinances and easy to implement policies – that a “starter kit” should include guidance on how to discuss and frame these policies with the community. Invariably, staff and elected officials will need to present these proposed policies to local residents in community or formal government meetings. Participants from communities just getting started noted that they could use advice on which key words have been shown to be successful in communicating climate change policies persuasively in the past. One participant even suggested that it would be useful to receive a sample public presentation (or “sales pitch”) to use as a starting point for crafting his or her own materials.

“Theoretical environmental mumbo-jumbo will make people’s eyes glaze over – I need sound bites that will give me something small and specific to sell.”

- **Many participants turn to the Internet when searching for information regarding climate change policies, but are frustrated by the lack of a central, organized clearinghouse.** When asked to indicate where they turn when looking for information regarding climate change policies, a surprisingly large number of participants responded with one word: “Google.” Some were somewhat reluctant to admit this – perhaps viewing it as a slightly haphazard strategy for researching local government policies – while others openly acknowledged that that the Internet is the first place they look. However, nearly all lamented how disorganized and dispersed the information is online – with only a handful of websites (in their awareness) that acted as clearinghouses for local governments seeking climate change policy information. Another added benefit of a clearinghouse website would be the validation factor it could apply to the information it included. Several participants noted that when searching online it could often be challenging to distinguish between more or less reliable sources of information.
- **In addition to the Internet, participants currently get information from a wide range of organizations.** The most commonly mentioned organization was the American Planning Association (APA), with some participants citing their local chapter and others citing the national organization. Not surprisingly, participants who were professional planners were most likely to cite APA. Another category mentioned by participants – particularly elected officials – was regional associations of local governments or metropolitan planning associations. This was particularly the case when transportation decisions were being made, given that many local governments seek to address transportation issues regionally.

Participants also frequently mentioned seeking or receiving information from the Urban Land Institute, the International City/County Management Association, and ICLEI - Local

Governments for Sustainability. Participants from communities with a significant local university presence also mentioned using those universities as resources.

- **Participants generally agreed that information should go to staff – as a starting point – before elected officials.** While some elected officials wanted to see all of the same information as staff, at least as many preferred for it to go to staff first – particularly planning departments. (Not surprisingly, staff preferred for the information to come to them first.) In most small communities throughout the Intermountain West, elected officials work full-time jobs outside local government and acknowledge they do not have enough time to sort through lengthy reports; instead, they rely upon staff to filter and summarize what they ultimately end up reviewing.

“If you can make the City Council think the idea came from them, that’s when it’s going to happen.”

- **Participants uniformly stressed that information provided to them should be concise, and preferably distributed via email.** Many participants complained about a culture of sending around large reports that gather dust on office bookshelves, with a common refrain being, “don’t send me a 50-page report.” In fact, many mentioned that they would prefer to receive information over email because it created less clutter and was easier to distribute to colleagues. Additionally, by their very nature email communications tend to be brief and lend themselves to short summaries of different policy issues or proposals. If after reading a short summary in an email a participant wished to review the larger text or report, they would like the opportunity to do so. Most preferred this approach to having larger reports sent to them in hardcopy format.

Participants also noted that they were more likely to review information sent to them via email if it came from a trusted source – such as one of the organizations listed above.

Several said that articles in professional journals would be a good way to disseminate information – but noted that their readership was limited.

- **Most participants favored in-person interactions to exchange information.** In an era when local government officials are bombarded with information, face-to-face meetings are likely to have more impact. Whether these meetings took the form of regular regional meetings, conferences, or field trips to observe the implementation of a particular policy seemed to make little difference – participants said they prefer discussing policies directly with other local government officials who have experiences from which they can learn.

Many seemed particularly enamored by the concept of “field trips” to view case studies first-hand, but also realize that such trips are costly and difficult for communities facing budget shortfalls to justify. Consequently, many participants stressed the benefits of local conferences or meetings, or direct presentations to local government as cheaper alternatives to national conferences or gatherings. Local conferences also have the added benefit of self-selection for communities that share similar characteristics. This can help address the demand for facilitating “apples to apples” comparisons between communities.

- **Participants were more interested in technical “how-to” advice, and not national or high-level policy debates.** Taking into consideration the endemic skepticism regarding climate change in many Intermountain West communities, many participants noted that receiving information about major national – and especially international – policy debates was not especially useful. With perhaps the exception of a few of the larger communities or ones with a more liberal, environmentally-friendly populace, most participants wanted information that provided them with actionable policy approaches and advice on the best implementation strategies.
- **Participants also welcomed the idea of finding out about grants.** Given the current economic climate and given that many participants noted how limited resources prevent them from pursuing climate change policies as actively as they might wish, it is not surprising that participants were eager to learn about local grant opportunities or other ways to obtain additional funds to support climate change policies.

Conclusion

Overall, the results of the research suggest reason for cautious optimism that local governments in the Intermountain West can be moved to adopt more aggressive policies to address climate change. While there is still a perception that residents in many communities are skeptical about climate change, most officials that we spoke to indicated that such public disbelief was steadily (if slowly) eroding, and most of the officials we spoke with were themselves convinced that climate change was an issue that needed to be addressed. Many – though not all – of the primary remaining challenges to increased adoption of local climate change policies had to do with information. Based on the results of the research, local officials are seeking concise, practical information about how to begin a policy initiative; case studies to show how they have been implemented in similar communities; cost-benefit studies to make the case that policies will have economic benefits; and messages to present the policies and their co-benefits to the public in a clear and tangible way. If local governments in the region can obtain this information, it ought to provide significant encouragement for them to explore the idea of explicitly addressing climate change in their policymaking.

References

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