Greening Communities: Integrating Climate Protection Policies into Local Governments' General Plans through Online Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we outline the need for aggressive climate protection planning, the value of placing that planning upfront in the general plan policy making process, provide an overview of tools and resources currently available to communities, identify some gaps in the capacity to integrate climate protection policies into local governments' general plans. We then discuss and critique an alternative approach that uses online collaboration to achieve those important goals.

Introduction

Climate change presents both an immense challenge and an opportunity to the creation of sustainable communities. Integrating climate protection into the operations of local governments through the general planning process, and changing the way general plans are developed in California may be an effective way for local governments to achieve ambitious greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction goals, at the same time such a response will lay the foundation for creating more sustainable communities. While local governments and communities have some motivation to adopt climate change policies, they typically lack the needed financial and technical resources to identify the strategies that would be most meaningful to them and their constituents.

In this paper, we discuss and comment on an innovative approach to facilitating the integration of climate protection policies and strategies into local governments. This approach involves the development of an online database of climate policies with built in collaboration tools – a Climate Policy Database. Such a database can provide local governments with greatly enhanced access to actual general plan language and implementation strategies related to climate change, coupled with peer review and analysis, and the ability to customize sets of policies to meet individual needs. For many local governments access to such a resource can potentially change the way they develop climate policies and how general plans are used to accelerate climate responses throughout California.

Need for Policy Level Approach

General plans are vital to the successful growth of communities. Through policies and implementation strategies, general plans lay the foundation for local governments to build upon. The idea of a comprehensive plan that defines a community's vision for future development is not new to California. "Master Plans" were first codified in 1927 (Fulton & Shigley 2005), and in 1937 California became one of the first U.S. States to mandate master plans for cities and counties. Overtime, the state required local municipalities to develop specific sections, or *elements*, as well as *specific plans* for specific geographic areas. In 1984, the state revised the planning statutes so that some of the existing elements were consolidated into the seven required

elements of a community "general plan": Land use, Housing, Open space, Safety, Circulation, Conservation, and Noise.

While general planning may not be an ideal mechanism to manage changing conditions, for example nearly 2/3 of general plans in California are out of date (Detwiler 2006), it is an appropriate mechanism for establishing long-term response goals and for setting direction for community development.

Importance of the General Plan for California Climate Protection

As research is increasingly showing, climate change will have a long-term impact, (directly and indirectly) on the economic, political, and social well-being of California. For example, in a study utilizing climate models, 11 climate scientists from five institutions found that human-induced global warming has and will continue reducing the snow pack in the western mountains, which serves as our natural water storage bank (Kerr 2007). The great uncertainties around the impacts of climate change, make response management exceedingly challenging.

In light of this and other scientific assessments, it would make sense for local governments to actively plan for climate change. The California State Legislature has already recognized this imperative through enactment of the landmark AB 32, which established the first statewide effort to reduce and cap greenhouse gas emissions across all sectors of California's economy. Although the translation of AB 32 into local municipal policies has not even begun, and it is unclear what direction this will take, it is clearly in local governments' best interest to start actively planning and preparing for what may be a mandated cap on all local governments' operations.

As climate change becomes increasingly evident and state regulations authorize local governments with responding to climate change, climate planning is moving to the forefront of concerns for local governments (City of Seattle 2008). Because of the timeframe and scope of climate change, climate protection strategies require a firm long-term policy level commitment. Embedding climate protection strategies into municipal policies through general plans will be a critical piece of local responses. Given the mandate that general plans should address, this "long-term perspective" on the "conditions and needs in the future," the General Plan is the natural foundation for local government climate planning.

Obstacles for Climate Protection Policies

Despite the heightened urgency and enthusiasm in actively addressing climate change, many communities, including some of the 728 cities that have signed onto the Mayors' Climate Protection Agreement, are finding it to be a challenge to develop and translate GHG reduction strategies into effective policies and programs (Roosevelt 2007). This is no surprise since such planning requires significant resources, such as allocating funds to hire staff or consultants¹ with appropriate background and technical knowledge to efficiently develop and implement climate protection policies and strategies. For example, in its effort to be a climate leader, San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsome has come under fire for the costs of maintaining his climate staff (Vega 2008). Not all local governments have the political will and the financial resources needed to develop their own programs and policies, yet to achieve climate reduction goals statewide, every

¹ A large number of cities, particularly the smaller ones, rely on consultants to manage the general plan process. As such these consultants are also critical to address in order to advance best practices for climate planning.

community will have to integrate climate planning into their general plans at some point. Yet, general planning is already an underfunded activity in California. The Governor's Office of Planning and Research's (OPR) identified 304 cities and 39 counties in California that have not revised and updated their general plan within the last ten years (OPR 2006) A likely reason for delaying the update process is the high costs for an average California city. OPR research found that updating a general plan can cost on average about \$333,139 (including CEQA \$96,277 and public participation \$39,643) (OPR 2003a). Given that California does not provide significant financial support for the revisions of general plans, most cities and counties must allocate general funds to finance the general plan update (Detwiler 2006). Given the underfunded state of general planning, integrating climate protection into the general plan is unlikely to occur without significant facilitation or support.

Case Studies of Successful Climate Planning

Despite potential barriers, some ambitious cities in California have taken the initiative to incorporate climate protection policies and strategies into their general planning process. The City of San Diego and Marin County are two examples of these cities.

City of San Diego. San Diego, which completed a 5-year planning process on March 10, 2008, has made climate protection an important issue for the City's long-term planning by including climate change as one of the keys issues that is addressed in the Conservation Element of its draft General Plan (City of San Diego 2008). One of the ways that the updated General Plan will be utilized is to update or amend the City's community plans, the public documents that contain specific proposals and policies for long-range land uses and public developments and improvements in a given community. Through this process, each community plans will align better with the General Plan's goals and objectives. Some noteworthy climate protection policy goals that are clearly stated within the General Plan include:

- "Reducing the City's overall carbon dioxide footprint by improving energy efficiency, increasing use of alternative modes of transportation, employing sustainable planning and design techniques, and providing environmentally sound waste management";
- "Preparing for, and being able to adapt to adverse climate change impacts"; and
- "Collaborating with climate science experts on local climate change impacts, mitigation, and adaptation, including sea level changes, to inform public policy decisions." (City of San Diego 2007, 9).

Marin County. Completed in November 2007, Marin County's Countywide Plan update represents an innovative and comprehensive document that serves as a progressive model for other communities. What makes this update to the Marin's Countywide Plan so exceptional is that it has incorporated the concept of sustainability as the overarching theme of the entire Plan. The Plan is also built on community-defined principles of sustainability and incorporates over 70 indicators and targets for measuring accomplishments and identifying next steps in three areas: Natural Systems & Agriculture, the Built Environment, and Socioeconomic Systems. Moreover, included within the Plan are both specific policies and implementation strategies for reducing GHG emissions such as conducting GHG emissions inventories, setting GHG emissions

reduction targets, and developing programs to plan for and adapt to projected sea level rise. (County of Marin 2007).

Assessment of Options

Given the tension between the importance of integrating climate policies into general planning across California, and the resource burden this process may incur on local governments, it is critical to examine what resources are currently available to support local government climate planning. Two kinds of tools currently available to communities and comments on their application to integration of climate policies in general plans are first, a collection of *guidelines*, such as best practices recommendations and resource lists, that communities can turn to assist them in the climate planning process. The second set of tools consists of more substantial and *technical support* being offered by organizations especially in terms of conducting greenhouse gas emission inventories.

Guidelines

California's 2003 OPR's General Plan Guidelines (OPR 2003b) are an important guideline to policy development and planning processes in the State of California. Yet, to date there are no resources within OPR that address climate planning specifically. A number of organizations have begun to promulgate guidelines for climate planning relevant to local governments. Many examples of such guidelines or case studies can be found on the Internet (EPA 2008, Institute for Local Government 2008, Mayor's Climate Protection Center 2008).

Despite their proliferation, it is unclear the degree to which these guidelines are being used among local governments and how applicable to general plans the content is. Guidelines are also found in the form of databases such as the CEES Climate Action Database (University of Colorado 2008), or the International Energy Agency's Climate Policies and Measures Database (IEA 2008). Although these databases provide more customized access to information, they remain essentially static one-way sources of information about climate planning.

Technical Support

At the same time as guidelines are appearing, several organizations (some of whom also provide guidelines) are providing more in depth technical support to communities in the climate planning process. The range of support varies with the organization, its focus and its capacities. For example, Clean Air Cool Planet provides a stand-alone inventory calculator (Clean Air Cool Planet 2008), but offers no direct support for inventory completion², whereas ICLEI-US' Cities for Climate Protection Campaign (ICLEI 2008) offers a rich set of direct technical support services such as; development of software products, staff and elected official training, technical assistance in designing and implementing climate response strategies as well as others. An indication of the scope of services available to communities is found among the directory of providers on the Greenhouse Gas Protocol Initiative (GGPI 2008) or the California Climate Action Registry website (CCAR 2008), which currently lists 31 "technical assistance providers."

² In fact, they make a strong disclaimer "CA-CP will not be responsible for verifying your results from the Campus Carbon Calculator, and assumes no liability for the accuracy of your final data or its use on your campus."

A key technical support service being offered is the facilitation of GHG inventories to help the community define its existing emissions and to establish some basis for determining policies and targets for reductions. Inventories in particular are likely to involve a higher level of service and support because of the technical complexities of gathering and documenting community emissions. At present, there are a number of protocols for inventorying and all are quite complex and specific. For example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2006), the Greenhouse Gas Protocol Initiative (GGPI 2008)) as well as several others have created inventory protocols. For GHG inventories, it makes sense that communities require thirdparty support, as many communities are ill equipped to manage such a process on their own.

Commentary on Existing Options

Guidelines are only as useful when they can be applied to a jurisdiction's needs. While catalogs of best practices provide insights into what can be done, many of these guidelines provide limited analysis of the real-world implementation experience. Additionally, climate change is a moving target; what is best practice today may not be so tomorrow. In most cases, guidelines are not structured to change quickly so they can become quickly outdated.

As with guidelines, technical support is often less well aligned with the policy definition process that is critical to general plan development. Technical support is invaluable once a commitment to climate planning has been made, but until that point arrives, local governments may not be in a position to utilize technical support because they are still defining where that support will be needed. Technical support is also resource and time intensive.

These options are somewhat predicated on an assumption that jurisdictions will manage climate planning in isolation. Guidelines are widely available, but there seems to be no tracking of or support for feedback and sharing of results. Because technical support is provided on a service model, the benefits are not necessarily shared among jurisdictions. In our opinion, this approach limits proliferation of climate planning. Despite the need for unique climate planning, there is much that could be shared, especially at the general plan level. Tools are needed that facilitate greater collaboration than currently occurs. These tools should also allow collaboration to occur at a level appropriate to policy definition. General plans are an ideal locus for this collaboration, because state guidelines define common structure, creating a basis for sharing developmental burdens around climate planning.

Outline of an Alternative Tool for Facilitating Climate Planning

In this section, we outline an approach using online collaboration to help local governments integrate climate protection policies and strategies into future development.

Climate Policy Database

Tensions between the scale of the problem and availability of planning resources suggest that creating a tool for local governments to collaborate climate policies for general plans could be of immense value. One of the challenges of creating such a tool is to create a framework that is accessible to a diverse set of actors, flexible enough to provide relevant information quickly, and customizable so that participants can ultimately derive their own solutions. Over the past year, a concept emerged from work conducted to identify best practices for integrating climate protection policies and strategies into the operations and practices of local governments.³

As we began exploring the "best practices" in climate planning, we came to feel that there was no shortage of information; rather there is a shortage of analytic tools to filter that information. What was lacking was a way to transform the large and unwieldy structure of individual policy documents into a set of building blocks from which they can build their own policies and integrate them into their own general plans. We started collecting examples of climate, energy and sustainability policies and implementation strategies from the General Plans of various "model" jurisdictions (such Portland, OR, San Diego, CA and Marin County, CA). The collected information was organized into three units; overall policy goals relating to sustainability, illustrative language taken from "model" jurisdictions, and examples of potential implementation options for meeting those policy goals.

Each of the respective implementation options is tagged with relevant keywords (see Figure 1 below for a schematic diagram of this structure). This database provides a core of building blocks from which one could build his/her own climate policies. Such a structure allows a person to search for policy options from a variety of perspectives; based on general plan element, overall policy area, or implementing department. The resulting entries are further arranged so that a user can view options that have similar goals and objectives, but have different implementation options. At present this database is populated with 19 policies that encompass 92 pieces of illustrative General Plan language that are connected to 258 specific implementation options. These options span a wide range; from voluntary to mandatory, from simple to complex. To provide concrete linkages between policy language and related search criteria, we are currently cataloging⁴ program examples and related resources (technical documents, staff contacts, reviews and case studies).



Figure 1: Example Structure of the Climate Policy Database

³ Our work was conducted as part of the California Sustainability Alliance team (http://sustainca.org/).

⁴ Through a recent grant awarded to us by the Bay Area Air Quality Management District

Direction for Development

Development of this database led to the concept for an online version of this database with specific features that enable collaboration on the general plan policy development process. As the examples of guidelines and technical support above illustrate, the notion of an online resource for policy makers to address climate change is by no means unique. However, as noted the existing tools are only sources of information, they do not provide for collaboration in a way that we feel this situation merits.

Laying out all the details of the proposed online tool are beyond the scope of this paper. In this section, we only outline two particular feature concepts that we feel can directly support collaboration for climate planning: 1) *user input* on the quality of the content and 2) the ability for users to *customize content* for their own jurisdictions. After outlining these features, we will conclude by providing an assessment of the benefits and challenges of developing such a tool for local governments.

User input. Because the scope of climate change and the necessary programs designed to address climate change are so vast, and because there is so much variation in how cities may respond to climate change, defining a fixed set of best practices is unnecessarily restrictive. Rather what is needed is an open and evolving assessment of which particular practices are valuable in certain regions and under what circumstances. From such a discussion a particular jurisdiction can determine best practices for themselves.

Providing both rating and commenting options for particular policies is one way to create such an open-ended assessment of best practices. We envision two subjective rating scales that allow users to rate the difficulty of implementing particular policies and to rate the anticipated carbon benefits. Assuming a user group of planners, policy makers and climate change experts, over time such ratings could provide a rapid means of evaluating policies. To compliment the rapid assessment provided by the ratings, allowing users to comment on particular policies or options provides more in depth analysis thus creating a sustained and centralized dialogue about what policies and programs are effective for particular needs.

To further enhance the capacity of users to identify the policies and programs relevant to their needs, additional keywords can be coded into the database. Having keywords such as geographic region, population, or median income, allows the user to identify policies that may be more relevant to their needs. While this structure has similarities to an online forum or chat room, the differences are critical to note. Whereas an online forum provides an efficient vehicle for discussions on a range of topics, it can be challenging to identify relevant conversations. Because we envision that comments, ratings and keywords will be directly tied to specific policy options, the analysis remains linked to particular options and can thus better inform analysis directly.

Customizable content. While access to climate protection policy language and program guidelines can be a valuable starting place, there is much work required to take generic policies (whether broad policy goals, illustrative language, or specific implementation options) and adapt them to particular needs. Our concept for this online tool is not only to create a library of policies, but to also enable users to select and customize the policies they feel can best meet the needs of their respective jurisdictions, and then as they become adopted, return them to the

library so that their changes and deliberations become available to other jurisdictions to learn from (see figure 2 below for an outline of how users might adapt policies).



Figure 2: How Content Is Customized, Adopted and Returned to the Library

Customization combined with the commenting and rating features described above allows new users to track the history of policy adaptation and to see why one policy gets changed and from that history make their own decisions. This customization further enables a particular jurisdiction to use the tool while still preserving an internal process. Such a structure enables a jurisdiction to move quickly and seamlessly from overall policy identification to the more complicated process of developing actual general plan language⁵. Ideally, the outcome will be a set of climate policies for the particular jurisdiction and, if they choose to share their results, an expanded set of policies in the library for others to learn from. An added benefit of this customization approach is that a set of jurisdictions could collaborate on a common set of policies to facilitate regional planning thereby sharing the total developmental burden.

Importance of the Climate Policy Database

Benefits

While there are many likely benefits to increasing local governments climate planning and policymaking, in this paper we touch on three that are particularly relevant to the advancement of effective climate responsive general plans; *collaborative potential, capacity for evolution,* and the *low threshold for entry*.

Collaborative potential. Creating effective and comprehensive climate change policies takes time and effort both of which we have identified are in short supply among local governments. Providing a means for smaller cities, towns and county governments to pool their limited resources not only makes better use of resources, but also can end up creating a more effective outcome. With the tool described above, individual planners and city staffers could begin to

 $^{^{5}}$ At this early stage in the project development, it is unknown whether individual jurisdictions will customize content or just adopt existing content. However, by including such an option adaptation is built in should the need arise.

work on regional plans, or share analysis tasks, or vet new ideas among their peers quickly and easily. All of these characteristics enhance the possibility that even the smallest or poorest cities can create general plans that take climate change into consideration.

Capacity for evolution. As noted above, uncertainty about how climate change effects will manifest themselves over time are an important factor in our response. This also relates to uncertainty about how effective particular policy responses will be over time. The best practice of today is unlikely to remain the best practice for the next decade. How can a local government agency stay on top of these changing conditions and make critical policy decisions in light of this uncertainty? Additionally, how can local governments who may not enter into climate planning process for several years, ensure that the information they are relying on to develop their policies relates to the conditions they face when they actually begin planning? By developing a system where ongoing discussion and analysis of policies occurs, regardless of where or when a local government enters the policy planning process, they can see an evolving discussion of what constitutes best practices in climate planning. By providing a means for information to change as rapidly as conditions do and putting the analysis in the hands of the individuals who are making the on-the-ground decisions, climate policies can evolve with the needs of the users.

Low-threshold for entry. We are already seeing jurisdictions such as San Francisco and Marin County that are proactively using their general plan as a key element in their overall climate action planning. However, there are over 470 cities in 60 counties in the state of California (State of California 2007), some are extremely small and some are extremely poor. While the lessons in climate planning being learned by larger or more affluent communities are certainly valuable, there is as of yet no mechanism to ensure that all cities (who under AB 32 will have to develop climate programs, and should build these into their general plans) benefit from the pioneering work of their peers. Additionally, while one can easily look over the Marin County General Plan, the availability of such a template is only a starting place. It is the greater level of analysis and selection of relevant options that cities must do on their own. This presents a significant resource expense that many communities are unlikely to be able to take on. By putting climate planning online, and providing efficient tools for adapting existing approaches to specific needs, we can lower the threshold for entering the climate planning arena significantly.

Challenges

At the same time as there are significant benefits to promoting online collaborative general plan development, there are serious challenges that must be addressed to make such an approach reality. In this section we touch on three that represent the most significant hurdles from a policy planning / implementation perspective: *engagement of users*, *subjectivity of the analysis*, and the balance between *complexity and accessibility*.

Engagement of users. There is a fundamental chicken and egg challenge facing efforts to engage local governments in collaborative planning. With the service model of guidelines and technical support outlined above, collaboration is not a critical element of success. However, for collaboration to work, an active user groups is necessary. Without an active body of content and existing comments and ratings in an online tool, a jurisdiction may consider the opportunity does not justify the effort required. Effectively addressing this challenge will require providing

streamlined mechanisms for information gathering and articulating a strong case for the value of collaboration. Additionally, there may be opportunities to engage communities where there is regional interest in developing climate policies. Even without existing content, a group of communities could use this tool to pool their efforts. Ongoing engagement may be less of a concern than initial engagement. By preserving comments, ratings and a record of the options selected by particular communities, users' analysis remains after they stop being an active participant, so their ongoing engagement may be less crucial.

Subjectivity of analysis. Providing a rating system for each policy/program in terms of carbon reduction benefits and implementation difficulties could provide an important tool for decision makers. The goal with such ratings is to provide a quick guide (e.g. low, medium, high) not an objective quantitative measure of policy performance (e.g. pounds of CO_2 reduced). However, there is concern that numerical ratings may be taken at face value, and the value of the tool may be judged by the quality of the ratings. We recognize that creating such a subjective rating system will generate debate and require ongoing refinement. One way to sustain the quality of the ratings is by ensuring that the user group is made up of decision makers most in a position to make such ratings (e.g. policy and climate change experts). While such an approach does not in itself guarantee the accuracy of the ratings, it does provide some basis for using them for the rapid analytic they are intended for.

Complexity vs. accessibility. Climate planning is a complex affair. While some basic policy goals are often straightforward (e.g. reduce residential energy consumption by 20%), The underlying programs that seek to implement these goals can be very complex. Developing a policy-planning tool that provides sufficient depth of information to be useful in making decisions and developing appropriate policies yet is accessible enough to facilitate comprehensive planning and collaboration across jurisdictions presents significant challenges. One approach to balance complexity and accessibility is by offloading the technical discussion from the core of the tool. For example, by linking particular policy options to a document library and resource list, by providing users with contact information to follow-up with the implementing jurisdiction, and by enabling hyperlinks in comments users can easily move between the policy discussion within the tool and technical resources outside of it. Such an approach allows users to focus on analytic discussions of options. Overall, it will be critical to structure such a tool so that what it cannot do is as clearly defined as what it can do, and that there are clear directions on how to locate additional resources as needed.

Conclusions

We are at a critical juncture in our collective response to climate change. The decisions made in the next few years are going to set our course for decades to come. Whether we continue on the present course and ultimately fall short of necessary change, or we rally together to create a coherent response that enables us to move out of this crisis is likely to be in part an outcome of California's leadership. Just as California has provided leadership in other environmental crises, it stands poised to do so with climate change. One way to provide that leadership is by demonstrating the potential for rapid proliferation of local climate change policies. We feel that California's general plan structure is an essential element of that process, but that existing approaches to general planning and climate planning are not sufficient to disseminate new

practices quickly enough. For these reasons, we feel that online collaborative planning is a means for greatly accelerating integration of climate policies into municipal general plans.

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