

Climate action at the local level

By: Joe Nathanson January 27, 2022



The 26th U.N. Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26), that convened in Glasgow Oct. 31-Nov. 12, 2021, served to focus attention on the global climate crisis – at least for those willing to pay attention.

Of course, other events, in the U. S. and elsewhere in the world should also have grabbed our attention. In America, these range from huge wildfires in many western states to the more frequent and powerful hurricanes raking the Gulf states and the Atlantic coastal region, and the tragic losses due to tornadoes across the mid-South. Globally, these events extend to devastating floods in Belgium and Germany, as well as the raging wildfires in Australia leading to losses of land, livelihoods, and lives.

It may not be possible to link any one of these catastrophic occurrences to climate change, but it sure provides a mounting body of evidence that human activity – specifically the burning of fossil fuels – is leading to a dangerously warmer planet.

So, what are some of the outcomes of the Glasgow gathering? The World Resources Institute, a nonprofit organization focused on global environmental issues provides this assessment: “The long-awaited COP26 climate summit in Glasgow has come to a close, making important progress in a number of areas — but not enough. The world still remains off track to beat back the climate crisis.”

Recognizing the urgency of the climate threat, it was agreed that ministers from all over the world would return next year to submit stronger 2030 national emissions reduction targets with the aim of closing the gap to limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit).

While national goals are helpful, in the end it is actions at the local level, that of individual households, businesses, institutions and local governments, that will make a difference.

In an online article, “Cities Walk the Talk on Climate Action at COP26,” Mauricio Rodas, one of the University of Pennsylvania’s Institute for Urban Research representatives to COP26, writes, “City governments are close to the people: they know about their residents’ daily

battles, needs, and desires. According to the World Economic Forum, 56.2 percent of the global population now lives in cities; this number is expected to increase to 68 percent by 2050. With 70 percent of global CO2 emissions generated in urban areas, cities are where the battle against climate change will be defined. Cities are hubs of climate action, with effective policies and innovative initiatives ...”

Indeed, Fortune magazine noticed the leading role that cities will play in the climate fight. On Nov. 1, Fortune informed its readers that “Cities Not Countries are Driving the Conversation at COP26,” as it announced the mayors’ train leaving from London to go to Glasgow.

The local front

The City of Baltimore adopted its first Sustainability Plan in 2009. The plan set forth the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 15% by 2015. In 2012, the Baltimore Office of Sustainability took the next step and prepared a Climate Action Plan (CAP) for the city. The plan commits to city to taking action to mitigate global climate change. Baltimore’s greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions for the baseline year 2010 were 7.5 million metric tons (MT) CO2 emissions/ year, an amount expected to rise without taking direct action.

The Climate Action Plan outlines how the city will achieve reductions in GHG similar to goals set by the earlier Paris agreement on climate change. It addresses the nearly 70 percent of total emissions that come from the use of energy that heats and cools our homes, as well as our commercial and industrial buildings. Transportation, notably driving cars, accounts for most of the remaining 30 percent.

What’s next?

The initial CAP is now a decade old. Baltimore is in the process of updating the 2012 CAP, with a focus on integrating equity and resilience lenses. The CAP update will strengthen the planning and policy connections between climate, flooding, adaptation, and infrastructure resiliency. It will also evaluate ambitious new GHG emissions reduction targets. The community engagement process now underway aims to educate traditionally underrepresented residents of the city. It recognizes that some communities and neighborhoods have been disproportionately affected by climate change.

Climate inequities come in many forms. One example is the lack of tree cover and hotter average temperatures in lower income neighborhoods. Other disparities may appear in the quality of infrastructure, such as sewer systems more prone to flooding, or a neighborhood’s health risks due to proximity to dangerous pollutants from industrial sites. Concerned residents are invited to visit the updates at the Office of Sustainability at www.baltimoresustainability.org.

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