

PLANNING, POLITICS *and* CLIMATE CHANGE: *Research Results*

by Devin Causley



Photo credit: Chantal Laliberté

Municipal governments have a leading role to play in combating climate change. Across Canada, municipal leaders at council and in staff ranks are moving to mitigate emissions and prepare for the impacts of an already changing climate. While the initial charge has been led on the merits of environmental protection and energy conservation, increasing interest is coming from those concerned with mitigating risks and capturing local economic opportunities. Little more than a decade ago climate change was seen as limited to the realm of global decision makers. Today, the impacts and solutions are now being

understood as local... and that is where municipal government enters the stage.

A role for municipal government in climate change requires not only leadership but also different thinking in municipal planning and decision-making. Leadership on climate change is coming from all departments within municipal government. Every municipal story is unique. This diversity poses some unique challenges to traditional silo structures of municipal decision-making. Some of these challenges are explored in this article.

Local governments and their planners have a critical role in addressing climate

Summary

Canadian local governments and their political leaders have considerable resources to assert in addressing climate change which requires that planners understand the links between effective planning and political leadership. In this article, results from a graduate study on the local politics of climate change are summarized to offer insights for planners on how climate change decisions are made by local governments.

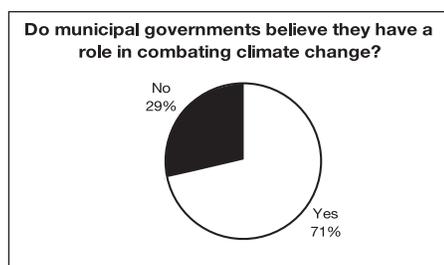
Résumé

Les autorités locales canadiennes et leurs dirigeants politiques disposent de ressources considérables à consacrer aux changements climatiques, situation qui exige que les urbanistes saisissent bien les liens existant entre la planification efficace et le leadership politique. Le présent article résume les résultats d'une étude sur la politique locale appliquée aux changements climatiques afin de donner aux urbanistes un aperçu de la façon dont les décisions relatives aux changements climatiques sont prises par les autorités locales.

change. Just over 70% of respondents to a recent survey of municipal governments feel their municipality has a significant direct role to play in addressing climate change, while approximately 90% believe their municipal government has a role to play in educating their community about climate change. These figures suggest that both municipal staff and our elected leaders believe there is a need, desire and ability for action. The City of Edmonton is one example of active community engagement by a municipal government, through their Carbon Dioxide Reduction Edmonton Program.

This article draws upon the results of a Masters thesis completed at the University of Waterloo titled *The Local Politics of Climate Change Factors Influencing Municipal Decision Making*. Research comprised an extensive literature review and web-based survey with municipal decision makers. The survey comprised 32 closed ended questions and resulted in 118 responses from municipal elected officials, senior staff and other municipal staff. Specific results of interest to planners are explored to offer insights on the interaction between the planning and political decision-making aspects of climate change.

FIGURE 1



To understand climate change in local government, planners must first understand some differences in how municipal staff and elected officials view the issue. Politicians are risk-averse and due to electoral cycles are often short-term thinkers, a contrast to longer-term strategic thinking needed to combat climate change. Despite this shortcoming, our elected officials represent a highly educated pool of individuals, most with university or graduate degrees. This education, however, often lacks training in environmental issues. Considerable pressure is placed on our elected officials to be knowledgeable on a host of issues beyond their career or educational backgrounds. A myriad of lobbyist and interest groups also advocate for their attention, some carrying more weight than others both inside and outside of city hall.

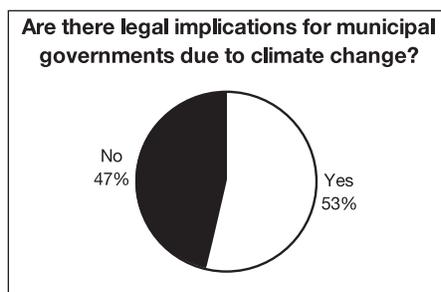
Municipal elected officials consider themselves to be informed about climate change. When considering their fellow council members, economic and educational challenges are found as barriers to building support. Movement on climate with the electorate is viewed as an educational challenge. Information resources along with provincial and federal funding are priority items needed to address this challenge. Elected officials

see public and council support for municipal expenditure on climate change projects as supportive.

Climate change is viewed as equal or more important in comparison to other local environmental issues by municipal councils, although the environment was viewed as a priority issue by only half of respondents. Thus, climate cannot be communicated on environmental grounds alone. Decision makers agree that climate change is already happening, but are divided on whether it can actually be prevented. This sense of vulnerability also extends to the local economy. Roughly 80% of respondents feel their local economy is somewhat too highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Vulnerability has implications for both economic development and emergency-preparedness planners. The Regina-based Communities of Tomorrow research and technology cluster is one partnership emerging to capture local benefits in response to demands for more sustainable local infrastructure.

Liability is also an increasing impetus for action by council. Several instances of infrastructure failure and civil suits against municipal governments in the past few years now leave liability as a leading incentive for municipalities to be proactive for mitigation and prevention. Planners must therefore be proactive in practicing due diligence to anticipate potential impacts.

FIGURE 2



Advancing climate change requires a champion; someone who will encourage municipal action, identify the issues and resources to support action and monitor progress. Champions are evident at both council and within the ranks of municipal staff: in fact, they are equally important. The elected officials often hold the decision-making powers, while their staff has the knowledge. Therefore it is important that the two work closely.

Planners have an important role in cultivating political champions. Our elected officials seldom possess the formal education or scientific background in climate change and thus must rely on the skills of their staff to fill this void. Political champions must often make difficult decisions at council that face political risk, opposition and financial scrutiny. It is here that a planner's expertise in public consultation, research and policy development can help the champion at council to overcome these hurdles.

When it comes to implementation, information is important. We all know that information is a powerful tool; however, when it comes to climate change and decision-making not all information is created equal. Research results reveal that the media, conferences and books are the main sources of information on climate change for elected officials. At the same time, these decision makers give little credibility to the media, industry or the electorate. Scientists and academics are seen as the most credible sources, followed by municipal or professional associations, other municipalities and provincial governments. When it comes down to decisions at council, the main influencers remain municipal staff recommendations, the electorate, and provincial/federal programs or policies that carry weight. Table 1 illustrates more of these findings.

According to the study, just over three-quarters of respondents indicate that the quantification of emissions from municipal projects is desired or required. This suggests that planners must undertake climate planning with consideration for how results will be measured and verified. Elected leaders want to see the community reaching emissions reduction targets and need to feel secure that financial commitments are justified. Emissions inventories and baselines are one way this can be accomplished. York Region Municipality and the City of Saint John are leaders in the approach through energy management.

Planning for climate change is no longer a unique form of planning. Rather, it has become standard practice within municipal government either through a dedicated secondary plan or more holistic sustainable community plan (Integrated Community Sustainability Plan, Official Plan, etc). According to the study, half of the respondents indicate their municipality has developed a climate

TABLE 1: INFORMATION SOURCES, CREDIBILITY AND INFLUENCE ON MUNICIPAL DECISION MAKERS

	Source	Credibility	Influence
Top Ranked	Media	Scientists' Reports	Federal and Provincial Government
	Conferences	Peers (other municipal politicians/staff)	Municipal Staff Recommendations
	Books/Journals	Municipal/Professional Associations	Electorate and Community Groups
Middle Ranked	Peers (other municipal politicians/staff)	Provincial Government	Scientists' Reports
	Municipal/Professional Associations	Advocacy Groups	Liability
	Advocacy Groups	Federal Government	Industry/Business
Bottom Ranked	Electorate and Community Groups	Media	Peers (other municipal politicians/staff)
	Family/Friends	Electorate and Community Groups	Local Chamber of Commerce/Economic Develop Agency
		Industry/Business	Media

change action plan. Respondents also believe there is a strong connection between air quality, climate change and energy management planning. The Resort Municipality of Whistler has already pioneered this approach with their Integrated Energy, Air Quality and Greenhouse Gas Management Plan.

Adaptation and mitigation now go hand in hand for climate change. Almost all respondents believe climate change is already happening and consequently consider it to be equally or more important than other local environmental issues. Climate is increasingly being considered in municipal functions such as transportation services (fleets, transit), municipal building and waste management. Halifax Regional Municipality is already leading this approach through their Climate Smart Program.

Every municipal climate change story is unique. Elected officials, municipal administrators, engineers and planners are all becoming engaged in a grassroots movement on climate change by municipalities. Leadership can come from a local planner; or where the charge is not led by municipal planners,

they certainly have a role. Municipal planners across the country have already begun to implement climate protection measures; many that may not be immediately connected to climate change. Planners can help mitigate and adapt to climate change by zoning for renewable energy, accommodating urban agriculture, emphasizing transit-oriented development or modeling for long-term climate impacts. These are only a few examples of measures being implemented across Canada.

So what can a planner do to facilitate action on climate change beyond the front desk of the planning department?

- Start by cultivating a champion on council, someone who can raise the issue on behalf of staff, provide direction and hopefully some resources.
- Work with community partners to build broader support for community action. This will not only help to support the council champion but also help sustain momentum if individuals leave the process.
- Talk with other departments within your municipality: public works, engineering, municipal fleet, finance, etc. These people also have valuable skills and will be needed to help with implementation.
- Identify financial or policy incentives that can be used by council. Increasingly, federal and provincial governments, along with municipal associations are offering climate programs targeted at municipal government that may offer financial incentives, training or policy direction.

And finally, talk to your peers. Other municipal staff and elected officials have valuable experience that they are happy to share. ■

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