

## Executive Summary:

# Creating Dialogue and Facilitating a Climate Forum: Understanding Climate Impacts and Opportunities in the Centre Region, PA

July 2021

### Overview

The Centre Region Council of Governments (COG) is developing a Climate Action & Adaptation Plan that will identify strategies to reduce the region's greenhouse (GHG) emissions and adapt to a changing climate. Preparing for and managing climate change-related risks goes beyond local government and will require collective action from across our community. Public engagement is a key component to help create a relevant community action plan.

The COG worked with students in Penn State Law's *Mediation of Environmental and Public Conflicts* course during the spring semester 2021 to implement one part of the public participation plan. The goal of the COG and class partnership was to better understand stakeholder's concerns about climate impacts and identify potential opportunities and activities for climate action in this region. In addition to interviewing approximately 30 people, students prepared for and facilitated an online public forum on April 13, 2021 with more than 150 participants. Students compiled their interview and forum notes to create a full report, which summarizes what was shared.

Full Report: <https://www.crcog.net/climate-forum>

### Shared Broad Messages

Below are areas that participants shared where local governments can provide leadership through their climate action and implementation efforts:

1. How do we **shift from reacting to disaster to being proactive** in implementing projects? Pro-actively planning can reduce financial liabilities.

2. The **time to act is now** as we are already seeing local impacts. Stakeholders would like to see less planning and more doing.

3. There is a need for **both top-down and bottom-up efforts: actions** taken by government but also support of community-led efforts, with work to remove barriers to such bottom-up efforts.

4. There should be a **range of climate action items implemented** by local governments and businesses alike.

5. Land use, development, transportation, bike routes, public transit, affordable housing, green space, and agricultural lands are all important considerations as this region examines **current practices and future decisions related to development** and climate impacts/opportunities.

## Climate Impacts

6. Stakeholders **identified ways to address local impacts and opportunities** (solar, building management, public transportation, other local policy changes) and ways to address **global/long term impacts and opportunities** (such as joining the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative).

7. **Equity, affordability, and justice issues** are also part of the puzzle and must be considered. For example, access to affordable housing in the Centre Region is also a climate-related issue as people drive further to find more affordable housing.

8. **Education is critical.** Stakeholders had a lot of ideas on how to approach education, particularly by their local governments. They want to see action and implementation along with educational outreach and engagement.

9. The **financial side** of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to potential climate impacts **is very real; however, failing to make investments is also problematic.** Finding ways to leverage projects for multiple benefits while developing “green jobs” may be important in addressing financial concerns and is something worth exploring at the local government or regional level.

10. The Centre Region has excellent air and water that by and large meet regulatory standards. **Continuing to protect such high-quality resources** is also important to consider.

11. Stakeholders wanted to know **what local government officials will do with the information** provided through interviews and the public forum and look forward to additional action steps and the implementation process.

Stakeholders discussed climate impacts they already see or are concerned about for this area. Water-related impacts are a significant area of concern: drought, floods/stormwater, land use and water impacts, ecological concerns, and transportation impacts. Stakeholders are also seeing changes in weather and seasons (hotter, longer summers; less snow), as well as impacts from severe weather (wind, ice, significant precipitation). Such impacts affect the built environment (reliability of electricity, for example) and local ecology (hotter temperatures affect local streams, for example). Stakeholders also identified a variety of issues associated with human health, impacts to local agriculture, financial concerns, equity concerns, and linkages to land use and development. Finally, they identified general sustainability concerns associated with waste management and plastics.

## Ideas and Opportunities

Stakeholders also shared ideas and opportunities to address potential climate impacts, both in general and ideas that could be implemented by local governments in the Centre Region. These included reducing greenhouse gas emissions by increasing usage of renewable energy, particularly solar; creating carbon markets or offsets; reducing energy use in buildings, both existing and new while providing for affordable housing; and finding creative ways to provide alternative transportation modes, including a more interconnected set of bike paths, access to public transportation, and electric vehicles. Stakeholders identified opportunities for adapting to potential climate impacts by implementing more green infrastructure, working with the agricultural community, and managing water. They also identified ideas for waste management.



## Local Government Action

Finally, stakeholders had several ideas on what local governments could be doing.

- Education was a key theme, with many ideas on who, what and how such education could be accomplished.
- Stakeholders see local governments as leading in establishing climate plans and modeling effective implementation, including through municipal energy decisions, purchasing decisions, and other types of greenhouse gas or climate adaptation measures (especially related to water management).
- Leveraging different topics together is another way that local governments can engage; addressing both climate resilience and water quality concerns, for example.
- Local coordination could in turn help leverage regional, state, and national changes while leveraging potential funding sources, incentives, and ways to change behavior.
- Stakeholders want to see local governments continue to engage with Penn State students and faculty on education, research, and implementation of ideas.

## Next Steps

In terms of next steps, there is a significant need to reach a broader audience as the COG continues to develop the Climate Action and Adaptation Plan, and as local governments implement the Plan. Potential steps include reaching out to specific sectors: agriculture, business, and developers, for example. One person commented that the online forum should not be the only forum held. Stakeholders also want to know how local governments are implementing action; this may be an opportunity to showcase or highlight local sustainability efforts. They provided a wealth of ideas on broader education,

including some potential messaging. Overall, people were interested, engaged, and wanting to see action in this space; tapping into this local community could help accomplish the goals of the Climate Action and Adaptation Plan for each local government and within the COG as a whole.

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The students appreciated the opportunity to work with the Centre Regional Planning Agency and various stakeholders on this project.

To share your comments, suggestions, or questions on this report, please contact Penn State Law Professor Lara B. Fowler at [lbf10@psu.edu](mailto:lbf10@psu.edu). For more on the Climate Action and Adaptation Plan, please contact Pam Adams at [padams@crcog.net](mailto:padams@crcog.net).

