

Local Government Officials and Climate Change Policy

*Observations From Focus Group Discussions
in Colorado and Arizona*

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Outline of the Research

- **Sponsored by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy / Sonoran Institute Joint Venture**
- **Focus groups and one-on-one interviews with elected officials, city and county managers, and urban planners in the Intermountain West**
- **Designed to explore the following questions:**
 - **What are the primary obstacles to addressing climate change in land use planning, and how can they be overcome?**
 - **What information do local government officials say they need to craft effective policies to address climate change?**
 - **What are the best ways to convey that information to local officials?**



Methodology

- **Two focus groups (Completed)**
 - **Denver (February 3, 2009) – representatives from the cities and towns of Aurora, Boulder, Centennial, Commerce City, Denver, Englewood, Fowler, and the counties of Summit and Weld.**
 - **Phoenix (February 11, 2009) – representatives from the cities and towns of Cave Creek, Fountain Hills, Glendale, Goodyear, Mesa, Oro Valley, Peoria, Phoenix, and Tucson.**
- **In-depth telephone interviews with similar staff and officials from other states and regions, including Wyoming, Utah, Montana, Idaho, New Mexico (Ongoing)**



Participants expressed concern about many issues related to climate change – but did not label them as such.

- **None of the participants volunteered climate change as one of the most pressing planning challenges facing their community.**
- **At the same time, many issues they mentioned did have a connection with climate change:**
 - ***Water supplies***
 - ***Energy use***
 - ***Increasing strain on local infrastructure***
- **Participants tended to relate these concerns to population growth and urban sprawl, not to climate change.**

Climate change is seen as a source of controversy.



- Participants viewed climate change as a controversial issue – both inside and outside of government, though more so among the general public.
- There appeared to be more skepticism among elected officials than among staff – perhaps because of their heightened political sensitivity.
- More politically liberal communities that also had highly developed climate action plans – Boulder and Tucson – were marked exceptions to this trend; in these communities, there was perceived public pressure to do *more* on the issue.



Most agreed that climate change should be addressed in local government planning.

- Nearly all participants expressed a desire for local governments to include adaptation to climate change in their planning.
- While most agreed that mitigation was also important, there was debate as to whether local governments could effectively make as much of a difference.
- Several suggested that mitigation efforts would be achieved through regional coordination, or at the federal level.



Framing Solutions and Language Choices

Few participants use “climate change” as an explicit justification for new policies and programs.



- **Larger cities (Denver and Phoenix) and those with strong environmental constituencies (Boulder and Tucson) do embrace the term “climate change,” with several having explicit climate action plans**
- **Many other participants said they shy away from explicitly referring to “climate change” or “global warming” in planning efforts – even in cases where policies are explicitly crafted to address the issue.**



Many suggested “sustainability” as a better and more comprehensive frame for policies.

PHOENIX: “‘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.”

DENVER: “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...called sustainability...a triple bottom line approach.”

PHOENIX: “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.”



Participants stressed the benefits of climate change policy – rather than the negative consequences it will prevent.

- Participants said they strive to avoid a sense they are blaming their residents or being critical of past behaviors.
- Participants also agreed that it was not persuasive to tell residents about the potential problems climate change policy protects them from.
- Instead, participants recommended highlighting the associated benefits of policies to address climate change: less pollution, lower energy use, more green spaces, more housing and transportation choices, and –most importantly – cost savings.



Obstacles to Implementation

Monitoring progress toward GHG reduction goals was seen as both important and challenging.



- Participants believed it would be critically important to track the impact of any policies developed to address climate change.
- However, many participants were uncertain of how progress could be measured or monitored.
- Limited resources and staff were most commonly cited as obstacles to measuring progress, though some did point out the difficulty with defining what should be measured.

DENVER: "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."



Local governments face many other obstacles to addressing climate change.

- **Public resistance to the very idea of climate change**
- **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**

PHOENIX: "I think there also has to be a working relationship between the elected officials and your staff. It's so often that elected officials come in with an agenda, and they think their job is to change the town rather than to work with the professionals in understanding how they have to work together."



Strategies for Overcoming Obstacles



Addressing climate change may seem more manageable if taken on in small steps.

- Some participants said that skepticism and resistance to addressing climate change was rooted in a perceptions that the issue is too large for local government planning to address.
- Some participants noted that a strategy for addressing this problem is to define climate change by its smaller parts rather than its global impacts.

DENVER: “What we have done within our land use plan is we have 22 objectives. What we have done is we have 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.”



Getting support from the community can help elevate comfort levels.

- Some participants said incorporating members of the public in policy design makes it much easier to get buy-in.

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

- Persuading developers that green building is marketable can also be particularly effective.

PHOENIX: “We had a project that came to us...and it was packaged totally green, and [the developers] made such a great presentation. Everybody on Council was wowed, everybody in the audience was wowed, and all of a sudden a multi-family project in the middle of our downtown core was the talk of the town. It was because they knew what they wanted to accomplish, and they were able to share it with us.”



Case studies were seen as the most valuable type of information to help in advancing policy change.

- Participants emphasized the need to have access to case studies of (both successful and unsuccessful) local policies addressing climate change.
- Participants were most interested in data on other communities' "return on investment."
 - This enables staff and officials to make credible economic arguments in favor of pursuing specific policies.
- 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."
- Examples from successful communities could also provide valuable benchmarks to measure the impact of new initiatives.



In-person meetings and webinars were seen as useful ways to provide information.

- **Participants seemed to favor in-person interactions to exchange information, either conferences, seminars, in “field trip” case studies.**
 - **Webinars were seen as a potentially affordable alternative.**
- **Participants were more interested in technical seminars and not national or high level policy debates.**
- **Several noted that elected officials may require special meetings.**
 - **They respond to “exclusive” invitations and direct requests.**
 - **Mixing them with policy and technical experts may put some in uncomfortable situations.**

PHOENIX: “An elected official doesn’t want to go to a conference say with a planner who then knows more about that subject. They want to have some of that expertise rub off on them directly.”

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