**Headline:** Guide to Climate Action in Your Local Community

**Teaser:** Decades of unjust land use decisions have deliberately shaped and harmed communities. But there are concrete actions you can take to make positive changes.

By Cate Mingoya-LaFortune

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**[Article Body:]**

If you want to have a voice in how policy decisions are made and resources are distributed in your local community, the data you collect will be critical. Generally, before they commit to spending tax dollars on a new program or policy, local government agencies want to understand the scope and scale of the problem and how they will identify and measure the success of an intervention.

If a neighborhood has few trees, the urban forestry division might evaluate the number of spots suitable for new trees before it commits to planting. Once planted, the department might measure the number of surviving saplings five years later to assess success. Before installing protected bike lanes, the transportation division might evaluate the number of cyclists and motorists on the road over 12 months and then take the same measurements after the protected lanes are built to see if improved bike infrastructure has impacted how people get around.

However, municipalities don’t always consider all relevant data and information before launching an intervention, which can have disastrous consequences for the people living there or the intervention itself.

Policies are courses of action your municipality has chosen to adopt through guidelines, regulations, funding priorities, or laws. Everything in your neighborhood—from where the parking lots are located, how tall the buildings are, and which neighborhoods have street trees—stems from an intentional decision guided by policies. Sometimes, decisions were made a century ago, and sometimes, codified last week. Still, those decisions can be changed to reflect current or aspirational values and norms.

At their core, policies are ideas the government has decided will help them achieve specific goals.

Do you know who has good ideas about how to change things for the better in your community? You. You're well suited to transform the information you've gathered into municipal policy ideas through your collection of data, understanding local history, and conversations with community members.

Policy comes about via your elected and municipal officials, and there are many opportunities for you and your coalition to intervene in decisions being made. Understanding how policymaking happens will help you understand how to intervene. When you begin this work, it’s helpful to focus on four major areas for intervention: master plans, greening or resilience plans, local ordinances, and zoning. These four areas of intervention are how the bulk of decisions are made about prioritizing community needs and distributing resources.

**Example Asks and Ordinances**

Events such as votes on climate ballot measures don’t happen daily, so for your average community, realizing your priorities through existing municipal infrastructure makes sense. Below are a few examples of “asks” that you and your coalition members may consider advocating for and the processes or people you’d need to influence to make those asks happen.

Concrete examples prove that change is possible and is already being adopted by other communities (so what are we waiting for?). This can motivate elected or government officials worried about the feasibility of new programs, policies, and ordinances. Also, it’s easier to modify existing policies and ordinances than it is to draft them from scratch.

**The Ask:** New Local Ordinances that Improve Biking and Walking Infrastructure

**The What:** Petition your city or town council to draft, introduce, and pass ordinances that ensure that transportation improvements address pedestrian and cyclist needs along with those of cars. Most municipalities have a regular schedule for road and sidewalk repairs, and some cities have ordinances that link improvements to cycling and pedestrian infrastructure, such as quick-build bike lanes or curb cuts, to road repaving.

**The Why:** The hotter it is, the less likely people are to walk, cycle, and take public transportation, and the more likely they are to drive. Cars, however, generate a substantial amount of waste heat via their combustion engines, making walking along roads or active parking lots hotter than areas without running cars. The more heat there is, the more cars there are; the more cars there are, the more heat there is. Ordinances that allocate resources toward cycling and walking infrastructure help reduce the number of cars on the road, thus reducing the urban heat island effect and improving air quality.

**Example Ordinance:** In 2019, the city council of Cambridge, Massachusetts, passed the nation’s first “Cycling Safety Ordinance,” which requires the city to add permanent, protected bike lanes to major streets during scheduled reconstruction. The ordinance is expected to result in more than [22 miles of new protected bike lanes](https://www.cambridgebikesafety.org/2020/10/06/cambridge-sets-nations-first-mandatory-timeline-for-completing-bike-network/) and be completed by May 2026.

**The Ask:** Modify the Parks Master Plan to Include Splash Pads and Misters When Parks Are Built or Redeveloped or to Replace Aging Pools

**The What:** Departments of parks and recreation often produce master plans for large individual parks (think Prospect Park in Brooklyn, New York, or Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, California) or the entire parks system. These plans cover everything from the presence (or absence!) of drinking fountains to the repair, replacement, or decommissioning of park infrastructure.

If your community is vulnerable to heat, work with your coalition to submit recommendations that the parks department modify its master plan to prioritize the installation of splash pads and misters at local parks and playgrounds when they are built or renovated and the transition of decommissioned or failing pools into splash pads instead of shuttering them.

**The Why:** Diving into a pool on a hot summer’s day can be a great way to beat the heat, but there are a few challenges to using pools as a climate adaptation strategy that might have you looking toward misters. Increasingly, municipalities are decommissioning pools that have reached the end of their lives as pools are expensive to rebuild or maintain. Even if your local pool stays open, that doesn’t mean it’s usable by those most needing relief.

Some residents at risk of heat-related illnesses are unable to swim or have disabilities that keep them from getting to or enjoying the pool. People who work outside the home may not be able to get to the pool during open hours, and nationwide lifeguard shortages are reducing those open hours significantly. Splash pads and misters are great alternatives to pools. They provide accessible, intergenerational access to cooling down; don’t require skilled personnel, such as lifeguards, to oversee them; can be run day or night; and, compared to pools, are relatively cheap to install and maintain.

Splash pads require a fair amount of drainage to prevent stagnant water or localized flooding, but misters—which express a fine water vapor like what you might see sprayed over vegetables in the grocery store—require little to no drainage while offering similar benefits to splash pads.

**Example Ordinance:** The Park Improvement Projects Master Plan developed by the Louisville, Kentucky, Parks and Recreation Department calls for installing “spraygrounds” (interactive splash pads and misters) in park redevelopment and construction. Although not binding, the master plan does guide the investment in the Louisville park system, which currently enjoys more than thirty spraygrounds.

**Using Collective Power to Benefit All**

No one has a complete and undeniable approach to greening our cities without unintended consequences. Still, there are ways to be thoughtful about your impact and use your collective power to advocate for resilience policies and programs that benefit all. As cities and states develop their climate resilience plans, they must have residents and local advocates at the table and include multipronged strategies that allow for wealth building for those long kept out of the housing market due to their race or class, the stabilization of rents, and a push toward establishing more decommodified housing through the support of community land trusts and housing cooperatives.

They must allow for the creation of local jobs without disproportionately siting toxic industries in Black, Brown, immigrant, and low-income neighborhoods. They must provide for transportation and commerce without exposing those most vulnerable to plumes of black carbon-laden exhaust. Just and effective solutions meet the demands of the climate crisis and do so without causing harm to those who have already weathered the burden of injustice for too long. If a neighborhood’s flood risk is reduced but long-term residents can no longer live there, one crisis has just been swapped out for another.

As you continue along your journey in fighting against the climate crisis, use whatever resources or privileges you have not just to advance positive change but also to make sure those who that change will most impact are actively in the room and are being listened to. Drawing attention to the lived experiences and ideas of those often excluded from processes is a huge and undervalued step toward operationalizing the values of equity and justice.