

American Planning Association Policy Guide on Planning and Climate Change

Planners have the opportunity and obligation to address the historic challenges of global climate change. The planning profession and the process of planning are uniquely suited to help communities make the changes needed to rise to this challenge and achieve the outcomes needed to create communities of lasting value. The Climate Change Policy Guide recommends a policy framework to assist communities in dealing with climate change and its implications.

The earth is warming and will continue to do so as far into the future as we can see.

How warm? How fast? How severe the impacts?

“The five warmest years since the late 1880’s according to NASA scientists, are 2005, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006.”

In the last three years a variety of new conditions and certain extreme experiences have brought the issue of climate change into the forefront:

1. The earth’s temperature may have reached a tipping point. The issue now becomes a question of how quickly the climate will change and subsequently how significant the impacts will be;
2. The hurricane season of 2005, specifically Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, were more severe due to warmer ocean temperatures;
3. Evidence of ocean ice packs melting at alarming rates;
4. Evidence of sea rise due to the rapid melting of the ice fields over land in places such as Greenland, South America and Antarctica;
5. Changes in seasonal climate affecting the growing season;
6. Extended drought and resultant brush and forest fires;
7. Increased frequency of flooding and strong storms;
8. Evidence from the United Nations IPCC that the earth is warming and human beings are responsible for this because of increased carbon-based energy systems and the resulting increased greenhouse gas emissions.

Although scientists believe that the effects of human induced global warming cannot be eliminated because of the volume of greenhouse gases already emitted into the atmosphere, the risks of dangerous impacts on ecosystems and human health can be mitigated through two major strategies:

1. Reduce the amount of greenhouse gases that are released into the atmosphere
2. Sequester greater amounts of carbon in biomass or by injecting carbon emissions into the ground.

This policy guide focuses mainly on the first strategy, how to reduce greenhouse gases that are released into the atmosphere.

The built environment is a primary contributor to climate change and GHG emissions, this makes planning central to any policy solution. Importance must be placed on changing development patterns, transportation systems, and regulations in ways that reduce greenhouse gases emissions. Changing societal actions can slow the pace of climate change, mitigate the changes that do occur and allow adaptation to the ultimate effects of climate change. Change that planners bring to the table will be more fundamental than making sure everyone drives a hybrid or uses bio-fuels.

Current science indicates that the specific impacts of climate change are highly regional and even local in nature. Therefore, climate change policies cannot be based on a one size fits all approach. Climate change plans should reflect the adage that one should think globally and act locally. As with many environmental issues small incremental impact may have broad cumulative impacts.

Planners must be aware of what the future holds for their particular geographic region and formulate their strategies accordingly.

The Core Principles of Planning for Climate Change are:

- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) primarily through the reduction of fossil fuel use. This is critical to slowing the pace of climate change. As one of the largest contributors to this problem, the United States must adopt an overall goal or target for GHG reduction.
- Coordinate the actions of units of governments – because it is both a global and local issue, climate change policy must be coordinated among all levels of government.
- Promote interdisciplinary action among professional areas of expertise and among the public, private and non-profit sectors.
- Choose strategies that are economical as determined through a comprehensive assessment of community energy resources and use.
- Establish a balanced approach – recognize that action on climate change must include a mix of education (providing more complete information so decision-makers make better choices), incentives (whether through funding or other means) and regulation (at federal, state and local levels).
- Assist people and places that need it – recognize that special assistance may be needed for the people and places that are most impacted by the effects of climate change, but least able to change on their own. Consider issues of social justice, environmental equity or special attention to critical sites.

Planning to Reduce Climate Change – policies dealing with planning practices and raising awareness and education. These policies promote planning outcomes that reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and lead to lower GHG emissions, such as mixed use development, high density

development near transit systems, infill and redevelopment to utilize existing utilities and services.

Reducing Climate Change – policies that address standards, regulations and incentives to lower VMT and the production of greenhouse gases. Specific regulatory revisions or additions may be needed to reduce greenhouse gas emission related to transportation, building energy use, electricity generation, industry, landfills, and agriculture.

Adapting to Climate Change – these policies address the idea that no matter what we do today and in the near future in terms of mitigation, some level of climate change is already occurring and will continue and we need to adapt our lifestyle and communities to prepare for the impacts.