Public Participation in Municipal Climate Action Planning: Exploring Deliberative Methods

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Local Climate Planning

Local climate planning refers to efforts at the city or municipality, county, or regional level to identify methods of climate mitigation - reducing the severity of future climate change through reducing greenhouse gas emissions - and climate adaptation - reducing vulnerability of communities to the effects of climate change that cannot be prevented through mitigation. This includes steps such as completing a GHG inventory, setting an emissions reductions target, developing strategies and specific actions to meet goals, creating a vision for a climate-resilient community, and continued monitoring and reporting (Global Covenant of Mayors, 2015). A successful plan will reduce GHG emissions from municipal operations as well as the community at large and will contribute in a concrete way to community preparedness and resilience in the face of likely climate risks. Plans accomplish this through inspiring voluntary action by supporting and informing residents, establishing economic incentives/disincentives for relevant behaviors, making public investments, and mandating some changes through new policy (City of Flagstaff, 2018).

Many factors play a role in the success of municipal climate planning processes, from the initial motivation to create a plan to the implementation and monitoring of plan actions. A first step for many cities is joining a national or international agreement or compact, such as the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) or Cities for Climate Protection (CCP). These initial commitments are predicted by a variety of characteristics of cities; e.g. cities with more affluent, well-educated, and liberal populations that have previously addressed environmental issues through public policy are more likely to sign onto climate agreements, as are cities closer to coasts or more severely affected by extreme weather (Reams, Clinton, & Lam, 2016; Zahran et al., 2008). These situational demographic and environmental characteristics have been found to play a less significant role in actual policy development than they do in initial commitments, however, as designated city staff members, community activism, connections to neighboring jurisdictions engaged in climate planning, and partnerships with universities are instead primary drivers of progress (Pitt, 2010a; Reams, Clinton, & Lam, 2016).

Role of Public Participation

This paper will focus on another powerful factor in the success of CAP creation and implementation - the involvement of the public, including individual citizens, local businesses, local organizations, and other stakeholders. Local climate action planning is often a top-down process wherein the plan is developed by a select group of experts or officials (Kousky & Schneider, 2003). A survey sent to municipal officials involved with city CAPs across the country found that just 15% involved local citizens and 12% involved a steering committee or working group, while 46% involved a combination of planners, NGOs, and industry representatives (Cook, 2018). This trend was supported by my review of existing city action plans - while some seek input from the public, many utilize a small group to create the plan and then attempt to publicize the completed plan to the public.

This paper will focus on public participation because of its crucial role in the success of CAPs. Pitt (2010a) found that the "primary distinguishing characteristic" between cities that actually adopted emissions-reducing policies after a planning effort and those that adopted fewer policies than stated in their plan was community participation throughout the planning and policy design processes. While achieving emissions reductions within municipal operations may not require community participation, addressing the bulk of emissions will require changes that impact the community, and so climate action planning should take citizens' priorities, values, and needs into account. Public participation helps to accomplish this, in addition to providing an opportunity for increasing public knowledge of climate change and people's motivations to learn more (Neblo et al., 2018), increasing the perceived legitimacy of the resulting policies (Hoff & Gausset, 2015; Bulkeley & Mol, 2003), and connecting climate policies to issues of concern in the community (e.g. reduced air pollution, improved health, increased green space, etc.) (Betsill, 2001).

Three 'Publics' to Involve

A review of existing climate action plans suggests that there are three distinct approaches referred to as public or community involvement. Each approach targets a different public, or a different subset of the entire community, and concerns a different phase of the planning process, purpose for engagement, and process of engagement. Whether and the degree to which each of these approaches is utilized shapes the final content and impact of the final plan.

Public 1: Expert Committee

The first public that is frequently brought into the city climate planning process is local leaders and experts in areas relevant to climate planning who are enlisted either to drive the planning process or to workshop ideas and work alongside those driving the process. They are generally self-selected or selected by the city government because of their specialized knowledge or role in a particular stakeholder group, and they are brought in early in the process because their input directly informs plan content.

Charleston, SC created their climate action plan with high levels of involvement from an expert committee. The city government created the 20-member advisory committee and gave them responsibility for moving the plan forward through five subcommittees that drafted different sections of the plan. These groups included members of the city Planning Commission, local university, business community, local environmental groups, and building and architecture industries (Pitt, 2010b).

Expert committees bring local knowledge of relevant issues to the planning process, address limited city resources and staff by spreading the workload among stakeholders, and ensure that groups that stand to gain or lose as a result of a climate action plan have their voices heard. However, the interests of people who are not organized into groups or institutions from which a representative can easily be drawn could be excluded. Similarly the results of collaboration and negotiation among stakeholders may not align with the priorities or values of the general population. In addition, while stakeholder input and buy-in is critical to an effective plan, sustaining interest and involvement among some groups, for example leaders in industry, may be difficult.

Public 2: Community-Wide Outreach to Impacted Parties

The broadest group of citizens is often not engaged until near the end of the climate action planning process through outreach and education programs. Since the success of some community-wide emissions reductions strategies may depend on individuals' behavioral change, widespread awareness of the plan and understanding of emissions reduction initiatives is a priority. This is accomplished through a variety of means depending on the programs set forth in the plan, including but not limited to flyers and posters, community meetings, and social media/online information campaigns. In these varied forms, outreach efforts seek to develop public understanding of the problem, its specific impacts on the city, how the CAP addresses those impacts, and how individuals can contribute to mitigation and adaptation efforts. Community-wide outreach is primarily a one-way communication from the city or body responsible for climate planning to citizens.

For example, the city of Urbana, Illinois identified 5 broad goals in their climate action plan, the fifth of which was to "pursue coordination and outreach." They also included information and outreach items in the implementation strategies for the other four goals. Actions such as starting public information campaigns, running and energy efficiency challenge, holding educational sessions on water and energy conservation, or marketing existing sustainability programs to the public more extensively were included in these categories. (City of Urbana, 2012)

Community-wide outreach is ideally how people who were not involved in creating the plan come into contact with it and decide whether or not to implement certain strategies in their own lives. This is important because it informs citizens about what their city is doing and can build support for elements of the plan (e.g. home energy efficiency initiatives or programs to increase walking and biking). However, this type of interaction with the public does not typically give them the ability to participate in the planning process - it simply informs them of a predetermined plan. An exception would be outreach that informs citizens about the planning process itself - letting people know that the city is embarking on a climate action planning effort, explaining what that entails, and encouraging people to participate.

Public Input

The third public that is involved in climate action planning is a subset of the entire community that provides information to the decision making process in some way. This includes individuals and organizations who are interested in contributing to the city's plan, and should be the most representative of the three publics. While resource or time restrictions may prevent this from being as large a group as those targeted for outreach, it is important to consider the representativeness of this public so that no particular group's concerns or ideas are excluded from the planning process. Public input should be gathered early in the process so that it can guide what is included and prioritized in the plan. It can take a variety of forms, including public hearings, ballot initiatives, surveys, participatory budgeting, and citizens panels or juries (Fiorino, 1990). The structure and organization of this broadly representative form of public input in climate action planning will be the focus of the remainder of this paper.

The influence of public input in the decision making process varies widely. In many cities' climate action planning processes, a consultant, steering committee, city department, or other entity guiding the planning effort solicits input that they then consider alongside expert advice, technical feasibility, and cost in crafting the plan. This was the case in Flagstaff, AZ, for example, where an

extensive public engagement strategy was employed (Cascadia Consulting, 2017). This strategy included three public events where community members could express their opinions as well as a community survey. Input from these sources was "analyzed and considered in devising the overarching goals, vision, and targets; sectors of focus; and implementation strategies and actions of the plan." Here, public input is relevant to the decision, but only to the extent that those with decision authority allow it to shape their decision-making. The public does not have any official decision making power.

Another strategy is to grant decision making capabilities to the participating public. Although it has yet to be used in city-level climate action planning, this approach has been taken for a variety of planning and environmental decisions, for example water management in the Netherlands, where citizens juries made up of 12-15 residents deliberated about desirable policies and made an informed recommendation that the responsible government body was bound to respond to and consider for adoption (Huitema, Cornelisse, & Ottow, 2010). One of the most common ways citizens are made not just a source of information but a source of fully-formed decisions is participatory budgeting, a strategy that emerged in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and gives citizens control over how some amount of municipal funds are spent (Gelman & Votto, 2018).

Public input can benefit policy decisions in many ways. Engaging citizens as active agents as opposed to targeting them with top-down legislation increases political legitimacy and can thus encourage politicians to take bolder action in alignment with support for environmental policy among the majority of people (Hoff & Gausset, 2015). This active type of engagement, often referred to as a civic model of participation, can increase participation and result in increasingly democratic decisions, overcoming a lack of trust in governmental institutions and a lack of efficacy among citizens (Bulkeley & Mol, 2003). The appropriate role of public input is not the same for all policy decisions, however. Depending on the available information, likely public acceptance of the ultimate decision, and potential conflicts, Thomas (1990) suggests decision making processes with a spectrum of public involvement, from autonomous decisions by a government official to a public decision made by the public and the official in collaboration. Each method for public input comes with its own strengths and tradeoffs as well, which can be assessed through criteria such as the ability of amateurs to participate in addition to experts, representativeness, the ability to reach a decision through the process, the quality of discussion or debate, equality of participation among participants, etc. (Fiorino, 1990; Ward et al., 2003). Based on the nature of the policy decisions to be made in creating Bethlehem's CAP, I will make several recommendations for a process of public input that will not only benefit the initial drafting of the CAP but also its implementation and broader citizen engagement with this and other issues.

Recommendations for a Process of Public Input

The Context: Bethlehem, PA

In February 2017, the City of Bethlehem passed a resolution to create a city Climate Action Plan. This followed efforts from 2006 to 2012 to reduce carbon emissions from city operations under the Three City Climate Protection Proclamation and commitments to climate agreements including the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, Global Covenant of Mayors, Sierra Club Ready for 100, Mayors National Climate Action Agenda, and We Are Still In (City of Bethlehem, 2018).

Despite initial success in reducing city operational emissions by 28% from 2006 to 2012, efforts to officially set goals or a path for future emissions reductions have stalled in recent years. As requirements for the Global Covenant of Mayors dictate a community-wide GHG inventory, setting emission reduction targets, and identifying specific actions in the coming years, the city has issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) and received proposals from consultants to conduct a formal climate planning process.

Building on this foundation, Bethlehem has many favorable characteristics for the successful creation and implementation of a city-wide CAP. As evidenced by the city's participation in multiple mayors' agreements and the emphasis by multiple members of council on the importance of climate planning, the CAP has political leadership and support (Cook, 2018). Additionally, there are no major groups, such as fossil fuel companies or many workers in the fossil fuel industries, who would be directly threatened by the creation of a CAP. Lack of political opposition is a favorable condition for climate action planning (Pitt & Randolph, 2009)

To capitalize on those assets and create an effective plan, Bethlehem will need to engage residents, including all three publics described above, in the planning process. The RFP suggests that the consultants will develop an "overall plan for public engagement" that could include "workshops, breakout sessions, informational sessions with Q&A, etc." (City of Bethlehem, 2019).

Recommendations for Public Engagement in Bethlehem's Climate Action Planning Process

As described above, there are at least 3 types of public engagement, each of which targets a different group within all those who might be defined as "the public," has different benefits, and is most applicable to a different part of the planning process. To most fully benefit from what each public can contribute to the creation and implementation of a CAP, a public engagement plan should specify who specifically will be involved at which stages of the process to ensure that all three publics are considered. As it is relevant to Bethlehem's current stage of planning and not as well represented in existing city climate action plans as public one (expert committees) I will focus on methods for engaging the third public, a subset of the entire population that provides public input to inform decision-making.

Models of Participation for Gathering Public Input from Public #3

As stated previously, there are a variety of methods for gathering public input, including public hearings, ballot initiatives, surveys, participatory budgeting, and citizens panels or juries (Fiorino, 1990). Selection of a method is dependent on the goals of participation - is it to increase perceptions of the legitimacy of decisions? To gather as broad a range of perspectives as possible? To set priorities or criteria for decision making? To make an ultimate policy decision? As evidenced by climate action planning in other cities, plans with strong content can be devised by just working groups or city staff, but those plans are implemented more effectively when the public is involved. In early meetings about the CAP, a member of Bethlehem's city council recognized the importance of this involvement beyond the initial planning phases, stating that the goal is to "create a permanent structure that will address climate change on a local level." In order to foster public participation on an ongoing basis and generate the energy that participation can provide to the implementation process, Bethlehem's model for gathering public input should meet the goals of providing opportunities for citizens to learn about the issue, promoting long-term and community level thinking (rather than short-term individual benefits), and encouraging civic engagement by increasing citizens'

agency and meaningfully connecting them to decision-making processes. These needs would be met by a public deliberation process utilizing elements of the citizens jury method.

Citizens juries are a method for deliberative participation wherein 10-20 people randomly chosen to be representative of population demographics are brought together one or multiple times to make a decision in response to a "charge" from the jury's organizer or sponsor. They hear evidence from a variety of sources; ask questions/cross-examine witnesses (generally experts or stakeholders in the issue); and deliberate amongst themselves to respond to the charge, either through consensus or a majority vote with the opportunity to submit minority opinions. The jury organizer or sponsor often commits beforehand to respond to the jury's recommendation in some way, or may agree to implement the decision made by the jury. (Ward et al., 2003; Crosby, 1995)

Elements of the citizens jury method could address the needs of Bethlehem's climate action planning process described above. Unlike a survey, a citizens jury offers a two-stage process of education and deliberation, allowing participants to learn about climate change and its impacts in Bethlehem in more depth to make more factually and rationally based decisions (Konisky & Beierle, 2000). Citizens juries also promote long-term and community level thinking, because participants are asked to think and act as impartial jurors rather than representatives of a particular group or interest (Ward et al., 2003). The objective is "the public negotiation of the common good" (Smith & Wales, 2000). As jurors deliberate and collaborate, decisions will need to be justifiable from a broader perspective than individual self-interest to gain support. Lastly, citizens juries and other deliberative methods can help encourage ongoing civic engagement by increasing perceived agency and decreasing distrust or cynicism regarding the government and decision making processes (Neblo et al., 2018; Smith & Wales, 2000). (Jefferson Center; Konisky & Beierle, 2000)

However, citizens juries also have some major limitations. For example, a limited number of citizens - typically only 10-20 - would get the opportunity to learn the information covered during the jury process, experience the shift to a more community-focused perspective, and be encouraged to continue engagement. The juries' focus on rational deliberation can exclude certain voices that may advocate intrinsic value or tradition - potentially important considerations that are difficult to defend in rationalistic debate (Ward et al., 2003). In addition, juries' positive impact on civic engagement depends on the extent to which participants feel the ultimate decision represents their input and is used appropriately by policy makers. Therefore I explore methods of gathering public input that build on traditional citizens juries as well as other recommendations and literature regarding public participation to better meet the needs of Bethlehem's CAP process.

1. Selection of Participants

   Participant selection can vary in terms of the number and representativeness of participants. While citizens juries select 10-20 participants often using a random quota sample, Bethlehem may want to consider using a larger number of participants and/or a different selection method. Engaging more people in a deliberative process will extend the benefits of education about the issue, civic-mindedness, and trust/perceived legitimacy of decisions to a larger portion of the city. However, this comes with a cost as more sessions would be required and could make reaching a consensus more difficult. With a larger sample, the city would need to host multiple deliberative sessions so that each session did not contain more than 20 people, because the small size aids in ensuring all participants have the opportunity to be heard (Jefferson Center).

Multiple sessions would likely each make different recommendations, which would need to be addressed in the connection of recommendations to decision makers and policy decisions.

Beyond random sampling, other selection methods could include reaching out to community leaders and asking them to recruit within their networks, advertising broadly to interested citizens, or selecting participants from a variety of interests or stakeholder groups. Since stakeholders will be represented in public 1, and participants from public 3 will be asked to participate as members of the community rather than representatives of a particular group, organizers should avoid choosing participants in public 3 from specific stakeholder groups. A deliberative public input process is an opportunity to engage people who may not have prior connections to a particular interest or institution (Konisky & Beierle, 2000). Recruiting participants through community networks may be less resource and time intensive than conducting a random sample. Additionally, a request from a trusted individual is likely to be more motivating to people who are not already interested in the issue of climate action planning than a cold call or public flyer, making this form of recruitment a way of reaching people who otherwise may not participate. Community leaders can also provide insight as to related local issues (e.g. green space, food access, development, air pollution) that can be emphasized to make participation more appealing to a greater number of people (Pitt & Randolph, 2009). Thus, recruiting through community networks may be a favorable option if attention is paid to engaging as representative a sample as possible. This will require special efforts to reach out to vulnerable groups and to remove external and internal barriers to participation. Nurture Nature Center, a local nonprofit specializing in community engagement with issues of environmental risk, recommends such measures as holding meetings in easily accessible places, at convenient times, compensating participants reasonably, considering providing child care, providing food, and considering transportation needs (NNC, 2013). It would also be possible to set a quota for certain participant characteristics of interest (i.e. region of the city in which they live, race, income, gender, etc.) and screen participants who volunteer ahead of time to ensure a diversity of citizens are represented, even without random selection.

2. Scope of Deliberations

Once participants are gathered, the scope of what they are to deliberate must be set - in a traditional citizens jury, this is the charge. However, a climate action plan is not a single issue to reach a decision on, but a multi-faceted and complex combination of issues. To respond to a charge that addresses the whole plan - its many sectors and implementation as well as creation - participants would likely need many sessions over a period of weeks or even months. This would add a barrier to participation, be very costly, and potentially add too much time to the planning process. Therefore, a narrower scope should be identified. If, in participant selection, more people are included and form multiple groups, each could focus on a sector (infrastructure, transportation, community education, industry, home energy use, etc.) of the CAP. This is consistent with a city staff person's and council member's feedback on the engagement process for the Northside 2027 initiative, where it was found that people appreciated being able to focus their participation on a particular portion of the plan that most interested them. It may also be beneficial to use a deliberative process multiple times in the course of climate action planning, focusing on a smaller portion of the plan each time, for

example once in setting priorities for inclusion in the plan and once in setting priorities for implementation.

3. Deliberative Process

Once participants have been brought together for the stated charge or purpose, there need to be plans in place for the structure of the deliberative sessions. A major decision is how much control over the process participants will have. Early in the process decisions need to be made about group discussion guidelines and decision making criteria. The guidelines serve to set expectations for participants and encourage good quality dialogue (Smith & Wales, 2000). Decision making criteria could be predetermined or determined by participants. If their charge is to prioritize an array of potential measures to include in the CAP, they would need to decide what criteria are an acceptable basis for that decision (e.g. implementation cost, emissions reduction potential, air pollution reduction, benefits to underserved communities, etc.). Then, participants receive information - written materials, statements from relevant experts or affected persons, or data. While session organizers will have to select some initial sources, once participants have a foundational knowledge of the issue they can suggest additional sources that they believe would be valuable to their decision (Gooberman-Hill, Horwood, & Calnan, 2008; Ward et al., 2003). Session organizers should strive to select well-balanced and/or impartial sources, but allowing participants to suggest additional sources can ease perceptions of any organizer bias and add valuable information to deliberations.

For the deliberation itself, organizers will need to set a time frame. Again, participants can be given authority over this decision to a degree if time is built in to hold an additional session or two in the event participants find it necessary. During deliberation one or two personalities may dominate discussion while some participants do not speak up. This can reinforce social inequalities, for example if white men speak more than women or people of color (Gooberman-Hill, Horwood, & Calnan, 2008). For this reason it is important to select a moderator who can attempt to provide equal opportunities for all participants to contribute to the discussion.

4. Connection to Decision Makers

The capacity of deliberative processes to increase trust in government and perceived legitimacy of the resulting decisions largely relies on how deliberative processes are linked to and used by decision makers. The role that the public input provided in deliberative sessions will play in planning should be clearly communicated to participants at the beginning of the process. Trust in government is built by people being asked to participate and feeling like their input was heard and had an impact, but cynicism or distrust can be bred if people are asked to participate and then feel that they were ignored.

Citizens juries can establish a contract with policy makers before deliberation that obligates policy makers to respond to the jury decision in some way. This legitimizes the jury and aids in increasing political efficacy (Smith & Wales, 2000). Often this is an agreement to go through the jury recommendations point by point and either implement or explain why they are not implementing each suggestion. This is preferable to a more vague commitment to “consider public input” in decision making, because the latter allows policy makers to pick and choose which recommendations of the public they consider, potentially only using those that support their preestablished positions. An even stronger commitment from policy makers could actually

transfer some of the decision making power to a deliberative body. Similarly to the participatory budgeting process used in Port Alegre, Brazil, Bethlehem could set aside a small budget and allow participants full decision making power over what to spend it on. Even if this resulted in a relatively small scale project, it would have potential to generate enthusiasm, feelings of agency and efficacy, and support for further projects among citizens.

Conclusion

While public participation alone will not resolve all of the issues in creating an effective local climate action plan, it is an important aspect of a system of multilateral governance and crucial to creating the ongoing engagement and energy that a community-wide plan like the one Bethlehem has proposed requires in implementation. Public participation appears in the climate action planning process in at least three forms, and within participation in terms of public input there are a variety of methods to use to engage people. I have presented an overview of the potential benefits of a deliberative method of public engagement and explained a variety of approaches to using deliberation to increase knowledge of climate change, promote decision-making from a collective viewpoint, and foster continued civic engagement. Whether a separate deliberative process is adopted or not, it may be feasible to add elements of deliberation to planned public meetings. As Bethlehem chooses a consultant and continues the planning and engagement processes, they should consider carefully how each of the three publics will be involved and how that involvement serves the goals of the plan. Many cities have struggled to drive meaningful change through their climate action plans. Community participation in the plan has been a primary predictor of success, and deliberation is a form of participation well-suited to the needs of the city of Bethlehem and its residents. By exploring new ways of collecting and using public input to improve both decisions and ongoing public engagement concerning the CAP, Bethlehem will serve as a model for other climate action planning efforts in the Lehigh Valley and beyond.

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