

Davenport Institute Case Story

Western Riverside Council of Governments (WRCOG)

Sub-regional Climate Action Plan (CAP)

Sponsoring Agency: WRCOG is a sub-regional planning agency whose purpose is to unify Western Riverside County so that it can speak with a collective voice on important issues that affect its members. Representatives from 17 cities, the County of Riverside, two regional water districts, and the Riverside County Superintendent of Schools compose the WRCOG Executive Committee, the group that sets policy for the organization. It has a staff of 25-35 augmented with consultants and expert advisors and a series of committees to carry out its work. Together, as a joint powers agency, they take up regional matters critical to the area's future, including air quality, solid waste, transportation, economic development and climate change.

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The Problem: WRCOG felt that climate action plans (CAPs) would be a useful tool for its member jurisdictions, however the costs, staff effort, and amount of time it takes to develop a CAP was making it prohibitive for local jurisdictions to develop CAPs on their own. Five of WRCOG's member jurisdictions had already completed a local CAP, but the others had not, so there was a gap in the sub-region's planning. WRCOG was determined help all of its member cities in coping with big issues of sustainability.

WRCOG sought to successfully engage regional citizens in the development of its CAP so that the plan would be publicly supported and ultimately adopted by local jurisdictions. Climate change will affect Western Riverside County both environmentally and economically, but efforts to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are often viewed as controversial or a deterrent to development and economic growth.

This project would strive to engage members of disenfranchised communities that do not typically participate in local planning processes, as well as those who are misinformed or skeptical of climate action planning to raise awareness about the importance of GHG reductions in their communities.

Most people were not aware of where greenhouse gases came from or the various ways of reducing them or even why this is important. Outreach is difficult because the subject matter can be arcane. The technical issues did not engender much interest on the part of the citizens of the region. How would WRCOG interest the public in this far reaching plan?

Further, climate action planning is a voluntary activity. While it is very much advised and offers certain benefits, jurisdictions are not mandated or required to adopt CAPs. The advantages would have to be communicated and sold to all involved to get wide participation.

The Proposed Solution: WRCOG actively sought constructive input to better inform the development of recommended GHG reduction measures to be implemented in Western Riverside County. It chose a three tiered approach. The first tier was to engage the Planning Directors of the various member

jurisdictions to obtain guidance on the technical work and local politics and sensitivities. This technical committee met monthly to assess progress and discuss next steps.

The second tier represented stakeholder groups comprised of 30 different people from a variety of agencies. These included water agencies, the building industry, air quality districts, Southern California Edison, The Gas Company, solid waste industry, health groups and transportation agencies. The stakeholders group was often invited to join in on the monthly Planning Directors meetings as well.

The third tier of the outreach effort was to the general public. It would be the toughest part. Because the subject matter was somewhat abstract and not terribly exciting to many, a variety of tools were used. Direct conversations with a number of groups that had been identified by the Planners was one aspect of targeted outreach.

However, standard workshops would not likely have worked as the geographic area is over 2,000 square miles. So, the decision was to provide pop-up workshops and booths at existing community events. This way, WRCOG got the benefit of a local draw and could interest residents as part of larger gatherings. One very successful pop-up workshop was put on at the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) General Assembly. It generated over 100 surveys by local elected officials and key staff members.

Lastly, WRCOG set up a website using Mind Mixer (now My Sidewalk) full of clear and well-presented information, and questions for users to answer. The City of Riverside agreed to help market this effort through their local CAP efforts, which drove many more people to the website.

Outreach was ongoing. During pop-up workshops, WROG staff educated residents and community leaders on the purpose and benefits of a CAP and described potential GHG reduction strategies. The rationale for each strategy's recommendation, contributions toward GHG reduction targets, cost-benefit analyses, and associated day-to-day lifestyle changes were also be presented to the public for response.

Once the project team had come up with a list of strategies to reduce emissions, the outreach effort centered on asking residents which strategies they thought would be acceptable and work best. The project team facilitated interactive exercises that allowed participants to express concerns and prioritize strategies they believed would be most successful in the community, which helped translate local opinion into the public policy-making process. This even included a survey game whereby people would throw gambling chips into baskets to reflect their preferences.

Lastly, the pop-up workshops allowed the community to meet and work with WRCOG staff and learn about their role in the policy process. These introductions helped establish working relationships and identify valuable resources that will last well beyond the CAP project.

Goals: Goals were a bit hard to quantify at the on-start. Clearly, WRCOG wished to hear from people from all twelve cities and from all walks of life. They wished to dispel myths and mitigate community opposition to climate action planning and the perception of a Council of Governments telling people how to live or work. The project team sought to focus the discussion on the benefits to the region and why climate action planning is worth doing.

Outputs: Over 300 surveys were filled out at pop-up workshops, booths and meetings and the website generated over 100 interactions with the project team. People supported some strategies more

than others, especially those that were easily understandable. Diverse interests were evident. The Western Riverside Sub-regional Climate action Plan was completed in June of 2014.

Outcomes: All the WRCOG jurisdictions approved the Sub-regional Climate Action Plan. Neither the process nor the CAP itself became controversial or were undermined by special interests or individuals. Six cities took the additional step of adopting local version of the CAP, or are currently in the process of doing so. There wasn't enough funding to help the remaining six cities to follow suit, but there is interest. Additional funding is being sought to complete this local adoption process.

Lessons Learned: Blanket outreach doesn't work in such a wide geographic area. Choosing different outreach approaches to reach various groups was beneficial. Dividing the outreach into multiple tiers worked better than the typical community workshops. "Thinking out-of-the-box" helped, including the pop-up workshops at existing local events and the on-line survey. The website was most effective if tied in with cities' websites and outreach efforts as WRCOG is not as well known in the region.

What Can Be Replicated? The tiered approach is worthy of consideration by other agencies seeking widespread input and acceptance of a technical plan with major ramifications. Identifying the technical group and the indirect stakeholders and using a variety of tools to engage the public at large was critical to WRCOG's success. Having different goals for each group makes sense.

By not focusing on the technical aspects of the CAP, the project team tested what interested the public the most and tied technical strategies to those interests. Those technical strategies that engendered little public support were not included in the ultimate plan. Thus, this was authentic public engagement at work.

Resources: The Western Riverside Sub-regional Climate Action Plan (CAP)

http://www.wrcog.cog.ca.us/uploads/media_items/wrcog-climate-action-plan-final-draft-april-2014.original.pdf

The Western Riverside Climate Action Plan Implantation Model Book

http://www.wrcog.cog.ca.us/uploads/media_items/wrcog-subregional-cap-model-book.original.pdf

MindMixer Website for Climate Action Planning

<http://www.activateCAPwrcog.com>