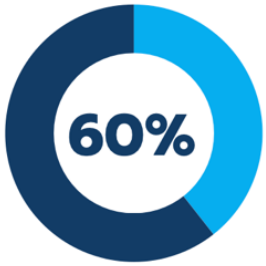
Fostering Climate Connections: Engaging Communities for a Resilient & Sustainable Future

Hennepin County adopted the Climate Action Plan in May 2021 understanding the urgency of making rapid and far-reaching changes to address climate change. This plan targets a 45% reduction in carbon emissions from 2010 levels by 2030, with the ultimate goal of reaching net-zero emissions by 2050. The plan includes protecting and supporting vulnerable communities to help them adapt to weather, social, and economic changes.

Hennepin County's Climate & Resiliency department created the Climate Connections project to bridge the existing climate change knowledge gap and build community trust. The county partnered with 10 Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) to share information and gather feedback, which will help guide future efforts and strengthen the community's response to climate change. The following illustration shows outreach and engagement efforts, along with key demographics of residents that participated in the workshops and surveys.

The **County**, **CBOs**, and **Lighthouse Global** designed community workshops and surveys to learn what the community knows about climate change, resilience, and preparedness; their interest in climate change action; and their preferences for methods of engagement. This report that Lighthouse Global prepared summarizes findings from those community workshops and surveys and will be used to support the county's improvement in its climate work.



moderate to limited knowledge of climate change

Knowledge and Awareness of Climate Change

Workshops and survey results show **low awareness** about climate change. Respondents have moderate to limited knowledge **(60%),** and one in ten **(15%)** report that they know nothing about it. While survey participants reported knowing more about mitigation strategies (strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and use nature-based solutions to slow climate change), they had less knowledge on issues like the causes, climate change vocabulary, and even less on the impacts and consequences of climate change. Similarly, many workshop participants linked the climate change definition to unpredictable weather. This understanding represents an incomplete picture of climate change as unpredictable weather is just one of the impacts of climate change. This shows the need for more education on climate change.

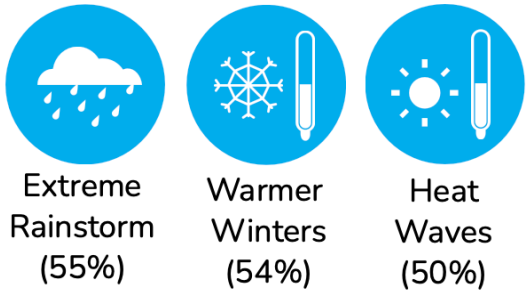
Climate Change Causes

Workshop participants identified several causes of climate change. They noted that people often **prioritize personal comfort and safety**, such as maintaining comfortable temperatures in homes and cars, **over environmental concerns**. They also mentioned crime prevention practices, like removing trees to improve sightlines and lighting can contribute to climate change.

Climate Change Impacts and Consequences

Participants acknowledged the global impact of climate change, such as droughts in East Africa and floods in China but also focused on its local effects in Minnesota. Three in five survey respondents **(60%)** agreed that climate change harms their community. Participants also identified several ways climate change negatively affect their communities citing **environmental, health, economic,** and **social** impacts.

Environmental Impacts – Almost every survey participant **(98%)** state that they have experienced environmental impacts. The most common are rainstorms **(55%)**, warmer winters **(54%)**, and heat waves **(50%)**. In addition, **76%** of respondents are very to somewhat concerned about the effects of weather change. Workshop participants also noted **unpredictable weather**, **rising temperatures**, **habitat loss and wildlife displacement**, and **water contamination**, linking them to health, social, and economic effects.



Health impacts – About 42% of survey participants said they experienced **poor air quality** as an impact of climate change. Participants also noted that higher temperatures make **physical activity harder**, cause **dehydration**, and worsen **respiratory issues** due to poor air quality. Others highlighted **worsened allergies** due to increased pollen levels and breathing difficulties caused by Canadian wildfires.

Economic impacts – About 52% of survey participants have experienced increased prices due to climate change. Participants mentioned rising **food** and **utility costs** and the financial burden from property damage caused by extreme weather. They also noted industry impacts like **power outages** (energy), **crop damage** (agriculture), and **disrupted seasonal work** (tourism).

"They had a power outage, which they had never had before, and the road collapsed in front of their home due to erosion from flooding. So that is a pretty extreme example and kind of what this picture was talking about of the infrastructure damages that costs everybody a lot of money to try to fix and just kind of can be irreparable damages (...) climate change affects both animals and humans." - R4R, workshop participant

Social impacts – Participants said climate change **disrupts their daily life** and social plans. Extreme weather damage, such as collapsed roads and fallen trees, **limits** transportation and **access** to groceries and healthcare. Events like low air quality due to wildfires prevent people from going outside their homes.

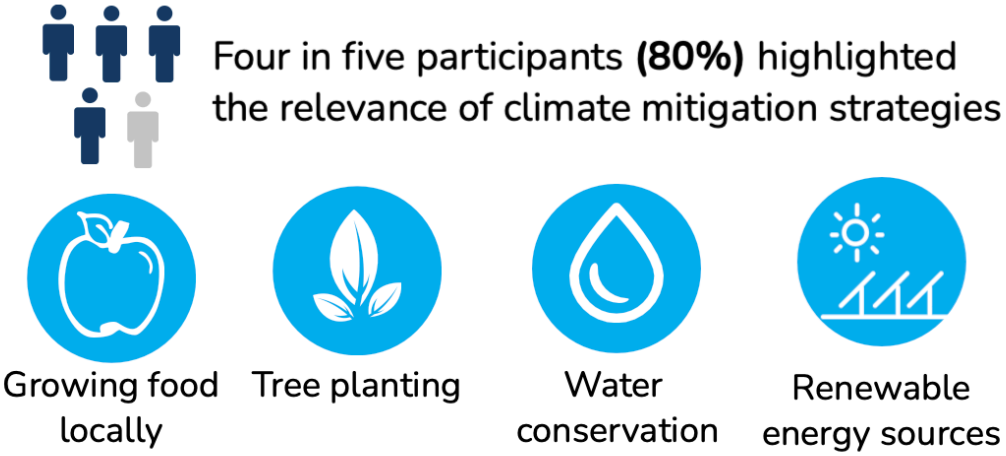
Participants noted that people with health issues, youth, elders, and low-income and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color **(BIPOC) communities face greater challenges from climate change.**

"Some insurances are pulling out, and they're not covering or insuring some homes, and so this is also affecting low-income BIPOC communities that don't have the resources or funding to recover in times like this." - BCB, workshop participant

Community Resilience and Recovery

Over half of the survey participants expect challenges recovering from natural disasters caused by climate change. Events like tornadoes and floods are the hardest to recover from. In the survey, 83% of participants said tornadoes are "difficult" or "not easy" to recover from, and 79% said the same about floods. In contrast, extreme rainstorms and droughts were seen as easier to recover from, with 42% and 40% of survey participants saying they are "easy" or "somewhat easy". Participants highlighted the need for education on climate adaptation (55%), that is preparing for and adjusting to the effects of climate change and called for financial support for sustainable practices (51%), that is actions that reduce environmental harm and protect resources.

Climate Resiliency and Mitigation Actions



Four in five participants **(80%)** supported strategies like growing **local food**, **water conservation**, **tree planting**, and **renewable energy**. Participants linked growing food to reducing food insecurity and preserving heritage and saw tree planting as a way to reduce heat and improve mental health. Participants also emphasized low-emission transportation (walking, biking, carpooling, electric vehicles), composting, and energy efficiency to cut emissions.

Barriers to Action

Participants noted barriers to adopting climate change resilience and adaptation actions.

Knowledge gaps: Lack of knowledge on proper recycling practices (people may mix waste and recyclable materials, affecting the recycling process), how solar panels work, how to compost properly to avoid issues like pests or bad smells, how to keep newly planted trees alive, and what crops would thrive in the current climate.

Financial challenges and lack of financial support: Discussions about sustainable practices and energy efficiency brought up financial limitations and a lack of knowledge about or access to financial assistance programs as reasons why actions are not taken. Additionally, participants talked about economic barriers that make actions like using electric vehicles, tree planting, gardening, or saving energy seem out of reach.

Lack of community exposure: Participants mentioned a lack of exposure regarding new technology. The lack of EV users in residents' social circles can make it harder for more people to understand how they work and can lead to people thinking that EVs are impractical or hard to use, making them mistrust how reliable they are.

Gaps in existing infrastructure: Participants highlighted gaps in pedestrian and cyclist infrastructure, particularly in suburban areas. Some feel that the current infrastructure is not safe for using other types of transportation that produce lower emissions. Other gaps in infrastructure participants identified include charging stations for EVs and lack of land and resources to implement community gardens.

Gaps in existing services: Participants also discussed gaps in bus service coverage as well as safety issues on existing routes.

Unfavorable habits: Some participants also mentioned that unfavorable habits, such as leaving chargers plugged in all day or buying more than is needed (overconsumption) limit their ability to adopt more sustainable practices.

Community Recommendations

Participants recommended **raising climate change awareness**, expanding **culturally relevant education**, supporting community-led mitigation efforts, improving infrastructure and services, and **strengthening communication** and staffing to better engage and serve diverse communities.

Encourage sustainable practices through policy

Create policies and programs to support energy efficiency improvements in buildings and encourage property owners to invest in energy-efficient appliances and LED lighting.

Design policy mechanisms to reward manufacturers to make sustainable products and penalize manufacturers that make environmentally harmful materials.

Work together with cities to improve policy enforcement particularly to reduce single-use plastics (plastics used only once) and encourage better recycling.

Collaborate with all county cities to impose plastic bag fees

Increase climate change awareness efforts

Community members mentioned the need to raise awareness of resources available to help mitigate climate change. They highlighted opportunities to increase awareness about:

The availability of recycling during cultural events and holidays

The availability of organic waste bins.

Other recommendations to increase awareness include the following:

Incorporate a variety of communication materials and channels to reach a wider audience from different age groups, including newsletters, flyers, and info-casts (like podcasts, webinars, and short videos), radio, television, and popular social media platforms like TikTokmedia

Provide climate change awareness resources in culturally relevant venues like churches and mosques.

Provide climate change education

Participants highlighted several topics in which they consider further education is needed:

Location of areas at higher risk of climate change events in Minnesota (e.g., areas prone to flood).

Resources available to create community disaster plans.

Green infrastructure: Such as rain gardens and urban tree canopy.

Gardening techniques.

How to protect water systems.

Recycling: Its importance and clarity on how to properly recycle. The recycling process after waste collection.

Preparedness: Storing supplies and emergency equipment.

Actions that are most effective in mitigating climate change.

The role of trees in climate change mitigation, and how to plant and care for them to ensure long-term success.

Energy-saving practices.

Composting: Its benefits, practices, and pest control.

Education for drivers to respect pedestrians and cyclists.

Recommendations on how to provide climate change education

Introduce climate change education from an early age. The practice of sustainable actions should be taught from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade, helping to shape good habits for life.

Provide culturally relevant climate change education and resources. Participants highlighted the need to adjust educational materials to fit the values, traditions, religions, and age interests; and make resources available in multiple languages.

Involve community leaders in education efforts. This is important to build trust and make educational resources easier for community members to relate to.

Create interactive learning experiences.

Support community adoption of climate change mitigation actions

Support community-led activities by working with community-based organizations to host events that help community members adopt climate change mitigation strategies and encourage community ownership.

Provide resources such as drought-resistant trees, seeds, fertilizers, and tools for gardening and tree planting.

Provide financial support like subsidies or rebates to make climate change resiliency strategies more affordable

Improve infrastructure and services

Use existing public spaces to create areas for climate change mitigation. Participants recommended Hennepin County set aside some public land for community tree planting, gardening, or building greenhouses (large glass buildings where plants can grow safely from cold weather).

Improve transportation-related infrastructure and services. This includes better sidewalks, bike lanes that are safe and easy to use, more bus routes, and a safe public transportation system.

Improve community green spaces by planting trees (creating cooling areas) or expanding refillable water stations.

Additional Recommendations

Create and maintain a staff position to support cultural sustainability efforts.

Provide a single and easy-to-navigate climate change website.

Hold regular community meetings with Hennepin County staff present. At these meetings residents could share their concerns, set community priorities, ask questions, stay informed about the county's work on climate change, and give feedback to county staff.