

Climate action plan feedback sessions

About the feedback sessions

To gather feedback on the county's climate action plan framework and strategies, a series of feedback sessions were held with community groups, youth, and the county's Race Equity Advisory Council in November 2020. Participants in the feedback sessions represented a broad diversity of communities in Hennepin County. A total of 84 people shared feedback on the climate action plan's foundational strategies, impacts the community has experienced from climate change, and their priorities for a climate-friendly future.

Participants were presented with information on the county's vulnerability assessment, greenhouse gas emission inventory, the county's approach to the plan development, and the plan's framework and foundational strategies. Feedback was gathered on seven topics: climate impacts, preparedness, priorities, values, strategies, opportunities, and future engagement and collaboration.

The themes summarized below were identified based on analysis of input shared in the chat and through verbal comments. Comments were reviewed and categorized based on alignment with one or more of the county climate action planning teams and foundational strategies as well as climate impacts and values using options presented in the public survey. Additional comments were categorized to capture more specific themes or nuances that were not represented in the numerical coding.

Summary of responses and themes

Climate change impacts

Impacts that participants and their communities have experienced most commonly fall into the categories of racial disparities and health and wellness. Impacts on natural resources, food, and crops were also frequently mentioned. Comments focused on the need for community-based solutions that increase racial equity and prioritize protecting people. Participants also discussed the need to protect natural resources, develop resilient communities, and build and maintain infrastructure that can adapt to changing climate conditions and facilitates sustainable behaviors.

Related to racial equity, protecting people, and supporting community-based solutions, participants expressed that addressing systemic racism and oppression is the only way to address the climate issues that stem from environmental injustice. They said implementation should start with policies that directly support communities that face the greatest overlapping challenges, especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities and people experiencing homelessness. Overlapping challenges called out include asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) due

to poor air quality, the heat island effect and hot areas during heat waves, historic disinvestment, and unequal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

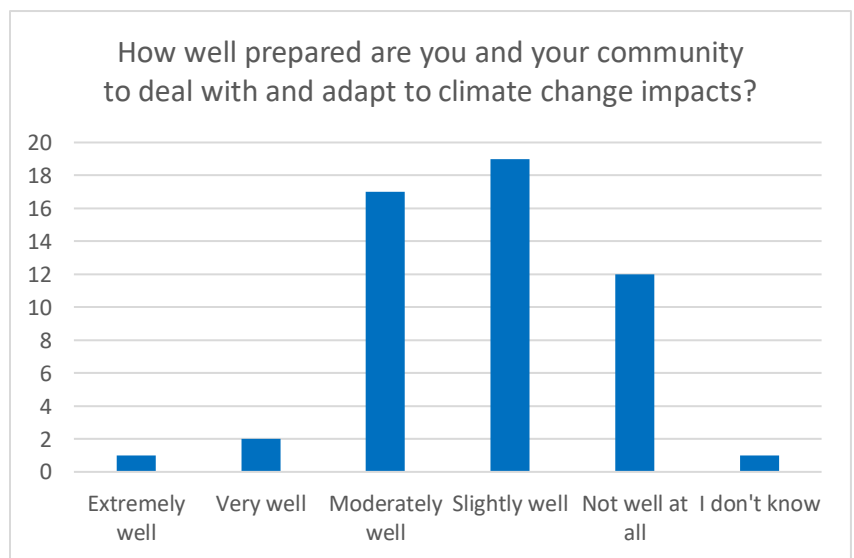
In regard to health and wellness, participants brought up concerns about air pollution and the increasing prevalence of poor air quality days. Participants found the air pollution from traffic map compelling because it clearly illustrates the air quality impacts from vehicle emissions. Some participants specifically mentioned concerns that the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC) contributes to poor air quality. They also discussed impacts to the food system, including soil degradation, increases in foodborne illnesses, and an unpredictable growing season. A longer growing season also means a longer allergy season. With all of the negative impacts of climate change, participants worried about impacts on mental health and increasing anxiety.

Related to natural resources, participants talked about how lake water quality is being negatively impacted by heat and flooding, and also how they have experienced flooding in cities. Participants have seen localized flash flooding due to heavy rainstorms, clogged storm drains in winter due to ice, and buildings experiencing water damage. Participants have seen trees in their neighborhoods lost not only to emerald ash borer, but also to devastating windstorms that came through when the soil was already saturated. More generally, participants have noticed trees, shrubs and other plants facing stress from hot weather and being infested by more and different pests. Using sustainable transportation options like walking, biking, and taking transit has gotten more difficult because of extreme heat in the summer and icier roads and sidewalks in the winter. Participants have noticed the changes in winter – missing snow for recreational opportunities and seeing increased damage to roads and other infrastructure from increase freeze/thaw cycles. In addition to local impacts, participants have family members and friends who have been impacted by wildfires and hurricanes in other regions.

Participants urged the county to pay attention to the influence that the perspectives on issues, who is making decisions, and who delivers the message has. There are existing community-driven programs and initiatives that are having big impacts, and it's important that these groups are represented in the solutions. The county also needs to look at how equitable hiring, contracting, and small business development can be expanded with new investments, such as in solar, weatherization of city and county buildings, and new construction of homes and apartments. Another factor participants urged the county to consider is a potential increase in population with people moving to the Twin Cities as climate refugees from more impacted areas.

Preparedness

Participants said they feel that they and their community are slightly to moderately well prepared to deal with climate change. Impacts they focused on needing to prepare for include financial impacts, impacts on the transportation system, and natural disasters including flooding and heat. Participants expressed a desire to prepare communities to be resilient, prioritize racial equity and vulnerable communities, offer financial incentives, support public policy within the region, and educate and engage residents. Participants mentioned that there are lessons to be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic to be better prepared to respond to climate impacts, including providing critical services, responding to economic impacts, and promoting behavior changes.



Related to financial incentives, participants talked about the need for more funding with a commitment to helping residents achieve the necessary changes. This could involve diverting funds from harmful projects into the hands of people who need it, and there was a call for reparations. Participants strongly supported inclusive financing options, such as how sidewalk fixes are added to city utility bills to be paid over time or using a pay as you save model, for projects like installing renewable energy on individual properties. Participants said programs are needed that help make older houses more resilient to extreme weather and more energy efficient, especially in vulnerable areas. They were also interested in fostering networks of resources within communities to respond in emergency situations, such as backup food storage and ways to connect with neighbors.

With natural resources and infrastructure, participants cited a need for help with water issues and for transitioning lawns to more sustainable landscaping. Participants also called for more trees to cover blacktop and reduce the heat island effect. Participants said they want more transportation options to reduce the need for cars to get where they need to go.

In regard to public policy, participants expressed the vital role the county plays in taking the lead and the need for the county to be bold and ambitious. They said some cities may not act on developing and implementing climate action plans until the county does and that communities in Minnesota will follow Hennepin County's lead.

Participants said we need more people on board in preparing for climate change. They called for better education on climate impacts so that people understand that climate change is affecting us now and we need to take action. Participants explained that even in middle-class neighborhoods, people aren't prepared for things like flooding or bad air quality, and communities with fewer resources would likely need more support. In conducting education and engagement, participants said it is important to find messengers that can reach community members more directly and ensure the message resonates.

Priorities and values

Participants were asked how the priorities the county identified to guide development of the climate action plan reflected the values of the communities.

Priorities for an impactful plan



Protect and engage people, especially vulnerable communities



Protect our buildings, roads, infrastructure and natural resources



Deliver services in times of disruption



Reduce emissions in ways that align with core county functions and priorities



Partner in ways that can be most impactful

Many participants said the priorities were a good reflection of the community's values, especially the attention to the disproportional effects climate change will have on marginalized communities. They said it was important to take into account that our research shows that emissions and impacts are highest near densely populated areas in cities. They wanted to ensure that all vulnerable and marginalized communities were being considered, such as recognizing that

LGBTQIA+ people face discrimination. Another community that was mentioned was Indigenous communities and ensuring our plan reflects the values of the people who were originally here. Participants said it was important to prioritize engaging frontline communities in the planning process to ensure the plan reflects the feedback, values, and priorities of those communities. While the priorities are a good reflection of the county overall, it is important to keep in mind that priorities will depend on the neighborhood and the stakeholders.

Participants called for the county to be a leader in setting goals and driving greenhouse gas emission reduction policy statewide. Participants wanted to see a more aggressive timeline and expressed the need for measurable goals, both short-term and long-term. Participants were interested in knowing what concrete changes would be made in the next few years. They were concerned about the funding needed to achieve these priorities, especially with the impacts that the pandemic will have on budgets. Recognizing that it won't be possible to do everything, they encouraged the county to prioritize strategies that have the greatest impact for the least cost and the greatest benefit to vulnerable communities. They said the county should focus where it has the most power, such as on transportation.

At the same time, participants explained that the county "staying in its lane" wouldn't be enough to achieve the response to climate change that is needed. The county needs to push other jurisdictions to be equally as bold. They suggested the county convene cities, watersheds, parks, and other entities to share their climate goals and approaches to responding to climate change.

Participants recommended adding climate education to the list of priorities, and they wanted to make sure that green jobs were part of the "protect and engage people" priority. Participants expressed that we need to go beyond protecting and maintaining infrastructure, but also building resilient infrastructure. Many were surprised to see natural resources in the priority of "protecting our buildings, roads, infrastructure, and natural resources" and felt that protecting and restoring natural resources was critical enough that they wanted to ensure it was appropriately prioritized. They explained that there are already strong voices calling to protect roads and infrastructure, and we need a stronger focus on protecting natural resources. They cited the numerous purposes that protecting natural resources and building greenspace can serve, including increasing resiliency, providing clean air and shade, infiltrating stormwater, filtering toxins, and storing carbon. Related to partnership, an idea that participants wanted to see more strongly reflected was opportunity for authentic community leadership.

Strategies

The seven foundational strategies identified as the best place to start that will serve as a strong foundation for the county's long-term response to climate change were presented to the participants.



Foundational climate strategies

- Build individual and community resilience
- Transition to renewable energy sources and reduce energy use overall
- Cut greenhouse gases from transportation
- Prevent food waste and divert organic material from the trash
- Design infrastructure, buildings and property to future climate conditions
- Build and maintain green infrastructure and sequester carbon on all county-owned property
- Decrease the heat island effect, especially in areas with highest vulnerability

Overall, participants appreciated the focus on a broad range of topics and the attention to more vulnerable areas. They encouraged the county to simultaneously work toward a rapid, just and inclusive transition while increasing resiliency, and they wanted the county to make it clear how each strategy contributes to reducing racial disparities. Some participants thought the strategies focused too much on public works considerations, stressing that the impacts that climate change will have on public health, public safety, and human services makes it vital to have those areas be a part of the climate conversation. Participants encouraged the county to be as bold and ambitious as possible, pointing out that the county's constituency supports bold moves on environmental, social, and racial justice issues.

Participants stressed the importance of creating specific, quantifiable goals and benchmarks that are reported on regularly to the public. Participants in the feedback sessions and the Race Equity Council encouraged the county to consider a goal of carbon neutrality or net zero carbon emissions by 2050. In addition to greenhouse gas emissions, the metrics should include indicators on public health, racial disparities, and economic equity. Participants saw pursuing these strategies as a way to create more just and healthier communities.

In addition to the seven foundational strategies, participants stressed the importance of more and better public messaging and education. They said that connection to place is an important way to move people to action, and education and engagement needs to happen on every level – from elementary-aged children to adults. They explained that county greenhouse gas emission reduction will be fairly insignificant in the scheme of global emissions, but engaging the public and pushing residents to support larger national projects would have a greater impact.

Participants shared many specific points of feedback and ideas for strategies, including:

Build individual and community resilience

- Consider how to make healthcare more accessible since climate change will affect both physical and mental health.
- Focus on more access to food and safe, affordable shelter.
 - Convert hardscapes into affordable housing and shelters for people who are experiencing homelessness or can't live in their home any longer because of flooding.
 - Convert turf grass and hardscapes into community gardens to increase food security and carbon sequestration by supporting community initiatives, especially in BIPOC communities.
 - Look for ways to make farm-to-table and community-supported agriculture initiatives more accessible to low-income families.
- Partner with schools to provide jobs and job training programs, especially for low-income individuals. Areas of interest for green jobs from the youth participants include renewable energy, energy efficiency, urban agriculture, transportation, and construction.
- Incentive urban development that promotes affordability and safety. Avoid further suburban and exurban growth and prioritize affordable housing in the urban core.
- Review county investments, including in infrastructure, employment, education, and training, and promote practices that support strategies to address the impact of climate change on vulnerable communities.
- Use partnerships as a way to influence land use.
- Look for ways to support small and local businesses coming out of the pandemic as smaller businesses tend to have a smaller footprint than larger corporations.
- Consider trends in population growth, especially the possibility of people moving from more impacted areas to the Twin Cities as climate refugees.

Transition to renewable energy sources and reduce energy use overall

- Set specific goals around energy, including energy sources and energy conservation.
- Provide renewable energy programs that are equitable and fair to low-income communities. Offer incentives for green energy and pursue inclusive financing options as a way to achieve these strategies for low-income households.
- Increase education about the impact of carbon-based fuels and alternatives and county programs that support green energy.
- Offer free home energy audits.
- Support community solar.
- Support cities in advancing clean energy solutions, distributed generation, demand response, and equitable investment.
- Use city water pipe infrastructure for ground source heating.

Cut greenhouse gases from transportation

- Make county roads safer for people walking and biking and create more complete streets and complete neighborhoods.
- Advance sustainable transportation by investing in buses, light rail, and transit-oriented development, and pursue electrification of the public transportation system.
- Focus on expanding the network for biking, walking, and rolling before prioritizing electric vehicle infrastructure. Think about who electric vehicle infrastructure is benefitting.
- Transition to an all-electric county fleet and enforce anti-idling policies.
- Connect bus and light rail systems to increase frequency and reach and develop retail amenities at rail stations.
- Make electric vehicle charging stations as common as gas stations.
- Keep in mind that reducing congestion can often increase vehicle miles traveled. Consider focusing on reducing vehicle miles traveled rather than traffic management.
- Explore options to shift state transportation funding formulas to ensure cities and counties receiving funding to maintain roads even as vehicle miles traveled decreases.

Prevent food waste and divert organic material from the trash

- Move away from trash incineration at the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC) and invest in waste management alternatives as a way to improve air quality and protect vulnerable communities.
- Take past injustices and racial disparities into account when siting an anaerobic digester.
- Ensure that there are not unintended consequences when considering establishing an anaerobic digester, such as incentives to increase the waste stream. Design the facility as a tool to reduce waste and think through the ownership structure so that it's use could be reduced over time.
- Consider incorporating urban agriculture into food waste prevention strategies.
- Ensure the cost structure of waste management prioritizes organics recycling to make it beneficial for homeowners and businesses.

Design infrastructure, buildings, and property to future climate conditions

- Strive for at least 100% renewable energy use in buildings,
- Create a fund to address the impacts of wetter seasons, such as flooding and mold.
- Provide tax rebates for green infrastructure and building remodeling.
- Implement a zoning requirement that requires a net-zero effect on existing open space.

- Collaborate with cities on development projects such as transit-oriented development, reusing and re-envisioning shopping malls, and creating higher density development near transit options in suburban and rural areas while preserving farmland and open space.

Build and maintain green infrastructure and sequester carbon on all county-owned property

- Expand equitable hiring with county building projects.
- Use water-absorbing plants that also provide food to wildlife and people.
- Plant no-mow grasses to cut down on maintenance.
- Focus more on food and soil health.
- Pay attention to maintenance and keeping green infrastructure functional.
- Stop over salting county roads and pioneer a solution that removes ice without damaging our lakes, rivers and streams.
- Focus on climate-friendly maintenance, such as plant species that require less mowing and watering, where turfgrass is best, such as in sports fields and play areas.
- Make parks and trails more usable and appealing to help with air quality and improve water quality.

Decrease the heat island effect, especially in areas with highest vulnerability

- Increase the urban tree canopy and replace trees that are lost – the sooner the better as trees take about 10 years before providing major benefits.
- Keep the focus on alleviating local impacts such as the urban heat island in vulnerable areas as this will address some of the worst impacts.
- Increase community engagement in vulnerable areas when planting trees to mitigate the urban heat island effect. Take into account past negative experiences with trees not being maintained in these communities. Have conversations about the benefits trees provide to the community and invest in ongoing maintenance.
- Explore ways to make it cheaper for residents to plant more trees and educate them on the benefits.

Future engagement and collaboration

Participants expressed strong interest and commitment to working with the county to ensure the climate action plan is effective and to coordinate on an impactful response to climate change. They reiterated the importance of taking an intersectional approach to ensure the climate action plan responds to issues of racial and environmental justice, health, workforce development and other topics. They expressed that the approach to the response to climate change will be most effective if we develop genuine partnerships and empower community leadership.

Participants expressed interest in helping to organize conversations about the climate action plan priorities and strategies and to help coordinate action and implementation teams along with city leaders and neighborhood associations. They suggested we look at everyone’s circle of influence to understand our collective network and to figure out how we can best collect feedback or deliver a message. They said we need to be creative in how we engage the community, and we should conduct engaging campaigns to reach the whole community.

Participants supported the county’s ongoing efforts to collaborate with cities, explaining that the county plays an important role both in pushing cities to take action and in supporting their initiatives. Beyond that, participants encouraged the county to build relationships with community activists as well as city leaders. They expressed that public will is currently ahead of political will – so it’s within communities where innovation is happening. If authentic partnerships are established, the climate action plan is an opportunity to address the historic and ongoing disinvestment in communities of color. This is especially true in the recovery and rebuilding from the social justice uprisings and pandemic. The rebuilding efforts should focus on improving outcomes for racial equity, public health, and climate resiliency. The Race Equity Council specifically encouraged partnerships with religious leaders, especially in BIPOC communities.

Participants said that grant programs are a great way to engage priority communities by empowering the organizations that know them best. Representatives from some refugee, immigrant, and minority communities expressed how focusing on climate change is new for them – a shift from their typical focus on meeting immediate basic needs – and they were excited to engage their community and see how younger generations were taking the lead. Participants stressed the importance of culturally relevant outreach, recognizing that different experiences and cultural views will shape people’s awareness of and approach to climate change. Participants were also interested in ways to elevate the voice of youth in the climate conversation and were interested to know more about internship opportunities for youth.

The Race Equity Council encouraged a focus on partnering with schools to ensure climate change is included in school curriculum. They recommended the county help schools develop climate action plans and provide funding for schools to create competitions, campaigns, and student committees focused on climate resiliency. This reach within school systems could be extended by incorporating climate education into early childhood family education, English language learning, and other adult education programs. The council also encouraged partnerships with universities to engage students in conducting outreach and to collaborate on developing programs to prepare people for a future green economy. They suggested partnerships with research institutions to develop solutions, with corporations to develop affordable green energy solutions, and with the Minnesota Department of Energy and Economic Development to address green energy funding gaps.

Participants wanted to know more specifically our plan was for incorporating their feedback and how they would know if changes were made to the plan based on the community feedback. They wondered if there will be a committee formed of community partners or residents to help guide the development and implementation of the climate action plan, and they asked about the diversity of the staff creating the plan as well as the people making the decisions. Participants in the youth session asked specifically about opportunities for youth involvement and offered to help with teen outreach. Participants expressed interest in regular progress meetings to discuss accomplishments, challenges, and how community organizations can help. Similarly, the Hennepin County Race Equity Advisory Council expressed a desire to continue to engage on the climate action plan and encouraged the climate action team to attend council meetings when there are developments on the plan so the council can provide input.

Participants

Community partner feedback sessions

Two feedback sessions were held with staff or representatives from nonprofit, community-based organizations interested in the county's climate change action plan. The 52 participants represented more than 40 organizations who work with diverse communities across the county. The following organizations were represented:

- Center for Earth, Energy and Democracy
- Citizens' Climate Lobby
- City of St Anthony Village Parks and Environmental Commission
- Climate Generation: A Will Steger Legacy
- Community POWER
- Cool Planet
- Edina Energy and Environment Commission
- EMERGE Community Development
- Environmental Initiative
- Fresh Energy
- Growing Green Hearts, LLC
- Hispanic Advocacy and Community Empowerment through Research (HACER)
- Lao Assistance Center of Minnesota
- Metro Blooms
- Metropolitan Council Equity Committee
- MIGIZI Communications
- Minneapolis Regional Labor Federation
- Minnesota Climate Adaptation Partnership
- Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light
- Minnesota Pollution Control Agency Environmental Justice Advisory Council
- Minnetonka Climate Initiative
- Mississippi Watershed Management Organization
- MN Renewable Now
- Move Minneapolis
- Northern Metals Settlement Advisory Group
- Northside Green Zone
- Northwest Metro Climate Action
- Off The Blue Couch
- One Family One Community
- Project Sweetie Pie
- Resilient Cities & Communities
- Safe Streets Save Lives
- Sierra Club
- Soular Scenes
- St Anthony Village Parks Commission
- St. Anthony Village & Citizen's for Sustainability
- TakeAction Minnesota
- Tangletown Neighborhood Association
- The Family of Trees
- Tree Trust

- Wayzata Energy and Environment Committee
- West Metro Climate Action
- Women United
- Yorth Group

Youth feedback session participants

A feedback session was held with high-school aged youth interested in environmental and climate issues. Most of the 18 participants in this session were youth, but in addition a few teachers and green team leaders attended. Many of the youth were involved in their high school's green team or a regional youth climate action group, such as Climate Generation's YEA! MN. Youth from throughout the county participated, including students who attend the following high schools:

- DeLaSalle High School
- FAIR School Downtown
- Irondale High School
- Maple Grove Senior High
- Minnetonka High School
- Roosevelt High School
- St. Anthony Middle School
- St. Louis Park High School

Hennepin County Race Equity Council

Hennepin County's Race Equity Advisory Council is a group of appointed members that advise county leadership on reducing racial disparities and advancing racial equity throughout Hennepin County. The council seeks diverse membership through representation of historically marginalized communities, geographical distribution, and individuals who represent various segments of the county population. Information about the climate action plan was presented to 14 members of the Race Equity Advisory Council, and the council responded with a memo of follow up questions and recommendations for strategies.