

## Regional Climate Action through Democratic Sustainability

*MAK Mitchell, Chair, LWV S/KC Environmental Committee*

### **Regional Origins:**

A wave of disappointment and urgency arose across King County as it was confirmed in 2019 that the county had dramatically [missed their ambitious carbon emission reduction targets](#). This realization intensified as the county residents experienced weeks of smokey air from west coast fires during the summers of 2019 and 2020. This unhealthy air was contrasted by many months of clean air during the spring COVID lockdown, providing a valuable “evidence proof” of what was possible if human emission behaviors changed collectively. A justified call to arms occurred by environmentalists who sought out the root causes of the climate dilemma, led by three county council members calling for a more proactive, urgent climate approach for the county and its cities.

### **Discovering Root Causes:**

Carbon emissions in King County have stayed flat over the past five years, despite money, time and energy spent on a variety of well-intentioned climate projects designed by cities and the county to lower carbon emissions. While this discouraging result can be explained partially by the heavy population growth in our major cities, the rest can be explained by the need for more democratic and equitable public engagement strategies and the need for a networked city exchange, rather than our current solo city approach.

It seems that the climate change system we have created in King County cities is perfectly designed to give us the results we are getting; since we are dissatisfied with those results, and our population growth will likely continue, we need to change our city delivery system. The League’s Environmental Committee set about doing that, first by working strategically with King County through our early formative feedback in the design of the new, five-year 2020 Strategic Climate Action Plan ([SCAP](#)) and its Climate Action Toolkit ([CAT](#)). We saw a natural advantage to the fact that LWV and King County share the same geographic footprint and the same desire to reduce climate emissions.

During this early feedback process, we saw the opportunity to create a regional network of cities within King County, all focused on the same ambitious climate goals and all customized to their own city’s needs for broader public engagement. This is the path to motivating human behavior change in each city which is essential in reducing carbon emissions.

It also became clear that all of us working together can produce stronger carbon reduction results than any one of us can do alone. Networks also produce more sustainable results than solo cities and at least 17 cities have already expressed public commitment to reduce carbon emissions through the K4C agreements supported by the county.

While we are seeing many well-written climate action plans emerge from city leadership, we see that the engagement circle of advocates for those plans only touches a small percentage of the public in most King County cities and rarely activates climate justice by involving those most impacted. Also, the engagement of the public is often limited to low level “input “engagement and rarely challenges the public to change their human behaviors to reduce carbon emissions.

### **Employing League Democratic Values:**

Given our League core values of democracy, equity, education and advocacy, we saw a need for sustaining those written city climate plans through more focused public engagement activities. We observed that most of the public was unaware of their city climate goals and were not very involved in their daily implementation.

Since the more ambitious climate goals require significant behavioral change on the part of our residents, we felt an urgency to bring the climate goals to them through democratic, equity-driven engagement structures. Once a majority is engaged and committed to change their behavior in small ways, we reasoned that residents would be more likely to advocate for more large-scale city climate change policies and state legislation such as a possible carbon tax. We began to believe that the city is the unit of democratic climate change and that cities will produce the carbon emission results we are seeking in King County. We saw that creating a networked exchange of cities would make us all smarter and would build speed and sustainability.

### **A New LWV Presence in Cities:**

We proposed that each city might benefit from a LWV Climate Guide, a member of the Environmental Committee residing in each city to “instigate” opportunities to educate and engage the public democratically within an equitable frame of climate justice. The county gave us strong support for this plan, and we began brainstorming how to “negotiate entry” into 20 mid and large size cities that are responsible for 70% of the climate emissions in King County. We approached each city council with a proactive [letter of support](#) from Alyssa Weed and a sheet that detailed [our proposed role](#) as a “guide on the side” to implementing the city council’s climate goal priorities. We also offered to create a networked exchange between the cities of King County for problem solving, modeling and solutions.

### **County Storyline**

Our Regional Climate Action Forum is structured to tell the storyline that is emerging now through our most recent adventures in the field with our twenty cities. You will hear from Rachel Brombaugh, King County Director for Climate Initiatives. She is also the Project Lead for the design and delivery of the Climate Action Toolkit. The LWV Environment Committee has met with Rachel and her team three times for our input and mutual learning. Rachel trained the Climate Guides and City Council Members in [the uses of the Climate Action Toolkit](#). King County has signed up for the most ambitious climate goals and will do so through significantly changing their county operations in

order to reduce their carbon emissions. However, cities represent over 80% of the county's climate emissions and we know that this is where our work lies.

**Negotiating Entry to Cities:**

Next, you will meet a panel of four Environment Committee Members, each a Climate Guide in the city where they reside: Sammamish, Mercer Island, Enumclaw, and Burien. Each will give you a short, lively description of their emerging progress with their city, including breakthroughs, barriers, insights and questions that they have encountered. Since each city is autonomous and is in a different place in the climate action process, we need to customize our democratic support as needed.

**Public Engagement Case Study:**

Finally, we will hear a case study from our most developed project in Shoreline to show you what the future of our emerging cities might look like. Shoreline has modeled democratic and equitable engagement every step of the way over the past two years and is very close to our ideal of a democratically engaged city.

**Alignment with our League's Mission:**

This action project is highly aligned with our League Mission and our future as an organization. We are:

*encouraging informed and active participation in (city and county) government, working to increase understanding of major public policy (climate) issues and influencing public policy (carbon emissions) through education and advocacy.*

So please join the action fray, give us feedback and let's prepare together for our aligned future!

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