

CLIMATE ACTION IN ACTION – THE BC LOCAL GOVERNMENT EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Carbon neutral, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and carbon offsets are just a few of the new words public works professionals must add to their vocabularies in British Columbia (BC). BC is Canada's most westerly province and is the first government in Canada to set a tax on carbon emissions.

At the 2007 conference of the Union of British Columbia Municipalities, the provincial Premier introduced the Climate Action Charter under which individual local governments were invited to sign and commit to developing strategies and taking action to achieve the following goals:

- become carbon neutral in their operation by 2012
- measure and report on their community's GHG emission profile; and
- create complete and more compact, energy efficient urban and rural communities.

To date, 174 local governments in the province have signed on to the BC Climate Action Charter.

This paper will discuss the steps being taken by local governments in BC to become carbon neutral and what impacts and opportunities the BC carbon tax has for governments and its residents.

Key Words

Climate Action Charter – A Framework for Action

Introduction

The Provincial government of British Columbia (BC) has taken climate change seriously, introducing sweeping policies and legislation from entrenching greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction targets in law to implementing a province-wide carbon tax. Passed in November 2007, the BC Greenhouse Gas Reduction Targets Act sets the most aggressive targets in North America, committing BC to reduce its GHG emissions by at least 33 percent below 2007 levels by 2020 and 80 percent below 2007 levels by 2050. Based on advice solicited from a range of pertinent professionals, the Province developed a comprehensive Climate Action Plan (2008) with programs, policies and legislation in every sector of the province. With legislation affecting vehicle emission standards, landfill gas capture, low-carbon fuels and utility generation requirements, as well as significant investments in renewable energy, the Province has

demonstrated a commitment to shift BC toward a low-carbon future. Exemplifying this commitment is the legal requirement for all public sector institutions, including provincial ministries and agencies, schools, colleges, universities, health authorities and Crown corporations, to be carbon neutral in their operations by 2010.

With an estimated influence of over 45 percent of Provincial GHG emissions, considerable attention has been directed to local government climate action. At the 2007 conference of the Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM), the provincial Premier introduced the Climate Action Charter under which individual local governments were invited to sign and commit to developing strategies and taking action to achieve the following goals: become carbon neutral in their operations by 2012; measure and report on their community's GHG emission profile; and create complete and more compact, energy efficient urban and rural communities. In support of the Charter, local governments, UBCM and the Province agreed to establish a joint Provincial-UBCM Green Communities Committee and topic specific working groups to develop the parameters and supports required to achieve the goals of the Charter. To date, 174 of the 190 local governments in BC had signed on to the Charter. This paper will discuss the steps being taken by local governments in BC to achieve the commitments outlined in the BC Climate Action Charter.

Climate Action Charter – A Framework for Action

Carbon Neutral Operations

Out of the Climate Action Charter, the Green Communities Committee established the Carbon Neutral Working Group, comprised of local government staff experts and resources people, to provide guidance in developing a carbon neutral program for local governments. Fundamentally, carbon neutrality is achieved for local government operations by measuring emissions from traditional services, such as fire, water, wastewater, administration and recreation centres, reducing emissions to the extent possible and offsetting the remaining emissions by purchasing offsets (measure, reduce, offset).

The Carbon Neutral Working Group has spent considerable time negotiating the boundaries of local government carbon neutral operations, as there has been significant debate around whether and how to include contracted services. The Working Group considered many of the existing GHG tracking protocols and proposed counting emissions from transportation, electricity use, heating and production of solid waste from the following traditional services: fire, water, wastewater, stormwater, solid waste collection and diversion, arts and recreation, road and traffic operations and administration and governance.

At this time, a draft guidance document and definition of carbon neutral local government operations has been circulated to BC local governments, while work is underway to develop a tool to help local governments track their emissions. In order to prevent off-loading of local government emission accountability and the subsequent privatization of services, it has been recommended that contracted services be included in the carbon neutral boundaries for new contracts and contract renewals. In addition to the introduction of the proposed boundaries at UBCM's 2008 Annual General Meeting, the BC Premier also announced the Climate Action Revenue Incentive Program to rebate carbon tax paid to local governments who are signatory to the Climate Action Charter.

Ultimately, the intention behind the carbon neutral program is to encourage real reductions in operational GHG emissions, while the remaining emissions are offset. To this end, an increasing number of BC local governments have developed detailed corporate climate action

plans targeting buildings, fleet and solid waste, often incorporating demand management strategies and adaptation considerations.

Local governments' response to climate change in BC has contributed to inter-governmental collaboration like never before. For example, the Regional Districts of East Kootenay, Central Kootenay and Kootenay-Boundary, representing a total of 48 municipalities and electoral areas, along with six First Nations, the Columbia Basin Trust, the Community Energy Association and a team of consultants, have banded together to develop a comprehensive carbon neutral planning project. The Kootenay Regional Carbon Neutral Action Strategy will include GHG inventories for all local governments, action plans for the regional districts, explore funding options, evaluate opportunities for a local carbon offset program and include significant capacity building.

However, emission reduction strategies undoubtedly take time and resources to develop and implement, and as local governments seek to reduce their carbon footprints – through the Climate Action Charter – they have voluntarily committed to invest in carbon offsets to reduce their emissions to net-zero starting in 2012. The rapidly evolving field of carbon offsets has generated significant debate around offset criteria and whether or not local governments will have to offset through the new provincial Crown corporation, the Pacific Carbon Trust. With limited resources and a range of potential emission reduction projects that would not otherwise occur without offset funding, local governments can make a good case for investing in offset projects within their communities that meet high quality offset criteria, including additionality, verification by a third party, counted only once, and measurable. Notwithstanding, these projects would have to be outside of the scope of carbon neutral operations to count as offsets, otherwise they would be considered double-counting. At this time, the Green Communities Committee is working with local governments and the Province to develop a valid offset system to enable local or regional offsets in keeping with the principles of other offset certification systems.

One BC local government has taken the lead on carbon neutral operations, attaining corporate carbon neutrality as of 2008 and achieving its 2010 corporate climate action goal two full years ahead of schedule. The District of Saanich on Southern Vancouver Island reports that it exceeded its 10 percent GHG reduction target (set in 2007) by the end of 2008. A range of initiatives are credited with achieving the 10.6 percent reduction in GHG emissions, including programs for building retrofits, fleet management and energy awareness and demand management. Additionally, the District has developed a unique, Provincially-recognized carbon neutral program whereby each Tonne of GHG emissions emitted annually by municipal operations is internally offset. Through a Municipal Carbon Neutral Reserve Fund, each year the District's GHG emissions are offset by making an annual contribution to the Reserve Fund (carbon price \$15/Tonne). Reserve funding is to be used only for new GHG-reducing initiatives within the municipality that would not have been otherwise financially feasible.

Measure and Report on Community Emissions

In collaboration with a range of stakeholders, the Provincial Ministry of Environment recently released 2007 Community Energy and Emission Inventory (CEEI) reports for the majority of local governments in BC. The CEEI reports provide high-level estimated community-wide energy consumption and GHG emissions from on-road transportation, buildings, solid waste and land-use change (deforestation at the Regional District scale only). Not to be confused with corporate operations inventories, these community-wide emission inventories satisfy the second commitment of the Climate Action Charter and offer valuable planning tools to help local governments plan, target and implement GHG reduction strategies.

However, despite the many strengths and benefits the CEEI has to offer, like a number of other initiatives implemented at the provincial scale, the project has arguably constrained and delayed action at the local level for several leading local governments. For instance, the Capital Regional District (CRD) took the lead on climate action back in 2003, initiating a community energy planning process which included both corporate and community emission inventories for the CRD and its 13 member municipalities. The CRD Community Energy Plan was completed in 2007; however, it became readily apparent that without staff and a mandate, the plan would be impossible to implement. As a result, the Regional District explored the development of a regional climate action function and after considerable process, a regional climate action and adaptation service was established in 2008/2009. With an action plan and mandate moving forward, the new climate action program has found its hands somewhat tied on a number of fronts as it waits for provincially provided data and monitoring frameworks to re-establish an emission baseline. Based on a substantially different methodology than the 2004 CRD inventory, the 2007 CEEI has arguably trumped the Regional District's inventory, despite its more localized data. However, the Province has offered to incorporate local data, such as transportation models and landfill gas estimates, to ensure the CEEI represents users' interests.

Complete, Compact, Energy Efficient Communities

In support of the third commitment under the Climate Action Charter, the Green Communities Committee and the Provincial Ministry of Community Development championed a key piece of legislation to require local governments to plan for climate change at the community level. Under Bill 27, the Local Government (Green Communities) Statutes Amendment Act, local governments must revise their Official Community Plans (OCP) and Regional Growth Strategies (RGS) to incorporate GHG reduction targets, policies and actions by May 31, 2010 (May 31, 2011 for regional districts).

This legislation is founded on the premise that the planning and regulatory decisions of local government play a key role in managing urban growth and shaping community form linked closely to GHG emission generation. Through their authority over land use and zoning, public transportation, infrastructure, building regulation and waste management, local governments make long-standing decisions that ultimately shape energy use in the community.

Recognizing the unique character and capacity of local governments in BC, the legislation enables creativity in meeting the requirements, instead of prescribing a defined process. Emission reduction targets can be quantitative or qualitative as long as they are measurable and are linked to implementation strategies. Considerable flexibility exists around requirements for GHG reduction policies and actions, and some communities are looking to articulate broad climate action goals in their OCP/RGS, while referencing more detailed community energy plans at the operational level. At its broadest level, the intent of Bill 27 is to foster a fundamental shift in planning across BC, whereby a climate action lens is applied to land-use decisions province-wide.

Conclusion

The Climate Action Charter is only one of a number of other legislative steps being taken in BC focusing on climate change and sustainability which also impact local governments. A number of these are the 2007 Energy Plan, a vision for clean energy leadership; a Bio-Energy Strategy; a five percent renewable fuel standard for gasoline and diesel; and last the BC Building Code changes designed to reduce energy and water use and to decrease GHG emissions.

Why should local governments be involved? First, our infrastructure is vulnerable to climate change, and more and more experts are talking about the need for adaptation. Second, local governments make decisions that drive emissions, some estimates put local governments in Canada about half of total emissions. And third, climate protection is an opportunity to advance sustainable development.

Author Biographies

DWAYNE KALYNCHUK is a Professional Engineer with over 27 years experience in local government. He has been a transportation consultant, a land developer in western Canada and has been General Manager of Environmental Services for the Capital Regional District in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada for the last 2 years.

For the year 2009 Dwayne will be full-time Project Director for Core Area Wastewater Treatment, a project estimated at \$1.2 billion, and the largest of its kind in Canada.

Dwayne has both an undergraduate and masters degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Alberta. Dwayne is a Past National President of the American Public Works Association with offices in Washington, D.C., and Kansas City. Dwayne is the recipient of the APWA Top Ten Award for 2008.

TERESA WADDELL has been coordinating a range of climate action and sustainability projects for local governments in the Capital Region, British Columbia. She specializes in emission inventory frameworks, sustainability indicator reporting, environmental bylaws and behavior change strategies. Teresa has a double-major in Environmental Studies and Geography with distinction from the University of Victoria.